



Building Power with Black Farmer Fund

How investing in Black agricultural systems cultivates community health & wealth

Transcript

This is Zoe from Feminist Food Journal, with another feminist food story.

Zoë:

In the past century, 98 percent of Black agricultural landowners in the United States have been dispossessed of their holdings. They have lost altogether 12 million acres of agricultural land, with most of the losses occurring from the 1950s onwards. Between 1950 and 1975, more than half a million Black-owned farms across the country failed. According [to an estimate](#) by the Land Loss and Reparations Project, the dispossession of Black farmers in the American South alone has implied a loss of \$250 billion to \$350 billion in accumulated wealth and income for Black farmers and their communities.

This systematic disconnection of Black people from the land occurred through a variety of means, which in the words of Atlantic writer [Vann R. Newkirk II](#), "were sometimes legal, often coercive, in many cases legal *and* coercive, and occasionally violent." Those of you who have read or listened to Dr. Alice Ragland's piece "More Radical Than It May Seem", which was published as part of this EARTH issue, will already know how these outcomes are the result of a long history of colonialism, slavery, and racist policy making.

[[Audio Clip](#)] Alice Ragland:

Even after the end of sharecropping, the history of dispossessing African American farmers continued. Black farmers were excluded from land purchases by federal programs and policies; their legal protections related to intergenerational property transfer were limited; and it remained harder for Black farmers to access the capital needed to maintain their businesses because of discriminatory lending practices. Combined with the fact that [most farm subsidies have continued to go to white farmers](#), this means that access to agriculture within many Black communities in the US is limited.

Zoë:

According to an analysis by NPR, even as recently as 2022, only 36 percent of Black farmers who applied for direct loans from the US Department of Agriculture were approved, compared to 72 percent of white farmers who applied. This, despite the fact that direct loans are supposed to be

the easiest type of USDA loan to acquire; they are meant for farmers who can't get credit elsewhere and can be used to buy land and farming equipment or cover other operational costs needed to keep a business alive.

Enter Black Farmer Fund.

[[Audio Clip](#)] Karen Washington:

A group of us started Black Farmer Fund because we looked at the wealth inequality that we saw especially when it came to Black farmers, in terms of the amount of land that they own, the amount of wealth that they have and found out that there is so much disparities when it comes – and inequality – when it comes to wealth and when it comes to land access.

Melanie:

Black Farmer Fund, we are a nonprofit and a community-led investment fund that supports Black food actors across the Northeast. So Black farmers, herbalist folks working in food distribution, the catering industry, really looking across the entire food system.

We started from, conversations that were happening with two Black farmers, Karen Washington and Olivia Watkins, who were personally frustrated with their own challenges accessing capital that really served their needs. They started having these conversations in 2018 and started expanding those conversations to incorporate the voices of different Black farmers in New York.

And that really led to the idea of creating something that was community-led, that really centred lived experiences of food actors and the different elements that need to be present for them to really feel supported.

And also the need for shifting power and putting power back in the hands of the community when it comes to sovereignty and having decisions over funding and how funding is distributed.

Zoë:

I had the honour of speaking with two women involved in Black Farmer Fund about their work, about power in our food systems, about Black Farmer Fund's unique approach to community wealth building, and the complexities of cultivating land in a settler-colonial context.

Melanie:

Hi, I'm Melanie Allen. I use she/her pronouns, and I'm the program director at Black Farmer Fund. I'm based in Brooklyn and I've been really fortunate to be able to work for different types of initiatives and projects that facilitate non-active capital, technical assistance and community networking for Black farmers, land stewards, herbalists, and food actors across the northeast and also internationally.

amanda:

My name is amanda david, and I am a community herbalist. I am a land steward. I've kind of done all sorts of different pieces in land tending, from migrant farm work to organic farming. And I've kind of landed on gardening as my true heart song, and community gardening to be more specific. I am a single mother to three kids. I have been super, super lucky to be part of the Black Farmer Fund, which has been amazing and life-changing and excited that we get to chat about that today.

Melanie:

How did I get involved? So my family is from Jamaica and both my grandparents grew up in the country, so grew up in rural environments. I've heard stories of my great-grandfather being, the butcher of the community, but both my grandparents were also sent to Kingston, the capital, in their teenage years to pursue schooling and further education, which is what a lot of families at that time were doing at this time, like urban migration and this removal, this disconnect from the land.

Even though they were in pretty urban environments for most of their adulthood, they always found ways to still stay connected. So, I spent summers visiting my grandparents in Jamaica and you know, we would have grapefruit trees, ackee trees, kalu growing, so, We had a lot of food growing at the house in, in a very like urban gardening type of environment.

But that connection to food and then food being connected to community was always something I was exposed to. So my grandma's house was the house that you could show up unannounced and you would get well-fed. So I've always been able to find healing and relationship in community and food system spaces.

I studied that in college. I studied agriculture and natural resource management. I also did some international development work and was fortunate to be able to work with farmers and Burkina Faso. I was working with cashew farmers. I spent some time in the Benin and I was doing research on yam farmers that were being impacted by climate change and migrating from the northern region to the central region in search of more arable land.

And I've always just been really excited about these different elements of agriculture, but also these powers at play that keep folks from having access to resources, access to technical assistance, access to funding, and access to decision making. So I was noticing a lot of overlap, whether I was, you know, looking at agricultural systems in the US or abroad that these power systems were still keeping certain communities, certain folks out of, out of these spaces, and I wanted to be involved with something that was really directly connected to shifting that.

And that's what excites me about Black Farmer Fund. I'm from New York, so being able to work closer to home in a context that I'm more familiar with was also something that felt important. And also doing something that is really working at like the root of power.

amanda:

My involvement in the Black Farmer Fund has been – originally I was one of the very, very blessed, and amazing folks who received funding from the Black Farmer Fund.

Funding is not a big enough word. It's like funding and support and community and like resources. You know, in so many ways it really was just like being welcomed into a community

and folks were like "We're here for you. What are your needs? How can we support?" Part of that was money, and part of that was just skill-building and technical support.

Melanie:

Our funding approach centers on integrated capital. So it's a mix of grants and loans. Low-interest loans range from 0.5 interest to 4 percent depending on the entrepreneur's capacity to pay back. And we have this approach because we want to be able to have funding that is reparative, that responds to previous harm that farm that funding vehicles have done. And reparative capital is a term that we, we learned from our colleague, Mark Watson.

And then we also, we're not just doing funding, we're doing technical assistance. So all of our businesses are supported with different types of technical services that respond to their specific needs. That could be marketing, it could be business development support. We have a few collective cooperative models that have received governance support.

And then we also think about interdependent networks across the food system. So we actually have a project that we're collaborating on with one of our partner organizations, Northeast Farmers of Color Land Trust, that's looking at market distribution and helping to facilitate listening sessions and focus groups with Black land stewards and farmers across the northeast to find out what are folks growing, what markets are they currently accessing. What markets do they want access to that might be more lucrative? What are the barriers to those markets? And really trying to build the foundation of what interdependent networks could look like. So if we have three farmers up in Ithaca that are all trying to get their product down to a more lucrative market in New York City, and they're all having an issue with transport, or that's a financial barrier, what would it look like if that was done collectively. Or one of the issues that a lot of our farmers experience when trying to get into larger markets like supermarkets, there are quantity requirements that they have to be able to meet. And for a smallholder farmer, that could be challenging. So what would it look like for four or five farmers that are growing the same product in the same way to be able to collectively sell their product to a supermarket, for example? So those are the types of conversations we're having.

We really center relationships at the heart of all of our work and just want to be able to respond to the needs of the folks that we're supporting. So our funding is no strings attached. We don't tell folks how they have to use their money. We're here to provide guidance and support as requested, as needed, but we really want that self-determination to be present in the different layers of our work.

amanda:

It's been amazing to be a part of that. And now I'm a part of the investment committee, which is tasked with the amazing responsibility of being able to choose the next round of folks to get funding from the Black Farmer Fund. So, it's been really just such a beautiful process to be on that side of receiving the support and then being able to help, kind of shape and, um, be a part of the next cohort and moving this forward been amazing.

Zoë:

One of the things that I find most compelling about Black Farmer Fund's model is the way that you define risk. What I mean by this is that while more traditional investors might consider the

monetary risk of making a certain investment, as I understand it, Black Farmer Fund, instead considers, what is the risk of not investing - in the individuals, for the communities. I think that is a really powerful way of disrupting the status quo of investment practices which have done so much harm to the communities you are trying to support.

amanda:

Yeah, absolutely.

Melanie:

To really understand why our work is necessary, why alternative funding vehicles are essential to really uplifting a racially dressed food system and to understand why a lot of conversations around decolonizing agriculture are happening, it's important for it to have that, that racial justice lens and to really reflect on the history of agriculture in this country, acknowledging that there was a genocide of indigenous peoples and their land was forcibly stolen from them. And then this land was forcibly cultivated by enslaved Africans from multiple generations.

And once Blacks were free, the promise of forty acres and a mule was taken away. And we see Black people being chased off their land by racial terror, violence, theft, and not having the same access to financial support and subsidies because of discriminatory lending practices. Higher interest rates, loans, and lack of legal and financial resources to support them in defending their land. And as a direct result of that, the amount of farms owned by black farmers in the US went from 14 percent in 1910 to less than two percent today. And when we think of land ownership in the US, 98 percent of rural land is in the hands of white folks. So this decline of Black and Brown indigenous farmers, it's a direct connection to this historical context.

And it also represents a disconnect from history and cultural practices. And it also connects to the fact that a lot of our communities don't have ready access to, to fresh food, and that's connected to the disproportionate health disparities that we see with communities of colour. That was extremely vivid with the recent COVID crisis.

So all of these things are connected, and that's why power is a big part of it. And power – it's beautiful power. It's power that's shared. It's power that's collective. It's power that's decentralized. Building community and networks and interdependence. And that's really the heart of what we're doing because we, we work collaboratively with other organizations that are values-aligned because we're trying not to be in competition with each other, because that's the divide and conquer that white supremacy wants us to have.

And then also when it comes to our investees, we try to intentionally build relationships amongst them. We have community work days where our investees can host workdays where other farmers that receive funding, farmers from the investment committee can come and support with a big project that normally would take maybe that farmer a whole week, but we can get it done in two days, such as a greenhouse build or transplanting or weeding and those, those types of activities are, yes, to help with capacity on the land, but also just to build relationship and to learn and connect and exchange with each other.

amanda:

I mean I think Mel said it beautifully. You know, land and our connection to land via agriculture, herbalism, you know, land tending is really, in my opinion, the root of our power, the root of anyone's power. Finding ways to reclaim that power and to build these systems so that we can once again determine how we're going to grow our food and the ways in which we're going to tend the land and what our relationship with the land is gonna be. Just like, just giving Black folks back their power, you know?

I feel like there are so many problems, but I feel like the connection with the land is the solution or holds the answers to all the solutions we need. So I feel like it's just, just everything.

I think to me as a land steward – I guess I use those words because, you know, I just consider myself in this ever-evolving, amazing relationship with the land that I am a hundred percent the student of the land. And so, you know, stewarding in that I'm just trying to figure out how to nurture that relationship, learn from the land, and then to be able to do my best to care for it in a way that is reciprocal and nurturing for myself, for the land, for the plants, for the animals, for everyone who depends on the land for life.

This is a relationship as old as time, and I feel like as a Black woman, this is like something that's so ancestral, so embedded in my DNA, but literally, for every single human on Earth, it's the same thing. You know, it's literally how we're here. This is how we're alive. And so I feel there's been so much through the continuing ongoing process of colonization that has purposely disconnected us from that.

And particularly disconnected Black and brown folks, queer and trans folks, and women. And so, being able to, to take that back, to reclaim that, I think again, not only is it the source of our power, but it's also this really incredible way to fight against all these systems of oppression that colonization has imposed on all of us and such a beautiful way to honour the legacy of our ancestors who, if they didn't hold these relationships to land, none of us would be here.

Zoë:

I wonder if you can reflect on this issue of relationships with the land in the context of the history that Melanie mentioned earlier – that is the theft of what is now American land from indigenous people by the settlers who then brought enslaved Africans over to cultivate it. How do you contend with the complexities of this settler-colonial context?

amanda:

It's so tricky because obviously, we're on stolen land. This is not the land of my ancestors.

I just again, through the assistance of the Black Farmer Fund, was able to purchase a house and with it, my little land that I turned into a community garden. And you know even just the thought of ownership of land, goes against my core and who I am and what feels right. But knowing that I have to work within the system that I'm in, unfortunately. And so, you know, for me it's just about being able to bring the community in and to make sure that if there's a piece of land that I can steward, that I can share that with my community.

And I feel like I just have to really zoom into the microcosm because, you know, I'm thinking about the big grander issues but it does start to feel like, oh my gosh, what can I do? And so I'm just like, okay, let's zoom in: I have like this acre of land and do I believe in like land ownership?

No, I don't. So what I can do is I can open it up to like the BIPOC folks in my community to come and also participate in stewarding this land and helping to make decisions and shape it.

I know there's like so many different ways to kind of go about grappling with that, like policy work and like so many things, but that's the little piece that I can handle.

Zoë:

Yeah, I think the issue of land ownership is such an interesting one. While I was preparing for this interview, Isabela, who is FFJ's other co-founding editor sent me a chapter from the book *Black Food Matters: Racial Justice in the Wake of Food Justice*. And in this chapter, Brian Williams and Tyler McCreary explain the shortcomings and pitfalls of relying on what they call "a politics of state recognition", so things such as land ownership, to address legacies of anti-Black land dispossession. Essentially I think their argument is about how individualized and racialized logics of capitalism engrained in the American systems of legal recognition can really serve to undermine more radical approaches to Black liberation. And, their assertion is that real justice won't be achieved in these systems or through the normalization of private property, and so they suggest that Black farmers should draw inspiration from "more collective attempts at spatial autonomy and economic self-determination" from the US and around the world.

I see your attempt to make your individually owned land a space of collective stewardship and Black Farmer Fund's commitment to community and relationships as very much aligned with this aspiration. But of course, as you say, it's nearly impossible to fully break out of the crushing capitalist systems in which we exist but I guess the first step toward this collective approach, even if it has to involve private ownership can then be collectivized in exactly the ways that you mention of who you bring onto the land, who you share the responsibility of stewarding it with, and putting the community above the individual, even when it comes to privately owned land.

So I think you've given us a pretty clear idea of how Black Farmer Fund operates and the value of your work, but one thing I would love to clarify is how you conceptualize Black agricultural systems. Your website says you are committed to nurturing "black community wealth & health by investing in black agricultural systems". I'd just love to hear what is your vision for these systems and how they differ from the current system.

Melanie:

When I think of Black agricultural systems, I think about healing and I think about legacy. Our current agricultural system is large-scale agriculture. That is monoculture where, you know, we're focused on growing corn or focused on growing soy, and that's extremely harmful to the environment. It also has huge implications for climate. 25 percent of our greenhouse emissions come from monocultural practices, and a lot of our historical ways of, of growing is, more in relationship with the environment when we're thinking about intercropping and planting different things at the same time, because they're, they're in relationship with each other and they support each other or rotational cropping, and a lot of those practices have been challenged by colonization, have been challenged by monoculture.

Being able to reclaim this has huge implications for not only our relationship with food but also for the environment. One of the things that I really appreciate about the work of Black Farmer Fund and really just being part of this larger movement building space is food sovereignty and

self-determination for, for Black folks to have, a say in what food is grown, how it is grown, what markets it gets to.

Because when we think about so many of the communities of colour in the US, they're intentionally divested where you don't even have access to a lot of the food that is culturally appropriate and healthy. So being able to have more ownership along the different actors of the food system is really the intention of the Black Farmer Fund, that there is this self-determination that is possible, for more communities of colour.

Zoë:

Yeah, I think the connection between Black foodways and Black agriculture is really interesting and came through in some of the "Black Farmers Thriving" videos that you have online which are really great and I encourage our listeners to go and watch as well.

Now, before I let you go, I'd love to hear: What's next? What does 2023 hold for Black Farmer Fund?

Melanie:

Yeah, something exciting going on is that we're expanding our funding and support from New York to the larger northeast. So Black farmers, and food actors in Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Vermont, New Jersey, New York and Pennsylvania will all be eligible.

And we also have a rapid response fund that responds to emergency situations that Black food actors are experiencing where they can receive up to \$10,000 – this can go towards a fire, a drought, or an insect infestation that ruined all your crops – because we really wanna be able to respond to emerging needs that can't be responded to in our larger funding process, that that takes a longer amount of time.

And yeah, we're really excited because, you know, for our pilot phase, we were able to give eight farmers, eight herbalists, \$50,000 in grant capital and we're really committed to not underfunding folks, so the checks are gonna be bigger for our next round of funding. So we really wanna be able to be more responsive to entrepreneurs' needs.

And 50K is a drop in the bucket when you think of how much it costs to actually manage a farm operation business or a food-related business.

We're getting ready for our next cycle of funding, and we're in the middle of a \$20 million raise. So if folks want to get involved and learn more about how you can support, then you can visit our website and you can also email invest@blackfarmerfund.com to get more information.

Zoë:

It was such a pleasure to have this opportunity to speak with Melanie Allen and amanda david about Black Farmer Fund. If you would like to learn more or invest, I have included a link to the Black Farmer Fund website in the show notes. I have also included some information about amanda david's initiative, Rootwork Herbals, which I also encourage you to check out.

Thank you for listening to this episode of Feminist Food Stories. This episode is part of our EARTH issue. You can read and listen to everything this issue has to offer on our substack.

Earlier in the episode, you heard a short clip of Dr. Alice Ragland reading from her piece "More Radical Than it May Seem" which tackles many of the same issues as this podcast. Audio versions of many of our pieces are available for paid subscribers, so if you'd like to gain access to those, as well as other bonus content, consider becoming a supporter. If you like what you're hearing and reading, please consider sharing FFJ with a friend.