

[Bennett on White, 'Freedom Farmers: Agricultural Resistance and the Black Freedom Movement.'](#)

Review published on Thursday, February 25, 2021

Monica M. White. *Freedom Farmers: Agricultural Resistance and the Black Freedom Movement.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018. 208 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-4696-6389-0; \$14.99 (e-book), ISBN 978-1-4696-4370-0.

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Printable Version: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.php?id=54810>

In the early twentieth century, Black North Carolinians B. C. “Doc” and Nannie Corbett built a sizable estate by purchasing numerous tracts of land. By the 1930s, they were among the largest landowners in Orange County. In 2016, their second-youngest daughter, Scnobia Taylor, still lived on a tract of land that once belonged to them, and, despite being in her 80s, she kept busy on it. The first time her younger sister attempted to introduce us, Mrs. Taylor was too busy working with her corn to meet. When we were finally able to meet nearly two years later—it was springtime—she had a garden started and corn planted. Fruit trees dotted the property; chickens, ducks, and guinea fowl wandered around. She had traveled the world with her husband, a soldier, but when he retired, they settled back on her family’s land, and she took up again growing things they could eat. She learned it from her parents, she said. Tobacco had been the source of whatever wealth they accumulated; homegrown vegetables, fruits, meat, and eggs were the safety net that protected them. Doc’s parents had done the same on that land, and Doc and Nannie taught the practice not only to their children, but to the Black sharecroppers who worked on their land.

Dr. Monica White would categorize the Corbetts’ farming as a resistance strategy: growing their own food was a way of maintaining their independence in a racist society. In *Freedom Farmers*, she joins scholars who have turned their attention to the extent to which rural Black Americans used these sorts of strategies to keep soul and body together in a society that largely denied them the independence to make their own way. In this book, she focuses on the collective efforts of the poorest Black farmers to protect themselves, their families, and their communities, particularly the efforts to create cooperatives in the era of the civil rights movement. She does this, she explains, in order “to connect contemporary urban farmer-activists to an earlier time when African Americans turned to agriculture as a strategy for building sustainable communities” (p. 5). Instead of attempting to provide a narrative of Black organizing across time, an effort that would be both Herculean and likely to impose too much order on a chaotic, disjointed story, White examines several moments in twentieth-century Black agricultural organizing in order to learn from them. Her method, she says, is rooted in the “African principle of *sankofa*: studying the past to understand the present, and, from that, to forge a future of our own making” (p. 19). While it would be presumptuous of me to gauge the impact of this work on the community of farmer-activists, as a historian of Black farming, I believe *Freedom Farmers* is an excellent model of using the past to inform the present.

White builds her work on the theoretical framework that she calls collective agency and community resilience, or CACR. This model focuses less on the disruptive forms of everyday resistance in favor of considering the “activities community members enact as a means to be self-reliant and self-sufficient” (p. 6). CACR can take numerous forms but are built on several strategies, three of which White argues were key for the development of the agricultural cooperatives she documents. The first of these is “commons as praxis,” an approach to land ownership that eschewed individualism and prioritized “community well-being and wellness for the benefit of all” (p. 9). The second strategy was a “prefigurative politics” (p. 9) that functioned as an alternative for those excluded from electoral politics and emphasized democracy and participation. The final strategy was to pursue economic autonomy that, like prefigurative politics, provided an alternative to the exploitative labor practices that Black workers endured in favor of a system that allowed them to enjoy the fruits of their labor.

Having established the framework for the study as well as a brief exploration of historical examples of collective agency and community resilience (including gardens grown by enslaved people, the Colored Farmers’ Alliance, and the work of the United Negro Improvement Association) in a long introduction, White divides her study in two parts. In the first, she revisits the work of Booker T. Washington, George Washington Carver, and W. E. B. Du Bois, three men she argues provided the theoretical underpinnings for agriculture as a resistance strategy. Washington, as president of the Tuskegee Institute, pressed Black farmers to fight for their independence through self-reliance, while Carver, from his lab there, worked tirelessly to give them the tools to feed themselves apart from plantation stores and their high-cost credit. Meanwhile, Du Bois, she argues, provided the model for prefigurative politics in his lesser-known advocacy of cooperatives as a strategy for rural Black people. For White, the success or failure of these men in realizing their goals is not the point—an approach to the past with which a historian might quibble—so much as it is the value of their ideas for informing the present.

From the intellectual foundations of agriculture as resistance, White moves to case studies of Black-led agricultural cooperatives in the second part of the book. She devotes a chapter each to the Freedom Farm Cooperative formed by Fannie Lou Hamer, the North Bolivar County (Mississippi) Farm Cooperative, the Federation of Southern Cooperatives, and the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network. While each developed in unique historical and geographic circumstances, and each took a slightly different approach, especially with regard to the scale of their operations, White finds connections for each in their ability to develop the strategies of collective agency and community resistance. Despite their internal limitations and the racist resistance each faced, she finds in each cooperative lessons for modern efforts to develop community agriculture projects. Freedom Farm Cooperative and its “oasis of self-reliance and self-determination in a landscape of oppression” is an example of how “those who have been historically been excluded” might build sustainable communities (p. 87). The North Bolivar County Farm Cooperative and the Federation of Southern Cooperatives, meanwhile, demonstrate the power of networking and large-scale organization. The Detroit Black Community Food Security Network, for its part, shows how resistance through access to food need not be a rural phenomenon alone. White admits that her book is a “love letter” (p. 26) to these movements, so she spends less time examining the resistance they faced. Neither does she ever pose the question as to whether they, in a political economy built on exploitation and private profit, face too high of a hill to climb. White’s is a positive story with hope at its center, and people who similarly have hope in the possibilities of collective action should pay close attention to the strategies White discusses, for she offers much to learn.

Citation: Evan Bennett. Review of White, Monica M., *Freedom Farmers: Agricultural Resistance and the Black Freedom Movement*. H-Environment, H-Net Reviews. February, 2021. **URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=54810>

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