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“You’re too pretty to farm” Narratives of Resistance, Collective Mobilization, and Food Justice among Black Women Farmers

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Abstract

Black farming disparities persist in the United States (US). Currently, Black farmers represent only 1.4% of the nation’s farmers, 0.5% of US farmland, and 0.4% of total agricultural sales. For Black women farmers, the current landscape is bleaker—they represent only 1.1% of women farmers nationally. Several factors, including prohibitive policy legislation, structural discrimination, and combined forms of racialized and gendered capitalism have largely erased many Black women farmer contributions and political legacies from the modern agricultural landscape. The exigent need to study this unique subpopulation is reinforced by recent calls to address land ownership and wealth gaps, inclusion of culturally-relevant food and farming techniques, and diverse representation in mainstream agriculture policy conversations.

In this project, we draw on *Black Feminist Agrarian Ideologies* (Tyler, 2020) and *Constructivist Grounded Theory* (Charmaz, 2006) to privilege the perspectives and lived experiences of chapter leaders at National Women in Agriculture Association, a nationwide, Black women-led farm assistance organization headquartered in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma (n=9). Three primary themes emerged from the data analysis: (1) enacting resistive agency, (2) navigating barriers, and (3) emic forms of knowledge and education. Drawing on the understanding that large-scale structural and cultural inequities in farming have led to broader social, public health, and economic disparities among the Black community, we argue that Black women farmers political identities, lived experiences, and ancestral memory represent a uniquely innovative and access-related disparities and more equitable policy legislation. emancipatory approach to “doing” agriculture that many inform new ways to address food access-related disparities and more equitable policy legislation.

Theoretical Framework

Black Feminist Agrarian Ideologies (BFAI)

An emancipatory praxis that centers Black women lived experience, political identity, and ancestral memory within US agriculture's broader historical, cultural, political, economic, and social context (BFAI; Tyler, 2020).

“Black women farmers represent new strategies and innovative ways for thinking about food production, distribution, and consumption that challenge dominant approaches reproducing inequities in access and health outcomes (White, 2011).

Research Questions

This research study is the first of its kind, as it intends to apply grounded critical communication theory with qualitative data regarding Black women farmers.

- (1) How do participants describe motivations for farming in the current agricultural landscape?
- (2) How do participants challenge norms, power inequities, and taken-for assumptions in dominant agricultural discourses.

Method

Research Site: National women in Agriculture Association, a national BIPOC women-led farm assistance organization founded in 2008 and based in Oklahoma city.

Recruitment: The executive director of the NWIAA facilitated the research at the site.

Data Collection: Interviews were conducted between Oct. 2021 – Mar. 2022. A 19-question guide was used a template for the interviews, but participants were able to delve into their experiences with farming.

Data Analysis: Guided primarily by constructivist grounded theory. Allowed the research team to collaboratively to construct findings that emerged from the data.

Experiences/Project Activities

The project was our first foray into research in general. As such, we were given the resources necessary to understand the research process from the ground up.

- Explored multiple bodies of research on the topic of Black women farming, feminist ideologies, and co-operatives
- Examined Constructivist Grounded Theory and the data coding and analysis process (CGT involves a 4-step coding process: (1) initial coding; (2) focused coding; (3) axial coding; and (4) theoretical coding.
- Through the researching process, we had weekly collaborative discussions, exploring racial injustice nuances and the experiences of the NWIAA chapter leaders.

Citations

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