



# **Documenting USDA Discrimination: Community-Partnered Research on Farm Policy for Land Justice**

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## **Abstract**

Agriculture in the U.S. — in practice, policy, and scholarship — must reckon with ongoing legacies of structural racism, classism, and patriarchy. Grassroots organizations, such as Rural Coalition (RC) and National Family Farm Coalition (NFFC), are at the frontlines, calling for more accountable, equitable agri-food policies. Universities and scholars play a vital role in the engagement of community-based research to support these organizations' efforts. As a case study, this paper draws upon a master's degree practicum and multi-year collaboration

between American University (AU) faculty, students, RC, and NFFC. Students of this practicum engaged in community-based research to support these organization's understanding of current racial discrimination faced by Black rural farmers, fifteen years after the Pigford Civil Rights lawsuit cases filed against the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). Our research explores struggles for racial and land justice in the South. In addition, our paper seeks to provide reflections on the successes, challenges, and impact of community-partnered research for community organizations and students.

### **Keywords**

Agricultural policy; social equity; food systems; participatory action research; community-based research

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### **Introduction**

Food justice has emerged as an important realm of advocacy and scholarship that deliberately employs community-based research methodologies. Organizations leading agri-food movements need quantitative data and qualitative documentation, giving community-based researchers the potential to contribute to frontline group needs. Meanwhile, community-based research has the potential to enhance academia itself — both in terms of sharpened content, and more relevant context. More fundamentally, however, the academy's deployment of conventional research methodologies often reproduces power imbalances through extractive, asymmetrical data collection- benefiting researchers more so than the researched. In response, more scholars committed to equitable research are exploring alternative methods, such as community-partnered research. This broad spectrum of methodologies — ranging from community-based to community-led, participatory research to engaged research — aims for respectful dialogue, and mutual benefit between universities and grassroots, frontline community organizations. Such endeavors are growing, particularly around the topics of food and agrarian justice, food dignity, and food sovereignty: hence the topic of this special issue.<sup>1</sup>

This paper emerges from a modest attempt to move in this bold direction: a multi-year research partnership between a graduate practicum at American University (AU) and two partner organizations: the Rural Coalition/*Coalición*

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<sup>1</sup> These pivotal terms convey a diversity of grassroots, frontline mobilizations. A wealth of scholarship is unfolding around each, for instance: Williams and Holt-Gimenez 2018 (edited volume) on food, farm, and land justice; Porter et al 2018 (special issue) on food dignity; and Trauger 2017 (on food sovereignty), among many others.

*Rural* (RC) and National Family Farm Coalition (NFFC).<sup>2</sup> These umbrella organizations are part of the North American branch of *La Vía Campesina*, the transnational grassroots agrarian movement (Desmarais 2012; McKeon 2015).<sup>3</sup> They encompass a broad alliance of hundreds of grassroots groups led by predominantly underrepresented growers and ranchers (farmers of color, female farmers, farm-workers, indigenous groups, and immigrant growers) and agrarian cooperatives.

The aforementioned research partnership with RC and NFFC is conducted through a semester long practicum. Every year graduate students apply for and are selected to work closely with RC and NFFC for their capstone Master's research project. The research focus and design emerge from community group needs and requests. The research is conducted in regular, dialogic consultation with the community group members and leaders, and the final deliverables are produced to be directly of use to the community partners. Accordingly, we classify this as community-partnered action research. In this paper, we provide an account of our research and experiences as graduate students and as the professor, who designed this practicum collaboration. We sought to support these organizations' understanding of current racial discrimination experienced by Black rural farmers, fifteen years after the Pigford Civil Rights lawsuit cases filed against the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) for racial discrimination against Black farmers and ranchers in the allocation of farm loans and credit. In addition, our paper seeks to provide reflections on the successes, challenges, and impact of community-partnered research for community organizations and students. Though the methodology comes with challenges, we argue that it offers important potential to support the efforts of grassroots and community organizations demanding more accountable, equitable agri-food policies at the national level. It also has important potential in countering and reckoning with academia's long-standing legacies of appropriation and alienation of frontline communities who are bearing the brunt of the research topic in question—in this case, racial discrimination.

### **Geographies of Community-Based Research**

This project and partnership between RC, NFFC, and AU falls within the realm of scholar-activism, since it merges research with “political ideas to further change and work directly with marginal groups or those in struggle” (The Autonomous Geographies Collective, 2010). In particular, it explicitly aims to inform, reform, and transform agricultural policy and programs for the better. Community organization elders and leaders are our teachers. We, as academics, work as “co-investigators” alongside community organizations. By working alongside community coalitions, students have the opportunity to gain a deeper

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<sup>2</sup> Ruralco.org, nffc.net.

<sup>3</sup> Viacampesina.org

understanding of these complex and crucial issues in exchange for providing a practical deliverable to these organizations. This counters traditional service-learning, wherein engagement can be seen as “charity” and supportive of “academic or career of students over community benefits” (Mountz et al., 2008, 218-220).

Rooting the students and the work in a community-partnered methodology aims to give long overdue intellectual respect to movement leaders; as experts, they decide the research questions, set priorities, guide research design, and lead shared analysis (Mountz et al., 2008; The Autonomous Geographies Collective, 2010). As such, this methodology helps challenge lingering colonial legacies of standard research and has the potential to counter individualizing trends in the neoliberalizing university. From our experience, we see how the potential for such partnerships to support community groups pales in comparison to the potential for such partnerships to transform the students and researchers themselves. For graduate students in a professional Master’s program, this methodology offers multiple benefits, from deep content knowledge to critical perspectives to practical life-skills and connections with renowned movements. As their peers conducted capstone practicum research with private and public sector ‘clients’ — from the CIA, to the World Bank, to marketing companies, to the Department of Defense — students in this practicum forged intellectual, professional, and personal partnerships with frontline, grassroots community-based organizations connected to a global network of agrarian justice advocates. This entailed meeting, learning from, and working with practitioner-experts (farmers, fishers, farmworkers) and activist-experts (leaders of frontline community-based organization working directly with and accountable to such practitioner-experts) and the many fulfilling both categories. This has a “transformative effect” on us, as researchers (Mountz et al 2008: 228). Through the processes of collaborative research, we have not only learned about agrarian justice struggles and community organizing strategies from practitioner/activist-experts themselves, but we have gained experiential knowledge on U.S. agricultural policies and programs — their dysfunctions and potential. For instance, we had the honor of working closely with — and being mentored by — renowned farm justice advocate Kathy Ozer, Executive Director of the National Family Farm Coalition, before her untimely death in 2016. Moreover, such community-partnered research allows us as researchers to reflect on the process and findings of our project, collaboratively, with these grassroots experts and leaders.

Community-based research — how we characterize our own methodology — faces pressures from conventional academia to prove its objectivity — even as such methodologies emerge from the intellectual honesty (and objectivity) of admitting positionality and subjectivity. Nevertheless, scholars within and beyond academic domains attest to the potential efficacy of participatory action research, both in terms of its decolonial potential and for its pragmatism in informing and fostering processes of civic engagement (Harney et

al., 2016). As such, these realms of action research must stay vigilant regarding their responsibility to communities themselves. Fields such as critical geography and feminist political ecology have called for community-based scholarship; but as scholar-activists and activist-scholars within this special issue have discussed, such research would need to unfold in communities of praxis grounded in dialogue and solidarity. Those scholars who utilize participatory methods risk overlooking or oversimplifying despite intentions of participation and solidarity (Openjuru et al., 2015; Janes, 2016). Co-inquiry models of collective reflexivity could overcome such obstacles (Banks and Armstrong, 2014). Additionally, they can amplify the role of resource allocation (Derickson and Routledge, 2015). We contend that a key starting point is to admit that critical scholarship learns directly from community articulations (Escobar, 2008; Martinez-Alier et al., 2014), grassroots, on-site “*in situ* political theorization” (Graddy, 2013). The task remains how to operationalize research that truly benefits frontline grassroots groups and communities.

### **Methodology: Practicum and Community-Partnered Research**

In 2012, Graddy-Lovelace invited RC and NFFC leaders and members, alongside scholars, civil society groups, USDA officials, and farmers to AU for a symposium on the Farm Bill. RC’s and NFFC’s breadth and depth of frontline agrarian justice and agricultural policy expertise stood out. Moreover, as understaffed organizations acutely aware of the need for resources, the two coalitions’ leaders were interested in partnering with students and faculty researchers, sparking the beginning conversations that developed into a practicum partnering with RC and NFFC. Each year different groups of graduate students work on research needs as defined by the different member organizations of the partner coalitions, with each subsequent group of students building on the work of the practicums of previous years.<sup>4</sup>

Practicums are semester-long classes, “designed to give second-year master’s students real-world experiences in project management and consulting while preparing them for post-graduate careers.”<sup>5</sup> The 2016 iteration of this practicum had students, including two of the authors of this article, conducting mixed-methods research on social, economic, ecological, and political contexts and implications of the United States Farm Bill and agricultural trade agreements on diverse smallholders. The class was led by Graddy-Lovelace and consisted of fifteen students, representing different scholarly disciplines, including international relations, environmental policy, anthropology, and economics.

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<sup>4</sup> More information about this practicum can be found at <http://www.farmbillfairness.org>.

<sup>5</sup> American University offers an average of 24 practicums each year, including one practicum that focuses on food policy. See <https://www.american.edu/sis/practical/>

Like every semester, this practicum began with a close reading of Chapter Two of Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, wherein he introduces the liberatory problem-posing pedagogy as a counter to the dehumanizing banking style of education. Then, we worked to apply this pedagogy approach to a research methodology context, connecting critical inquiry with practical engagement. In this case, we learned how RC and NFFC emerged from long, intertwining lines of struggle: from the Civil Rights Era cooperative movements for the retention of land owned by Black Americans, to the American Indian Movement, to migrant farmworker struggles, to the farm justice movement of the 1980s farm crisis, to Pan-African anticolonial struggles, to the 21<sup>st</sup> century global anti-neoliberalism movements, on to the burgeoning transnational food sovereignty movement.

After Graddy-Lovelace laid the theoretical and pedagogical foundation for our class, students formed teams, focusing on different research topics set by previous conversations with RC and NFFC beginning in 2013 and 2014. In 2013 and 2014 the Rural Coalition held its annual 'Winter Forum' meeting at AU and in 2015 the Getting Our Act Together on the Farm Bill (GOAT) alliance—of which RC and NFFC are leading members—held its annual meeting there. Each of these gatherings included a brainstorming session wherein community leaders articulated research needs. Subsequently, these became the research questions for the practicum itself.<sup>6</sup> By the end of the semester, students supplied research deliverables ranging from Geographic Information System (GIS) maps, databases, economic analyses, documentaries, webpages, briefing reports, and literature reviews.

One of the recurring themes at RC, NFFC, and GOAT meetings and gatherings is the longstanding, persistent discrimination farmers and ranchers of color and female growers have faced in pursuing farm credit, crop insurance, and USDA policy and program benefits in general. The coalitions strive to counter the invisibility of low-resource and historically discriminated against agricultural communities — as well as their success stories. They work to show the racial, cultural diversity of rural America, a region that has been whitewashed and misunderstood, and to show the diversity of US farmers, who remain sidelined by dominant and powerful farm and agribusiness lobbies in D.C. These ongoing conversations and recurrent themes conveyed an evident need to contextualize land loss and how it intersects with systemic racism and policy discriminations.

RC and NFFC members have countered great odds to cultivate food and in particular to preserve traditional agricultural and culinary heritages. Indigenous and immigrant growers, as well as Black and Latinx-led agricultural cooperatives, have managed to keep farming through resourcefulness, creativity, and resilience — and,

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<sup>6</sup> Reports from the student-led research projects can be accessed at the Farm Bill Fairness website. See [farmbillfairness.org](http://farmbillfairness.org), the Practicum's website.

for some, a few small USDA grants.<sup>7</sup> USDA officials, however, often do not know enough about these stories. Accordingly, another clear need is for documentation and contextualization of the struggles and successes of these groups. Representing voices so often underrepresented and so long silenced is essential both in order to depict and explain how existing USDA programs and resources could be expanded to include these communities, and to help the communities convey their own valuable work, expertise, and experiences.

With these dynamics in mind, we used community-partnered research methodologies to develop a deeper understanding of the struggles facing marginalized producers by working with farmers and policy advocates in rural places. We decided to focus on the rural South due to the region's long and emblematic history in racialized agrarian injustices — and resistance. Most of the farmers involved in the Pigford class action civil rights lawsuit against the USDA were from the Deep South. According to the 2012 Census of Agriculture, Black Americans were “1.4 percent of the country's 3.2 million farmers” with “ninety percent [living] in twelve Southern states” (USDA, 2012). The histories of Black rural agricultures have long been obscured (White 2017), as have contemporary accounts of burgeoning food justice projects and urban gardens and farms within communities of color (McCutcheon 2015, Reynolds and Cohen 2016). A central aspect of these stories is the role of agricultural policy as a source of discrimination, yet also a site of contestation (Graddy-Lovelace, 2016).

Our research presented to RC and NFFC examined efforts to address discrimination in rural agriculture, such as USDA loan programs (Outreach and Assistance for Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers and Veteran Farmers and Ranchers Program, also known as the 2501 program), diversity policy initiatives in the Farm Bill, and class-action civil rights lawsuits for socially disadvantaged farmers (Pigford v. Glickman; Love/Garcia v. Vilsack; and Keepseagle v. Vilsack). Community groups are mobilizing to fight discrimination through agricultural policy reform — and to hold such policy reforms accountable. Accordingly, this scholarship begins with, and works from the agrarian justice commitments of the community partners themselves. It is therefore allied with activism sharing these goals, even as it employs rigorous quantitative and qualitative research methods. In total, this sub-team of the 2016 Practicum cohort developed three deliverables with RC and NFFC, including a GIS map, a

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<sup>7</sup> Latinx, as opposed to Latina/Latino, is a gender-neutral term that has been gaining in popularity in recent years. As Spanish is a deeply gendered language, with every noun being prescribed an either feminine or masculine identity, Latinx offers a more inclusive option. In addition to creating a more welcoming linguistic space with regards to gender, Latinx also has cultural significance. Recognizing that the Spanish language came to Central and South America through colonialism and that there are undeniable ties between colonialism, neoliberalism and the patriarchy, using a gender neutral term such as 'Latinx' in lieu of using the masculine 'Latino' as a default is a small act of rebellion.

documentary short, and a report based on qualitative data.<sup>8</sup> In the development of the documentary and report, RC and NFFC suggested people we could interview for both projects. They connected us directly with individuals with whom they had developed relationships over the years through organizing around the Farm Bill and Pigford cases. In the following section, we provide additional context to the Pigford cases, struggles for land tenure, as well as our findings from the interviews conducted. The section is meant to provide an insight into obstacles currently facing Black farmers, as well as to provide further documentation of these struggles.

### **Post-Pigford and Continued Struggles for Land Tenure**

To say that over the years, particularly from 1935 to 1970, and continuing through the 1990s, the numbers of Black farmers in the United States suffered large declines is to paint a true, but incomplete picture of farm ownership and operation in the country (Merem, 2006). In the past, the Department of Commerce's Bureau of Census led the data collection on farm ownership and operation in the United States. The department's definitions and terms used to measure the numbers of farmers and landowners in the U.S. have led to the publication at times of misleading statements that mask the complex truth of the story of farming in the U.S. (Gilbert, Wood and Sharp, 2002). One prime example of the problematic data collection was the collection of agricultural census data about farmers, but not about farm landowners.<sup>9</sup> In 1997, however, the USDA took over the Census of Agriculture from the Department of Commerce's Bureau of the Census. The 1997 USDA census was far more accurate in its count of Black farmers than preceding censuses which had skewed the trend line (Gilbert, Wood and Sharp, 2002). This article does not aim to take on the task of laying out the 'truth' of Agricultural Census data, but rather to point to the ways in which these terms can, and have altered perceptions, such as perceptions regarding the number of Black landowners in the U.S. These figures have at times made it difficult for policy makers, organizations, and the public to discern just how serious the loss of small farms — and in particular small Black-owned farms has been, and to discern how fast and to what scale land loss has occurred.

Land ownership remains vital to the existence of many communities (Gilbert, Sharp and Felin, 2002). Accordingly, the fight for equity and farmer assistance remains vital not merely on principle, but for the promotion of healthy communities and livelihoods. For Black communities, the "agrarian lifestyle" has

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<sup>8</sup> The final products of these projects can be found at <http://www.farmbillfairness.org/grat/>

<sup>9</sup> The data collection only included farmers who worked the land, but they did not necessarily own the land. Individuals who owned farm land, but were not the operators or farmers, were not included in the census. This lack of clarification by the USDA did not accurately portray the number of landowners. Black farmers who own land, but do not farm, were left out of the count.

“historical traumas of slavery, sharecropping, and tenant farming” (White, 2017, 17); agricultural practices and landscapes can carry these traumas. Though agricultural economists and policymakers may view the drastic trends in farm consolidation and rural exodus as economically inevitable and even indicative of efficiency gains and job churn, for those on the ground in the countryside, losing hard fought-for land can be catastrophic. There is trauma connected to land loss for communities of color, especially for indigenous and Black communities. Nevertheless, a resurgence of Black agrarianism emerges currently in grassroots practitioners (many connected to Rural Coalition) and, more recently, in scholarship (Baxter et al 2017; Williams and Holt-Gimenez 2017). White (2017, 17), for example, highlights the movement of Black communities reconnecting with “agrarian origins in order to build and rebuild sustainable communities”.

Though the USDA and NASS have compiled important datasets chronicling the demographics of land loss due to changes in terminology, there exists a lack of clarity regarding statistics of non-white farm owners and operators in the USDA Census of Agriculture Data. As an example of marginalization and lack of intentionality, this oversight adds to the history of trauma faced by these communities by continuing to hamper interventions and accountability.<sup>10</sup> No matter how the terms are defined, there has been a decrease in the number of smallholder farmers and farms. Black, Latino, Native American and women farmers in particular have suffered. RC and NFFC member groups have long focused on the crisis of Black land loss in particular. In 1910, over 12.8 million acres of land were held by non-white (mostly Black) farmers (Merem, 2006). The most recent Agricultural Census shows that about 46,500 Black farm operators work about 4.5 million acres of land (USDA, 2012). These numbers show an increase compared to past figures. At one point, data showed numbers as low as 18,000 Black farmers owning 2.3 million acres of land in 1997 (USDA, 1997). Nevertheless the 2012 figures represent less than half of the total from 1910.

This alarming decrease in the number of Black farmers has led many to ask ‘why’ and ‘how,’ and more importantly, ‘what needs to be done?’. Organizations such as the Federation of Southern Cooperatives Land Assistance Fund (FSC) and the Land Loss Prevention Project (LLPP), both members of NFFC and RC, have fought tirelessly to strengthen the hold smallholder and underrepresented farmer groups have on their land.<sup>11</sup> The Federation of Southern Cooperatives was created over half a century ago and took on its current iteration in 1985 when it merged with the Emergency Land Fund (ELF), an organization that worked to address the

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<sup>10</sup> See Germer’s and Dierson’s 2015 Practicum research findings in their report, “Funding for conservation programs under the Farm Bill: Who is benefiting?” ([farmbillfairness.org](http://farmbillfairness.org)).

<sup>11</sup> FSC is a member organization of both RC and NFFC. LLP is an RC member organization.

issue of black land loss.<sup>12</sup> Centered in Epps, Alabama, it has offices across the South, in Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Florida and Louisiana. The Federation aims for the “development of self-supporting communities with programs that increase income and enhance other opportunities; and [they] strive to assist in land retention and development, especially for African Americans, but essentially for all family farmers”.<sup>13</sup> LLPP was founded in 1982 by the North Carolina Association of Black Lawyers and advocates for financially distressed and limited resource farmers through litigation, public policy and promotion of sustainable agriculture and environment. These groups, through various means, have pushed for policy development to address the issue of Black land loss, and have brought increased attention to this critical but often-neglected issue.

In December 1996, a group of Black farmers went to Washington D.C. to demand that then-President Bill Clinton act to ensure equity in agricultural lending programs. Farm lending and credit programs are essential to the survival of smallholder farms that depend on monetary assistance as a cushion against the vast and uncontrollable uncertainties of farming. These programs rest at the heart of the discrimination faced by farmers of color, as time and again operators cope with issues such as failure to receive funds on time, and unequal assistance and information regarding the processes of receiving loans and credit. It is important to note that county committees — local arms of the USDA — are responsible for assisting farmers with loan and credit programs. County committees are meant to be representative of their communities, composed of local community members and elected by local farmers in that county. Due to a long history of problematic behaviors and policy decisions entrenched in systemic racism, however, county committees have come to be seen as the epicenter of discrimination. Recognizing this ongoing problematic treatment of farmers of color in the dispersal and allocation of farm loans and credit, and unequal representation on county committees, farmers filed a class-action lawsuit against the Secretary of Agriculture in 1997 (CRAT Report, 1997). Due to the remonstrance and protestations of farmers, activists and even USDA employees, then-Secretary of Agriculture, Dan Glickman, created a team to analyze the issues of discrimination within the USDA. This team — the Civil Rights Action Team (CRAT) — was tasked to create a report highlighting discriminatory practices within the USDA and offering recommendations for improvement. CRAT held listening sessions and heard from large numbers of farmers and employees of the USDA. This was not

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<sup>12</sup> The Emergency Land Fund (ELF) is known for their study, “The impact of heir property on black rural land tenure in the southeastern region of the United States”. According to FSC, ELF was significant in identifying one of the main reasons Black farmers lose land is due to heir property, which can “an more easily be absconded by developers or the government.” <http://www.federationsoutherncoop.com/files%20home%20page/landloss.htm>.

<sup>13</sup> The Mission and History of The Federation of Southern Cooperatives Land Assistance Fund: <http://www.federationsoutherncoop.com/files%20home%20page/fschistory/mission.htm>.

the first group to research civil rights issues in the USDA and create a report on it, but it was one of the most impactful. Ultimately the CRAT Task Force offered 92 recommended changes to the USDA and produced the Civil Rights Action Plan.<sup>14</sup>

Three years after the demonstration in Washington and the creation of the CRAT Task Force, the monumental Pigford case emerged. The 1999 Pigford case and the subsequent Pigford II case are notable milestones in the fight against discrimination experienced by Black farmers from the USDA. As class action lawsuits, both the *Pigford v. Glickman* case and the following *In Re Black Farmers Discrimination Litigation* (Pigford II) charged the USDA with discrimination in the dispersal and allocation of farm loans and credit, as well as with inadequate response to complaints filed between 1983 and 1997. Ultimately these cases won halting but unprecedented victories, at least at face value, as approved claimants received loan forgiveness and were awarded a sum of money based on the Track they filed under (Cowan and Feder, 2010).<sup>15</sup>

Though seen by some as a huge success — as precedent for broader repatriation struggles, nevertheless, the cases carried their own disfunctions of discrimination (Gilbert, Sharp and Felin, 2002). In fact, the creation of a second lawsuit, Pigford II, stemmed from issues of discrimination in the execution of the first suit. Forgiving unfair debt, awarding funds to claimants, and highlighting issues of racial discrimination in the USDA through the lawsuit, these stand as landmark achievements. However, it is questionable as to how much change these cases have brought about and how much they impacted the underlying problems on which the cases were based. Despite the inadequate nature of approaching underlying problems of discrimination through a legal case, the benefits were clear and the Pigford cases were followed by similar cases, all which charged the USDA with discrimination: the *Keepseagle* case (Native American farmers), the *Love* case (Female farmers) and the *Garcia* case (Hispanic farmers). These cases did not all achieve the degree of success of the Pigford cases; the *Keepseagle* case was awarded class action status; but the *Love* and *Garcia* cases were not (Carpenter, 2012), and in fact resulted in the 2015 egregious denial of 86% of successfully filed claims, on nebulous grounds of “fraud” (Zippert 2015).

A number of other policies came out of this increased awareness of discrimination, such as the 2501 Program (also known as ‘Outreach and Assistance

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<sup>14</sup> Rural Coalition and their member organizations did a lot of behind the scenes work to support the creation of Civil Rights Action Team, as well as the creation of the CRAT Report itself - originally the plan was to hold 50 listening sessions, with no report. However, encouragement and suggestions by RC and their member groups led to the creation of the CRAT Report

<sup>15</sup> There were two tracks in the Pigford cases, ‘Track A’ and ‘Track B’, the former being the most commonly selected. Under Track A, claimants receive \$50,000 and debt forgiveness. Track B offered the potential to receive a larger tailored sum of money, but required much more work and time, time being an especially precious commodity for a farmer.

for Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers Program’) and the Beginner Farmers and Ranchers Program (BFRDP). The 2501 Program was instituted in Section 2501 of the 1990 Farm Bill. This program aims to assist historically underserved producers navigate the USDA’s programs and services, so that they may benefit from the available resources. This has been a significant program and a positive step by the USDA in the recognition and assistance for the broad spectrum of ‘socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers’ (a term used by the USDA).<sup>16</sup> With RC and NFFC’s lobbying leadership, the 2008 Farm Bill awarded \$20 million to assist socially disadvantaged farmers. Despite the multifaceted success of the 2501 program, and its multiplier effects of community assistance, the 2014 Farm Bill halved the funding — while adding veterans to the eligibility. Again, RC and NFFC lead the civil society struggle to recover — and even expand — 2008 funding levels. In 2002 the USDA created another assistance program, BFRDP, though funding did not get authorized until the 2014 Farm Bill. A competitive grants program, BFRDP offers support for initiatives geared toward helping beginning farmers and ranchers. Through RC- and NFFC-led and ally-led advocacy and lobbying, the 2008 Farm Bill mandated that BFRDP target 25% of grant funding to projects addressing the needs of socially disadvantaged and underserved farmers.<sup>17</sup> According to a 2017 report by the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, this goal was met.<sup>18</sup> However, the report also mentioned inconsistencies in the data as a challenge, once again indicating a need for more intentional data collection by the USDA.<sup>19</sup> These inconsistencies in data make methodological

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<sup>16</sup> The term ‘socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers’ was created in 1990 by the USDA. Among our community partners and their allies, debates have risen over the term ‘socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers’. The fact that ‘socially disadvantaged’ is being used to apply to groups with such strong, supportive and rich social structures and groups, has been critiqued by frontline groups like our community partners as inaccurate and ironic. Since its creation, the term has been woven into the 2501 Program, making it difficult to eliminate despite its problematic and controversial nature. RC and NFFC ultimately decided to adopt the term in political advocacy to raise support for the 2501 program.

<sup>17</sup> In the 2014 Farm Bill, BFRDP’s mandated 25% of grant funding to projects for socially disadvantaged and underserved farmers was reduced to 5%. There is an alarming need for greater support of farmers of color.

<sup>18</sup> The report released by the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, “Cultivating the Next Generation can be accessed at <http://sustainableagriculture.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Cultivating-the-Next-Generation-Oct-2017.pdf>.

<sup>19</sup> The USDA Race, Equity, and Gender Program Statistics query tool (REGStats) is intended to make the program application and participation rate data available to the public (<https://www.outreach.usda.gov/regstats.htm>). However, while this is a useful tool it is lacking information on certain programs (such as BFRDP), and only has information available for a select number of years. More research is needed to show how this program could be improved, and what the most useful information this program could provide, and in what way.

approaches such as community-partnered research more valuable, filling in gaps and narratives missing from the data and official accounts.

These cases, and the organizations and individuals fighting for greater equity and representation for farmers, have brought about significant change, including policy creation and implementation, and increased awareness regarding the plight of underrepresented farmers. In terms of land loss, data from the USDA Census of Agriculture offer their own glimmer of hope. These data show increasing numbers of Black farm owners and operators, and an increase in the amount of land owned by Black farmers (USDA, 2012). At the same time however, the research and interviews we conducted in 2016 have shown that Black farmers continue to suffer from the same kinds of discrimination outlined a generation earlier in the CRAT report and brought forth in the Pigford cases.

### **Ongoing Troubles on the Farm — and in the County Committees**

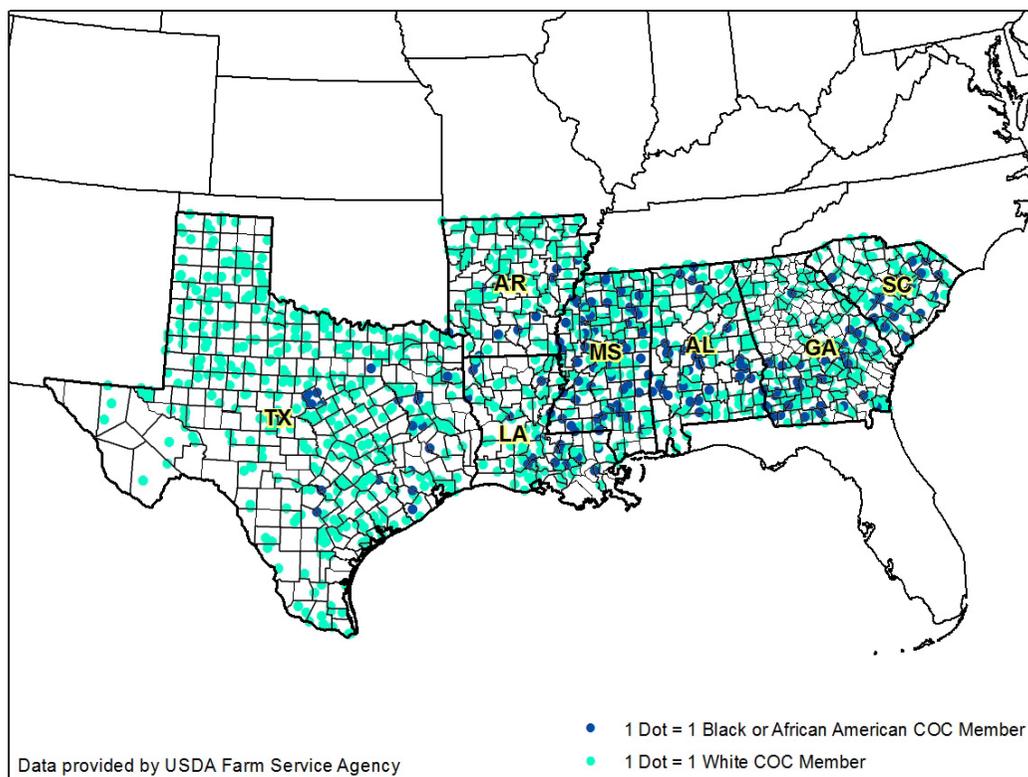
Our research sought to understand whether farmers' experiences with the county committees and of racial discrimination had changed since the 1999 *Pigford I* and *II* cases. To investigate our questions and concerns, we employed historical and current policy analysis, and then planned and conducted seven semi-structured key-informant interviews with farmers of color and activists with years, if not decades of personal experience and hands-on expertise on these issues. Our questions focused on the interviewees' opinions of the cases, as well as their personal experiences with discrimination as farmers, their experiences laboring to expose issues of discrimination and fighting for greater equity for farmers. After conducting the interviews, we coded them to determine if we could find similar themes amongst the pool of interviews. Rooting our analysis in knowledge of the history of discrimination and the Pigford cases, we found similarities between experiences expressed by interviewees who had worked directly with farmers in the Pigford cases, and farmers who had begun farming well after the Pigford cases had closed. As the driving complaints behind the Pigford cases were around discrimination on the local level at FSA offices, we wanted to get a more current picture of the demographic breakdown of the county committees, as well as to supplement our research with quantitative data.

Using 2013 data from the USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS), and the FSA, we mapped the population distribution of county committee nominations in the Southern United States (see Figure 1) — where a majority of Black farmers in the country are located (USDA, 2012).<sup>20</sup> From the data we can

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<sup>20</sup> For the map, COC refers to county committees. We created the map using ArcGIS. The shapefiles for counties and states were downloaded from National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) and the demographic election data was provided by the Farm Service Agency (FSA). Our spatial analysis pays attention to the distribution of Black farmer and White farmer nominees in the following Southern states: Texas, Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama,

see that White farmers comprise a majority of the county committee nominations. The 2012 Census of Agriculture reported a vastly greater number of White farmers (3,051,572) than Black farmers (46,582) in the country (USDA, 2012). In the Southern states included in the map below, the census reported 32,330 Black farmers and 655,197 White farmers. As you can see, the trend continues on a smaller level, there are fewer Black farmers than White farmers. However, if you look at the numbers of Black farmers in the South versus the number in the country as a whole you will notice more than half of the farmers in the United States are in these seven states. As already noted in this article, compared to past figures the numbers of Black farmers dropped perilously low in the mid to late 1900s, in the past decade the numbers have been slowly on the rise. The fact that most Black farmers in the U.S. are in these states and this population has dropped in number, combined with the ongoing discriminatory practices as indicated by the CRAT report and the Pigford case, indicates a need for strong institutional representation and support. The data displayed in this map highlights the need for the USDA to continue outreach to Black farmers, to increase their participation in USDA programs, and to support efforts to diversify county committee nominations and elections.



Georgia, and South Carolina. Future research is needed to expand the analysis to include states such as Oklahoma and North Carolina.

**Figure 1:** 2013 COC Election Nominees in Selected Southern States  
(Black Nominees vs. White Nominees)

Many of the common themes from the interviews refer to county committee offices, and the discriminatory practices that have remained entrenched in these structures. A number of the most prevalent and relevant themes have been highlighted and displayed with quotes.

- **Connections:** *Treatment differing based on connections and relationship.* USDA County Committee officers often treat people differently depending on their personal relationship and connection to the person they are serving.
- **Fraternity:** *Binding together to protect one another.* There is an atmosphere of fraternity among county committee workers, particularly evident when an official is accused of bias.
- **Disconnect:** *Lack of relationship between the USDA office in D.C. and county-level offices.* Disconnect between the local-level county committees and local Farm Services Agency offices (FSA) from the national USDA offices.

Notably, these themes from interviews conducted in 2016 closely parallel observations made in the 1997 CRAT report. The seven interviews we conducted included two farmers based in South Carolina and Georgia, and five activists based in North Carolina, South Carolina, Oklahoma, and Washington, D.C. A number of the activists were involved in the creation of the CRAT report and are consequently intimately familiar with its contents. Those on the frontlines fighting discrimination in the USDA still recognize the same issues of discrimination occurring. After the creation of the CRAT report; after the programs the USDA has implemented; after the rhetoric and ideas espoused by the USDA regarding equity and support for small farmers; after all this we continue to see the same patterns of racialized bias and exclusion. The similarities between the themes we have pulled from our interviews and the items highlighted by the CRAT report, examined below, serve as a powerful reminder that many goals have yet to be achieved.

### *Connections*

“That was the good ol' boy system.”<sup>21</sup>

“They tell you there is no money. They tell you that they are not taking applications now. What they don't tell you is that even if there is no money now, that there is gonna be (money) at a scheduled

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<sup>21</sup> Activist, community leader. Interview conducted in Washington DC, March 15, 2016.

period... They don't tell you that. Unless, you have a relationship with them.”<sup>22</sup>

“I went into the Farm Service Agency in... Barnwell South Carolina... inquiring about getting... crop insurance for vegetables... and the lady told me that, I had to plant my crop and then come back and purchase the insurance. Well, that's what I did, so that was... like January 6th January 7th 2009, and I finished planting my crops in April, May sometime... and when I came back to purchase the crop insurance like she had told me, she said 'you're too late, the deadline was the 28th of February'... the same agent, and I said 'well you know, I was in here in January, and you told me I had to plant my crop first.' I said 'well I still need to purchase the insurance', and she said well 'you cannot do it' and so, you know I'm, not trying to get into any confrontation, so, I said 'okay then' and walked out. And I thought I would make it, I thought everything would be ok, but I lost the majority of my crops. And just through natural disasters, and so I was just constantly hounding them about, you know, what type of relief can I get?”<sup>23</sup>

This theme permeated the key informant interviews. The first quote illustrates the sense of camaraderie that permeates these offices, and its exclusionary tendency. The other two quotes, the first from an activist, and the second from a farmer, are illustrations of how farmers who lack connections with the officials suffer through withheld assistance and information. These themes recurred repeatedly in the CRAT report listening sessions (CRAT Report, 1997): an ongoing story of county officials giving too little information, and offering less assistance, to minority farmers.

### *Fraternity*

“And some of them was shifted from county to county... if they got a lot of complaints they move them over to another county.”<sup>24</sup>

“The unfortunate situation is that as we speak there have been no consequences with the staff in terms of either compensation for the loss of land, the you know, the aggravation that these folks had to, in

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<sup>22</sup> Activist, community leader. Interview conducted in Washington DC, March 16, 2016.

<sup>23</sup> Farmer. Interview conducted in South Carolina, March 18, 2016.

<sup>24</sup> Activist, community leader. Interviewed in Washington DC, March 15, 2016.

order to prove the fact that they had actually been discriminated against.”<sup>25</sup>

These quotes, both from interviews with activists, illustrate how County Committee employees will protect one another from potential consequences that might arise from being accused of acting in a discriminatory manner. Officials charged with discriminatory behavior were often dealt with by relocation. They did not face any repercussions and were in fact allowed to remain employed by the USDA. Such self-protective fraternity is not unique to USDA County Committee offices, but nevertheless in this case is emblematic of larger systemic race-based biases and white privileges.

### ***Disconnect***

“Some of the workers wrote their own rules... They’d set their own rules and... they carried out their own rules... They didn’t check them from Washington down... they did their own thing.”<sup>26</sup>

“Now one might say Secretary Vilsack would use his authority and just appoint more people of color to these committees and expand the membership. That might help but I’m not necessarily convinced because the culture is so ingrained... in these processes. It would take more than that. It would take education and training on the part of county committees. It would take people who know racial diversity training to come in and really assist. You know, people to change behavior and thinking.”<sup>27</sup>

These quotes, both from long-time activists, illustrate the disconnect between the D.C. USDA offices and the local offices. Some county committee officials act outside of the rules and regulations laid out in D.C., and act rather according to their own agenda. The culture and atmosphere of the county committees remains removed from that of the USDA. The USDA can preach the word of equity and integration, they can send civil rights officers to local offices, but to change what is so deeply woven into the fabric of these groups will take something more radical and requires deeper transformation.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Activist, community leader. Interviewed in Washington DC, March 16, 2016

<sup>26</sup> Activist, community leader. Interviewed in Washington DC, March 15, 2016.

<sup>27</sup> Activist, community leader. Interviewed in Boston, Massachusetts, March 25, 2016.

<sup>28</sup> There is an ongoing conversation among member organizations such as RC and NFFC, as to what these solutions look like, and how they can be achieved. Our article hopes to chronicle some of the work being done, and to add to this conversation. Specifically, we suggest here that urban and rural struggles must be connected, and community-based research can help further this work and provide insight into solutions.

The CRAT report mirrors these themes, singling out issues in the chain of command, more specifically a disconnect between the local county offices and the government level of the USDA, the lack of accountability USDA officials and senior executives have been held to by the USDA, and the way county committee members will bind together. The CRAT report (1997) included a quote from a farmer illustrating the lack of accountability to which officials are held: “We had a supervisor actually take an individual’s plan and throw it in the trashcan... I think we need to look at some policies which govern accountability and look at the ethics of accountability as well.” Also included was a quote regarding the way the officials treat individuals differently based on their relationships: “If they [county officials] don’t like you, they won’t give you the loan.” (CRAT Report, 1997)

The similarities between the themes from the interviews conducted almost twenty years after the report was written, and after the historic Pigford cases, are also illustrated clearly in the present-day case of a 30-year-old Black farmer based in South Carolina. Young, skilled in agriculture, and deeply committed to farming his family’s land, Ryan Pressley would seem to be an exemplary model for the USDA: a former professional baseball player who grew up with grandparents who imbued within him a love for farming. Nevertheless, in 2014 due to bankruptcy stemming from unequal treatment by county committee officials, the young farmer lost both his family farm inherited from his grandparents and the farm he had purchased with his own funds in 2008. He joined RC to gain assistance in filing civil rights complaints.<sup>29</sup> Mr. Pressley experienced the same discriminatory treatment that the Pigford cases were based on, and as was outlined in the CRAT report. Since embarking on this research, we spoke with Mr. Pressley on the progress of filing a lawsuit against the USDA.

“I am continuing to stay optimistic in hopes that the USDA would stop their disparate treatment against socially disadvantaged farmers, but that just isn't the case. I am still fighting to secure a legal representation to file suit, but I'm afraid my statute of limitations has expired. My father is now the principal operator and I the manager. We will be going into an NAD appeal hearing later this month to get a loan decision overturned. We are dealing with the same local officials that I dealt with, and it seems as if they are intentionally denying my father alone because of me. They have gone into my file to try and discredit my father’s creditworthiness. He has a FICO score of 806. When does it end? How does it end?”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Ryan Pressley first presented his story at the 2013 Rural Coalition Winter Forum at American University. He presented again in 2014, to RC leaders and allies as well as to USDA officials.

<sup>30</sup> Ryan Pressley, June 1st, 2018.

With all of the USDA's programs such as the 2501 Program and the Beginning Farmers and Ranchers Development Program, the ongoing discrimination and setbacks that Mr. Pressley has faced are alarming and show that progress on paper does not guarantee progress on the ground.

Issues of discrimination have made farming for smallholder, under-represented groups significantly more difficult, and have contributed to the loss of farm ownership and farm operators in marginalized communities. Despite the historic nature of the USDA civil rights lawsuits, and the well-documented injustices and racism occurring in these systems, the attention of both the public and academics has been slow-coming — though a surge of publications on racism, rural discrimination and agricultural policy arises (Williams and Holt-Gimenez, 2018; White, 2018). To gain a deeper understanding of the connection between land loss, discrimination, and the needs and struggles of these rural communities it is necessary for the academy, both student and faculty researchers, to engage in community-partnered research with these frontline communities of farmers and activists. Despite progress, blatant parallels persist between the problems of the past and the problems of the present for underrepresented farmers.

### **Discussion and Concluding Thoughts**

In this overview, we introduce an approach to utilizing community-based research with community partners engaged in agrarian justice struggles. As part of their Master's graduate capstone project, students sought to support organizations by providing practical deliverables requested by organizations themselves. Community-partnered research, in the form of graduate practicums, have the potential for transformative impact for organizations, agri-food policies, and students and faculty researchers. We contend that a key contribution of our community-partnered research is to highlight the ongoing racial discrimination experienced by Black farmers and help convey the layers of trauma land-loss brings to communities committed to land-based life and livelihoods and cultural identity.

The loss of a farm, the withdrawal of land by a landowner, often translates to a farmer's loss of independence, family histories, community, culture, and connection with the land. These losses become impactful economically, socially, and psychologically. This is the crux of the work of RC, NFFC, their member organizations, and their ally grassroots groups around the world over, such as La Vía Campesina counterparts and allies. Land loss becomes destructive on many deep, even intergenerational levels. For communities striving to be land-based or to return to land-based cultural roots, the loss of land works like a catastrophe. The recent book *Land Justice: Re-imagining Land, Food, and the Commons in the United States* (2017) compiles diverse, powerful voices to chronicle this exact point. Shane Bernardo eloquently detailed this dynamic in his 2017 backgrounder "The Pathology of Displacement: The Intersection of Food Justice and Culture."

Here the brutal traumas of genocidal displacement from indigenous homelands haunts native communities in the U.S., as well as immigrants, migrants, and refugees coming to the U.S. RC foregrounds how these intersect with traumas of kidnapping and enslavement of African-diaspora communities. NFFC braids-in the more recent farm crisis. Even for those with settler colonial heritage, losing the family farm can be psychologically devastating. The current increases in farmer suicide attest to this, where individuals working in farming struggle with low farmgate prices, high input costs, and mounting debts. Farmers are 3.4 times more likely to commit suicide than other American workers (Kilgannon, 2018). Our community partners wish to convey how these traumas are related — and crucial to acknowledge and connect.

In Graddy-Lovelace’s conversations with RC and NFFC, they have repeatedly expressed a need for the documentation and contextualization of the struggles faced by farmers of color. This cluster of deliverables serves as a modest, preliminary step in the broader, iterative work of fulfilling the research need for increased awareness of the valiant efforts, the struggles, the ongoing fight of producers, advocates and scholar-activists working with RC and NFFC. This very article, being published and made available to the audience of the *ACME* journal, an open access journal, acts as a deliverable of the practicum, and works to fulfill a need of our community partners.

Since the ending of the practicum, community partners have used practicum deliverables, such as the map and documentary presented in this paper, as education, outreach, lobbying, fundraising, and archival tools to circulate amongst their network and bring awareness of their ongoing work.<sup>31</sup> Under the current administration, these materials and partnerships are all the more important, even as the Farm Bill 2018 congressional proposals and mark-ups leave little room for progressive, inclusive, anti-racist farm support programs. Nevertheless, RC and NFFC leaders and members continue to draw upon statistical regression analysis, economic impact indicators, GIS maps, and video shorts in their work. Most deliverables remain easily accessible online and are available on a website developed to host students’ projects.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> The Pigford Documentary is available on YouTube ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_JhXAZRqsk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_JhXAZRqsk)) and to be used as an educational tool and resource for RC, NFFC and any other organizations that express interest.

<sup>32</sup> The practicum has continued to engage and center RC and NFFC outside of practicum at Farm Bill Symposiums hosted at American University. The most recent symposium, “Farm Bill 2018: Policy, Politics, and Potential”, was hosted in March 2018 and co-sponsored by the Berkeley Food Institute. The event brought together academics, civil society leaders, policy makers, farmers, and the public to discuss research regarding the Farm Bill. The participants in the symposium were able to identify additional needs of research, “with the objective of increasing popular and scholarly understanding of — and engagement with — this complex legislation” (Farmers, Fairness, and the

On a more personal level, the ongoing practicum projects have benefited the graduate students involved in the practicum, as they describe: “Immersing ourselves in this work and in these communities, traveling to the Deep South to bear witness to the stories of farmers, presenting on this work at several conferences with other critical food scholars, and collaborating with students and advocates in Washington, D.C. provided a transformative experience for us as students in this practicum.” Students in the practicum gain an invaluable experience having had the opportunity to join robust partners and enhance their understanding of the present and past history of growing food in the United States.

In our case as students, the experience and exploration of both race-based discrimination in U.S. agricultural policy and engaging with this methodology has shaped the paths we have taken after graduate school. Currently, Alexandria Ward is working on national agricultural policy at an organization in Washington D.C. alongside another 2016 Practicum alumni now serving as the organization’s Diversity Outreach Coordinator. Amber Orozco works for a food policy organization in Los Angeles and provides business support for small neighborhood market owners to operate as successful healthy food retailers in underserved communities. (The graduates’ experiences alone make the community-based research methodology beneficial and rewarding for the faculty-lead as well. Indeed, this ongoing collaboration has been a key honor and highlight of their professional and intellectual life.)

This methodology comes with ample advantages and opportunities, as well as challenges for both researchers and community organizations. These types of partnerships require thorough logistical planning for both parties in order to build strong relationships and ensure that the projects are reflective of the needs of the community organizations. From the perspectives of community partners, a collaborative research methodology can be labor and time intensive, especially for those organizations who host, teach, and provide feedback to students. Many of these challenges stem from the structure of working from within a university structure.

In the practicum class structure, students are given a short-time span of slightly over four months: the rapid time-span of a semester. Truly thrown into the work, students are immediately offered a wealth of information and history and context to process, and they only have a few months to process this information and to create a deliverable couched in that knowledge. In fact, it is impossible to be truly knowledgeable about these communities and their struggles in such a short period of time. These challenges are certainly reflected in the work produced, our research on Black land loss and discrimination serve as more of a snapshot, an impression rather than a comprehensive deep dive into the subject. In following the

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Farm Bill, 2018). Among the speakers, included Rudy Arredondo, president of the National Latino Farmers and Ranchers Association, and Ben Burkett, president of the National Family Farm Coalition.

community-partnered methodology it was important to engage in meaningful ways with our community partners which meant that our interview sample is not particularly robust in terms of number of people interviewed. Our work and ability to travel also depended on funding from the university, which certainly had limits. Finally, the fact that we were conducting this research in the last semester of our Master's program while taking other classes meant that there were plenty of other demands on our time and energy that made it difficult to give as much emotional and intellectual attention to our community partners and our work as we wished to. Community-partnered action-research requires a degree of emotional energy and intelligence that can be at times difficult to draw on.

From epistemological and methodological perspectives, being an objective scholar, while simultaneously attempting to be an active member of the community organization proves difficult. The relationship between scholars and community organizations can be highly sensitive because of the amount of trust that given to scholars by their community partners through the acceptance of the scholar into community spaces. Providing critical feedback or shining a harsh light on complex dynamics aspects of partner organizations in research, writing, analysis could potentially be interpreted as negative criticism rather than honest and helpful analysis. Further, this could be detrimental to the communities and community groups in question as well as distancing the relationship between scholars and organizations. For example, all three of the authors of this paper are critical of systemic oppressions embedded in U.S. agricultural policy, yet we wanted to make sure to articulate our analyses in a way that would not disregard the hard labor of the organizations, who are continuously trying to change these very same systems of oppression from within.

Although this practicum has become impactful, a number of significant challenges need mentioning. More generally, community-partnered research has the potential to provide a substantial contribution to the work of nonprofit organizations, themselves often chronically overworked and resource-limited. Community-partnered research based on partnerships involving students and universities engages students directly with the struggles tied to these issues: an exemplary education in and of itself. A wide array of multidisciplinary research is needed on agricultural policy and discrimination — and the community struggles to counter it — at federal, county, and international levels. In the spirit of community-partnered research and collaboration, such future research would need to be done in partnership with grassroots, frontline groups and coalitions who are laying out the groundwork for equitable agri-food policy development and accountability.

Community-partnered research through the form of graduate practicum capstone projects also has the ability to provide support, resources, and new knowledge to communities and community partners, and inform scholarship on agri-food policies. This method can be used by students, academics, policy makers, activists, and the public-at-large to bring more explicitly to light the structures of

inequity that exist within policy and organizations. Events do not take place in a vacuum, and peoples' lived experiences are shaped by their gender, race and sexuality and the intersection of these identities. Working with community partners provides invaluable opportunities for more rigorous, impactful and fulfilling research. Through engagement with communities, researchers gain insight and understanding that will add validity to their work and increase its pertinence to the communities. Continued, attentive, and meaningful work with and alongside communities is often awarded with increased levels of mutual trust, understanding, and acceptance, all of which offer strong building blocks for effective and equitable research, moving forward.

Accordingly, together, scholars, working alongside diverse, grassroots farmer organizations, can give broader voice, and more grounding and context for reframing the current understanding of agriculture in the U.S. Through community-based participatory action research, scholars have the potential to connect, contextualize, and amplify the voices of marginalized farmers to help them transform U.S. agri-food policies, agriculture — and academia itself.

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