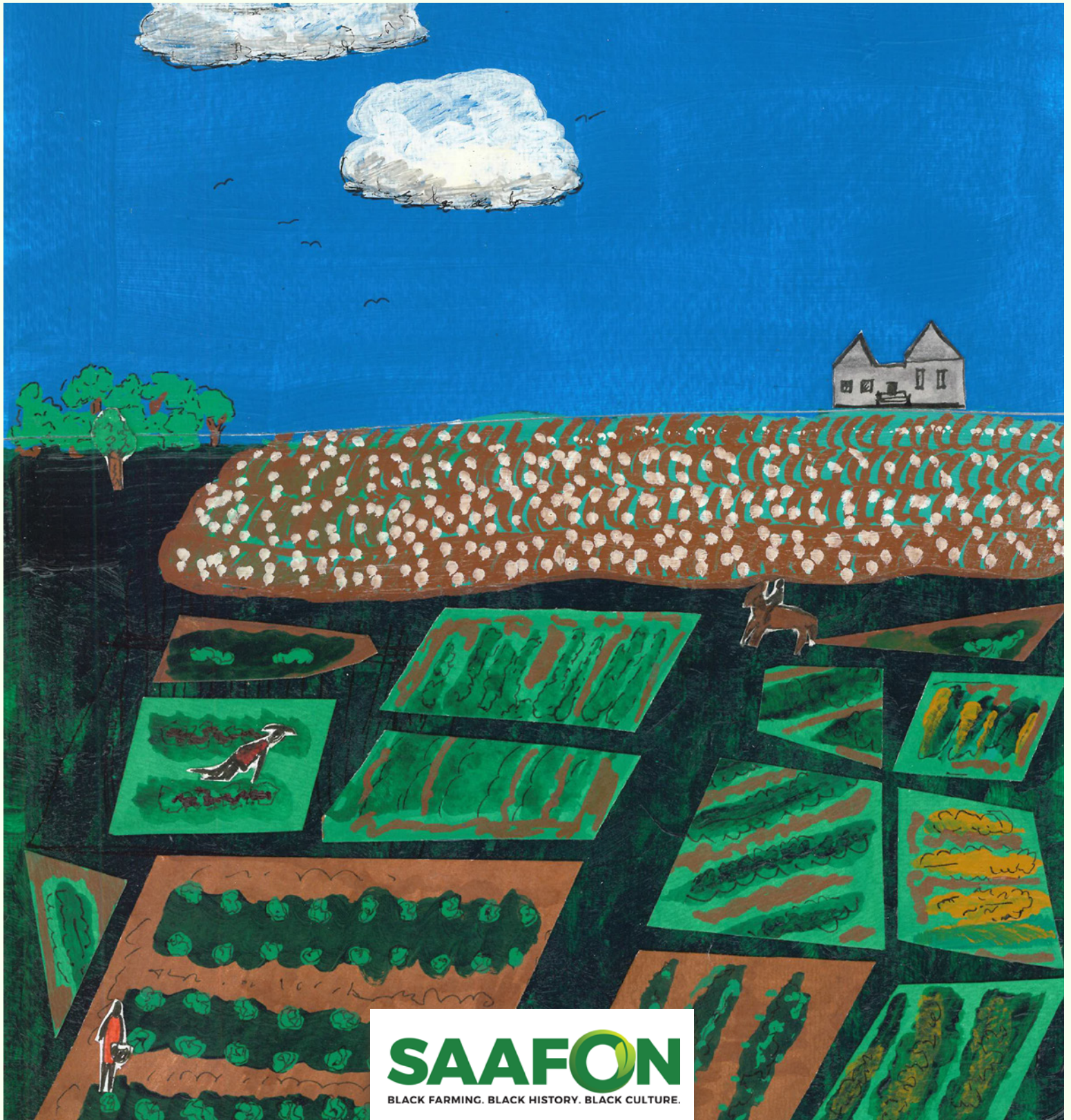


Growing the Legacy:

Stewarding a Black Agrarian Revival in the Rural South



by Noah McDonald

SAAFON
BLACK FARMING. BLACK HISTORY. BLACK CULTURE.

Juneteenth 2021

cover art by Tia Haynes



SAAFON,

Southeastern African American Farmers' Organic Network, began its Black Land Tenure Project in 2017.

The project sought to understand and find solutions to Black land loss and the decline in intergenerational land transfer among its network and Black farmers in the South. Land loss has been a longstanding concern among Black communities. [A 1982 report by the US Commission on Civil Rights](#) claimed that by the year 2000, there would be no Black farmers remaining in the United States. While this has not come to pass, Black farming, on its current trajectory, still has a marginal future.

SAAFON is dedicated to serving Black [agroecological](#) farmers in the Southeastern United States and the US Virgin Islands. This report articulates SAAFON's understanding of Black agrarianism and Black land loss through the voices of its member-farmers and young aspiring Black farmers. While much of the research on Black land loss focuses on legal, political, and economic strategies to stop land loss, listening to the voices of SAAFON farmer-members gives us the opportunity to explore potential cultural strategies for interrupting land loss.

In order to explore these strategies, we must undergo a process of remembering. This report is a call to remember that Black land and water-based cultures are the foundation of contemporary Black cultures. Black cultural forms like [artistic expression](#), [economic enterprise](#), and [spiritual practices and religious institutions](#) all ultimately have their source within agrarian cultural practices. Interrupting Black land loss calls for a 'remembering' that, as SAAFON member Sará Reynolds-Green put it, "*the land is the key to our life.*" In the case of this report, the process of remembering, or Sankofa—putting together the separated and lost parts of a body back together, to retrieve something, and even to conjure—aims to develop a greater understanding of what Black agrarianism means, does, and "be." Most importantly, we can imagine what Black agrarianism can become.



Report Summary

This report consists of four parts:

- I. An Introduction to SAAFON
- II. The SAAFON Black Land Tenure Project
- III. Articulation of Black Agrarianism
- IV. Strategies for Interrupting Black Land Loss & Revitalizing Black Agrarianism



“*Growing farmers is the key, farmers are the fabric, and that’s just the way I look at it, it’s like a quilt; we are just building a quilt of farmers. That is what we are doing.*”

*Cynthia Hayes
Co-founder of SAAFON*

Who is SAAFON?

SAAFON was founded in 2006 by “Ma” Cynthia Hayes and Dr. Owusu Bandele to assist Black farmers in the Southeast in attaining organic certifications. It is the first network of Black organic farmers in the United States. As acting executive director from 2006 until her passing in 2016, Ma Cynthia sought to build kinship and community among farmers and to connect them with the money and resources they needed. However, upon certification, farmers continued to face barriers to success such as racism and white supremacy and inadequate access to resources and community. Because of this, SAAFON shifted away from organic certification as a central strategy for farmer success although farmer members continued to utilize organic production practices. Presently, we are focused on Ma Cynthia’s vision in her later years—building kinship and community among Black farmers and resourcing their enterprises.

SAAFON member-farmers, staff, and board members share a common understanding that the traditional and ancestral lifeways of Black farming and rural culture that have been passed down through the

generations are in great peril of disappearing. The foundation that Cynthia worked so hard to build has grown into a community of committed Black folk from across the South and beyond who are working to secure resources to practice their inherited land-based strategies. SAAFON not only provides guidance, community, and resources for its membership, but is also wholly committed to the preservation and revitalization of Black agrarian lifeways. **SAAFON stewards Black agrarianism.**

As SAAFON has deepened its work, it has broadened to include and celebrate a new generation of Black farmers who embrace ancestor reverence, anti-capitalism, futurism, anti-patriarchy, and gender liberation. SAAFON celebrates this shift while remaining in deep relationship with legacy and elder farmers, and engaging with young and aspiring farmers looking to start their own journeys on the land. This intergenerational cooperation is what makes SAAFON so unique and powerful.

Our Farmers

SAAFON farmers are first and foremost concerned with economic, ecological and social sustainability, and political transformation. Our farmers view sustainable agriculture as fundamentally about more than technical practices. They possess a legacy worldview of success beyond productivity and profit. Their investment in farming goes deeper to the purpose of connecting personal, familial, cultural and ancestral agrarian legacies and futures. For member Sará Reynolds Green, the mission of her farm is “to operate a teaching farm to work with the youth—and adults if they need help—in developing sustainable agriculture. To [teach them to]

be able to sustain themselves by living from what you can produce from the farm, from the soil, what you can gather from the air if you’re a hunter, and what you can gather from the water, the rivers and streams around us.”

Ms. Sará gives us an excellent example of a cultural strategy that many SAAFON farmers embrace: teaching youth the importance of land stewardship and self-reliance. Other cultural strategies that SAAFON farmers embrace include collective work brigades, educational offerings for community, artistry and storytelling, and community organizing and relationship-building.



**SAAFON Mississippi
Farmers - 2020**
MS Agroecology
Encounter at Buie
Family Land Trust,
Brookhaven, MS

SAAFON currently has 55 core members, and is engaged with at least that many aspiring farmers and prospective members. The size of SAAFON farmers’ landholdings range from one tenth of an acre to five hundred acres. The average landholding is 48 acres, with an average of 15 acres under cultivation and/or in pasture. The total land ownership in the network is approximately 2,200 acres and the total land in cultivation and/or pasture is 483 acres.

Members range in age from under 20 to over 80, but the network is composed of a high number of elder farmers, with almost half of farmers over 55 years of age. 44% percent of SAAFON members are women. Many SAAFON members farm family land that has been in their family for a hundred years or more. Some do not have identified heirs or have secure plans for succession and transfer of ownership.

SAAFON'S Black Land Tenure Project

Farmers within SAAFON's network have voiced serious concerns about losing possession of their land. Their vulnerability to land loss depends on age, economic circumstance, and form of land tenancy. Many have financial pressures and lack pensions or retirement accounts, which typically leads farmers to end up selling their land at retirement in order to create necessary income. Unfortunately, many times the only land buyers available are developers to whom our farmers do not want to sell their land. For decades, Black farmers have struggled with young people within their families and communities being disinterested in taking up farming or inheriting their family's land. This dynamic is also present in SAAFON's membership. The lack of options for elder farmers is deeply troubling, and so we are faced with some essential questions:

- I. How do African Americans retain land through *cultural strategies*?
- II. How is the project of remembering tied to the interruption of Black land loss and a revival of Black agrarianism?
- III. What can SAAFON members teach us about intergenerational land work and its ability to prevent land loss?
- IV. How does the next generation look at the land? What challenges are they having? What do they want to do/see?
- V. How can SAAFON ensure successful farm and land succession in our network by activating cultural strategies?

Overview of Project Methodology



“*Memory (the deliberate act of remembering) is a form of willed creation. It is not an effort to find out the way it really was--that is research. The point is to dwell on the way it appeared and why it appeared in that particular way.*”

- Toni Morrison

Above picture: “Smith-Hughes (senior) class in ‘Agricultural Education,’ in their school garden for teacher training” at Tuskegee Institute in Tuskegee, Alabama.



Everyone, especially organizations and institutions, is engaged in storytelling in order to ground and justify their work. Where many past and contemporary works on Black land loss have focused on framing economic and the social impacts of land loss, SAAFON is offering a view of land loss through a lens of collective cultural loss and revitalization.

The SAAFON Black Land Tenure Project grew from a 2017 grant award from the remaining settlement funds from the historic Black Farmers Discrimination USDA lawsuit known as [Pigford v. Glickman](#) (1999). Through the project, SAAFON has sought to articulate a working solution to Black land loss and work to revitalize Black agrarianism through a lens of cultural stewardship and intergenerational kinship.

(the author) conducted interviews in 2018 to get an understanding of the vulnerability of our farmers to land loss and their ideas about creative solutions to land loss. The farmers' attitude towards being a part of a potential SAAFON land trust was also assessed. SAAFON originally hoped to interview both SAAFON farmers and their adult children. Because of difficulty in contacting members' adult children, I decided to interview non-affiliated young Black aspiring land workers in order to understand their goals, challenges, and aspirations.

I interviewed ten SAAFON member-farmers who were selected because they were farming family land—oftentimes land having been in their family since Emancipation and the years immediately following. I also interviewed seventeen unaffiliated aspiring farmers and landworkers, many of whom I met at the 2018 Black Farmers and Urban Growers Conference held at North Carolina Central University in Durham, NC. Nine of the ten SAAFON farmers interviewed self-identified as African American women, the other identifying as an African American man.

The group of beginning and aspiring farmers and landworkers was more diverse in both age, gender, race and ethnicity, and geographic origin than the elder SAAFON farmers. While the majority were cisgender women, there were a large number of interviewees who were genderqueer and trans. And while the clear majority of interviewees were Black, almost half were multiracial, and some identified as Latino, Native/First Nations, and African.

While SAAFON does not have many members younger than 40, it is connected to a wide audience of young people; the average age of the unaffiliated young aspiring farmers was 28. Many of these farmers embodied this new generation's desire to live in ways that do not perpetuate patriarchy and capitalism. For the selected members farming family land, the continued ownership of the land in their family is a paramount goal. The loss of ownership of the land could be devastating to not only the farmer but the family as a whole. SAAFON seeks to live up to the aspirations of the new generation of Black farmers hand-in-hand with its work to preserve and pass down the legacies of elders.

On Black Land Loss & Black Agrarianism

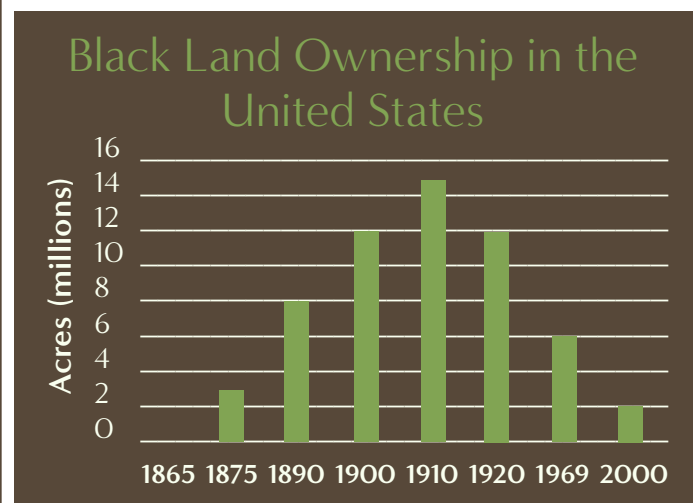
BLACK LAND LOSS

Land has the power to create a sense of place, a connection to family, and a physical and emotional dwelling realm for the owner and their descendants. - Cassandra Johnson Gaither in *Have Not Our Weary Feet Come to the Place for Which Our Father's Sighed? Heir Property in the United States*

Since the 1970s, most scholarship on Black land loss has focused exclusively on the economic and social impact of the loss of land ownership. There has also been work on how Black land loss functionally occurs in the legal system. Specifically, the Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund's report, *The Impact of Heir Property on Black Rural Land Tenure in the Southeastern Region of the United States* focuses on defining heir property, analyzing its vulnerability to theft and loss, and offering possible policy solutions. Similarly, much past and present work on stopping land loss has sought to address it through legal and political strategies such as research, legal services, legislative advocacy, and family mediation. This has been very important work that has laid the foundation for a more expansive understanding of land loss that SAAFON is undertaking in this document.

According to the most recent USDA Farmer Census in 2017, the average Black farmer is 62 years old, and only 6% of Black farmers are younger than 35. The Federation of Southern Cooperatives and others have estimated that 25% to 60% of all Black-owned property in the Southeast is heir property. Heir properties are those in which there is no legally designated singular/individual owner, and ownership of property is divided among all living descendants of an ancestor who died without writing a will. Heir property has been a huge focus for land loss advocates since the publication of the Federation's report. This is because heir property is

particularly vulnerable to land loss through forced partition sales, semi-voluntary sales (many times at below market value), and outside pressures. Large amounts of heir property—but not only heir property—are being lost to predatory and opportunistic developers, suburbanization, resort and vacation destination development, utilities and infrastructure projects, military installations, ecological extraction like timbering, family disputes, and corporate farm and real estate investment. It is not infrequent that developers, neighboring farmers and agribusiness, banks, and county USDA agents sabotage, threaten, intimidate, and harass Black farmers and landowners throughout the South. USDA in particular has a deep history of taking farms from Black farm owners.

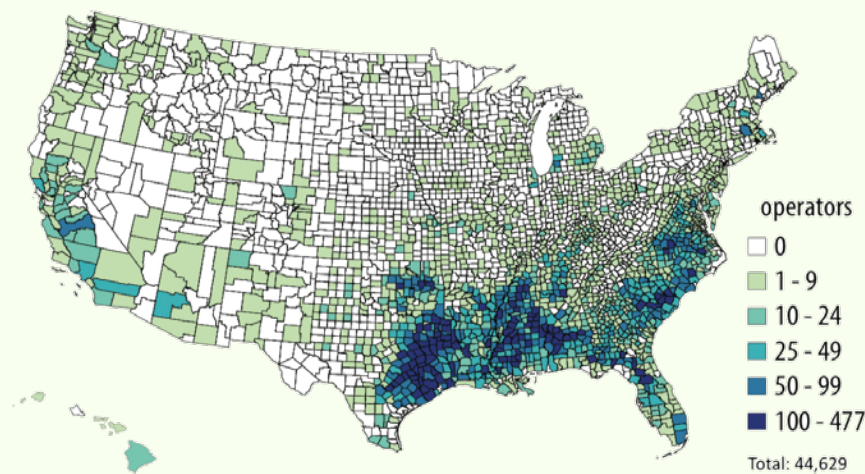


Data taken from Vanishing Act: America's Black-Owned Farmland, USDA Agricultural Censuses, and Only Six Million Acres Report.



Members and associates of Black Farmers and Agriculturalists in DC during Pigford v. Glickman deliberations (1997)

Black Principal Farm Operators by County



Black farmers by county from USDA 2012 Agricultural Census

Source: USDA NASS, 2012 Census of Agriculture.

Past and ongoing cases of land loss are increasingly being recognized in the public sphere and it has become recognized by many that the loss of land from Black ownership is the direct result of systems of white supremacy, capitalism, and ecological extraction. Agents of white supremacy and capitalism may be state actors (such as the USDA, police forces, banks and financial institutions) or non-state actors (such as citizens, self-organized white supremacist organizations, businesses and corporations, real estate investors, and vigilantes). Black land loss would be better described as land theft.

It is important to draw a distinction between the more accepted definition of Black land loss—the loss of legal ownership of land—and a more expansive understanding that Black land loss can be characterized as disconnection and alienation from the land writ large.

Cultural strategies that interrupt Black land loss do not necessarily emphasize land ownership. Instead, they emphasize that loss occurs at the severing of a sustained, intergenerational, and secure relationship with the land. In short, we must ask ourselves what kinds of cultural memories and ways of being are fundamentally lost when African Americans are cut off from the land?

While interviewing the farmer members and affiliates, it became clear that Black land loss was not a standalone phenomenon. The loss of Black land (and sea)-based cultures is inextricably tied to the phenomenon of Black land loss. Language needs to be created to name the collective cultural and collective being that is being taken from us and to speak to the things we are losing alongside the loss of land. That collective culture can be termed 'Black Agrarianism.'



We feel it to be very important that we obtain HOMES—owning our shelters, and the ground, that we may raise fruit trees, concerning which our children can say— “These are ours.”

- Committee of the Colored People of Halls Hill and Vicinity,
Falls Church VA letter to the Freedmen’s Bureau

Founders of Farmers and Mechanics Bank, Durham NC Image Courtesy of Durham Public Library

BLACK AGRARIANISM

There is a small, relatively recent body of work on Black Agrarianism, much of which comes from SAAFON members and supporters, including [Dr. Gail Myers](#) and SAAFON co-founder [Dr. Owusu Bandele](#), [Dara Cooper](#), [Drs. Ashanté Reese](#), [Monica White](#), and [Shakara Tyler](#), and farmer-activists [Leah Penniman](#) and [Blain Snipstal](#).

SAAFON uses the term “Black agrarianism” to describe the enduring land-based traditions, technologies, wisdoms, ceremonies, and practices of African Americans. The term goes beyond most contemporary understandings of farming; it encompasses the following practices and more: a) healing and herbal practices; b) fishing and water-based traditions; c) hunting and foraging; d) gardening and home provisioning; e) livestock husbandry and ranching; f) the fiber arts; e) music and dance. Thus farming—economic production from growing and raising of plants, fungi, and animals—is just one of many practices within Black agrarianism.

Black agrarianism, like most practices and traditions of Black folks, is a negotiation between pre-colonial indigenous cosmologies and functions and the political reality of being engulfed by and subject to the legal and political systems of Europe and its colonial projects. This negotiation is the foundation of African Americans’ relationship to the land. It is important to remember that ***Black people are the descendants of displaced and uprooted indigenous peoples*** from throughout Africa, all of whom came with cultural, political, religious and economic beliefs and practices. It is equally important to understand that these Africans served as forced labor to build British, French, Spanish and Dutch

colonies and American settlements on the lands of indigenous peoples in the Americas. In short, Black people were a ***stolen and owned people on stolen and owned land***. When brought over to the Americas, Africans adapted their belief systems and practices as best they could to meet their needs.

The term *kinship-based commons*, coined by Savonala Horne, names the indigenous ways of living upon the land in West and Central Africa during the time of the Atlantic Slave Trade. Many African-born enslaved people lived in agrarian villages and towns in which land was held communally by extended families. Simply put, a land belonged to a lineage and a lineage belonged to a land. The institution of the plantation—part prison camp, ecological engineering project, business enterprise, and school of civilization—was the beginning of the continuous process of Black negotiation with a European legal and economic system. Plantations forced this negotiation quite viscerally, as Africans were themselves property. Since arriving in North America, each generation of Black land stewards has—consciously or not—undergone its own unique negotiation between the tradition of the kinship-based commons and European forms of land tenure. SAAFON farmers are no exception and they provide us with real-life examples of this negotiation.



Dorothy Barker - Olusanya, LLC, Oxford NC SAAFON member

SAAFON Farmers:

Knowledge-Keepers & Practitioners of Black Agrarianism



Earcine Evans - Francis Flowers and Herbs Farm Pickens, MS



Felicia Bell - RD&S Farms, Brandon, MS

Black farmers are not only practitioners but thought leaders of Black agrarianism. Through the voices of selected SAAFON members and unaffiliated young farmers we see the themes of Black agrarianism. These themes are not timeless; they are the cultural values carried by Black agrarians in time, informing our everyday decisions wherever we happen to be. They can help provide wisdom on how present and future Black agrarians can negotiate our ancestral legacies with our political condition. The following themes were crafted by the author after viewing patterns in the interviewee responses:

THEMES OF BLACK AGRARIANISM

PROTECTION: The land and people have value that transcends the transactional/financial

COMMUNITY & KINSHIP: land stewardship is healing work to be done in community

EFFICACY: effective land stewardship requires economic viability, biodiversity, ecological participation, and the attention of multiple generations

NURTURANCE: land stewardship is an inherited legacy to be carried forward

SERVICE: land stewardship is done out of respect for our ancestors and to secure prosperity for our children

PROTECTION: The Land and People have Value that Transcends the Transactional/Financial

“

The land gives life not only to us because we have been here, but we feed the community, we feed the elderly... It [the land] just has so much to give, and if you don't give back, you're gonna kill and deplete what's here. And only think of it financially. That's a concern of mine.

Teresa Ervin-Springs
TKO Farms, Louisville MS
SAAFON Member

“

My great-grandfather came from Mozambique around 1870. He acquired the land that I am currently living and farming on. Originally the land he acquired was approximately 2,000 acres. My great-grandfather lived on the land with his family. He had a blacksmith shop, general store, wood mill, grain mill—self-sufficiency. While living in California, my husband started talking to me about the importance of black land ownership, and how black folk should be holding on to their land. After taking a tour of the land, I started thinking about how my great-grandfather, in leaving the land for his children, would have had a purpose for it beyond just selling it.

Sandra Simone
Huckleberry Hill Farms, Alpine AL
SAAFON Member

“

The model that we're trying to have here was that people could come to live as a refuge, thinking of battered women, trans folk, queer folk... I think people would grow the food, do the value-added production really just to pay the bills, really not looking to get rich. It's just to take care of ourselves and be free and keep educating and teaching more people to do what we're doing and maybe duplicate the model of creating anchor pockets in and around cities where we can rebuild the Underground Railroad with a different intention. At the same time having it where people want to come to tour and see what we're doing, not only to duplicate the model or like I said to get away, and be in an intentional Black joyous, healing environment.

Eric Person
Young farmer, GA





COMMUNITY & KINSHIP:

Land Stewardship is Healing Work to be Done in Community

“

I want this [farm] to support Black livelihood—to feed Black kids, teach them how to work with their hands, and how to grow. How to do animal husbandry. A place where Black folks can come and heal up some of the generational trauma we’ve suffered from. Have a salon like in 1960s Harlem, people come down to talk, to work it out. That’s what I want to see.

Kevin Springs

*TKO Farms, Louisville MS
SAAFON Member*

“

Last year (2020), the high tunnel roof was ripped off after a storm and a water pipe burst costing me a \$2,000 water bill. Both of these happened at the same time. A fundraiser was set up and money raised to replace the plastic for the tunnel and pay the water bill. The manager of the fundraiser came out with a group of volunteers and restored a goat shed. One of the people that came subsequently organized a farm-to-farm working group with farming neighbors. The host farmer provides housing and meals, and the guest volunteer farmers provide the labor for the host. We do a rotation with each other that has been ongoing for a couple of months and we have eight farm members. It has worked really well for us.”

Sandra Simone

*Huckleberry Hill Farms, Alpine AL
SAAFON Member*

“

A part of the vision is to have a gourmet soup kitchen. Like, a dope community cafeteria. Nobody would have to think about where they gone be getting their meals. Like, that’s never a thing, you know what I mean, and just spreading that gospel like nobody ever should have to think about ‘Am I going to have to find a meal?’ Like, no, you come and get one and you do what you need to do.

Tony Gayle

Young farmer, GA



EFFICACY: Land Stewardship Requires Economic Viability, Biodiversity, Ecological Participation, and the Attention of Multiple Generations

“

A statement that my grandfather always used to say is ‘let the land take care of you and let the land be for you.’ What he meant by that is that we should not be going into our pocket and paying anything for land... We are inheriting, so you know we don’t have lease agreements, mortgage payments or anything. We only have taxes, and the notion is we should not be going in our pockets to pay for taxes either. The reason is, the land should be able to take care of itself. If you’re growing on the land, if you’re raising animals on the land, whatever you’re doing on the land should pay the tax... So that’s it. I was raised in it, was taught the importance of land ownership, holding onto the land, you know, doing on the land what you see fit, to be able to utilize the financial resources to take care... So, we have fruit, nuts, herbs, vegetables, and apples. The reason for that was subsistence farming – living off the land and being self-sufficient, that was his purpose for having everything. I was able to live in that and I do remember eating from the land and only having to go to the grocery store for sugar and flour. We were to partake in everything from the land like domesticated animals and we also hunted and trapped animals.

Felicia Bell

*RD&S Farms, Brandon, MS
SAAFON Member*

“

For black young folk who want to be farm owners, there needs to be some kind of financial institution that can be tapped into. How can young farmers who don’t have the credit or collateral be able to purchase land? Black farmers and land ownership has dwindled so much in the last 50 years – not many of the older generation are holding on to the land for future generations, in part because some younger generations don’t want to have anything to do with farming. So, what are you gonna do? Sell it so that you get a little bit of money? What is going to assist young farmers in purchasing the land they need? What kinds of things can be done? Young folk have to work with us to help figure out the solution. In trying to bridge this gap, I have personally allowed young black farmers to lease portions of my land; I have a farming couple that is currently leasing land from me. They wanted to purchase 23 acres adjoining my property, but could not qualify for a conventional loan. The land in question was owned by one of my family members and had been in my family for generations. I learned that a white couple was also interested in purchasing the land. While I would have loved for the property to remain heirs property, rather than see it go to a white couple, I took out a loan to purchase the property and then sold it to the black couple. Otherwise, they would not have been able to acquire land to farm.

Sandra Simone

*Huckleberry Hill Farms, Alpine AL
SAAFON Member*

“

Definitely any growing or any production I do on the land I aspire for it to be sustainable and to practice conservation methods, and enhance biodiversity in any way that I can. I aspire for it [the farm] to also be a learning center, mostly the youth, to use the farm as a platform to inspire them to become entrepreneurs through agriculture, you know, through training and through marketing and through selling produce alongside the farmers.

So, having an incubator farm. Whatever land I have is probably gonna have some type of educational aspect to it... I'm into really anything that people can eat and that heals the body.

Tianna Neal

*Young farmer, GA
former SAAFON LandLink Intern*



NURTURANCE: Land Stewardship is an Inherited Legacy to Be Carried Forward

“

It's important to carry on that legacy of owning something, of owning their own land. On this island the rate of Blacks losing their land is astronomical. Whatever land you have, however little, even if it's just a half acre, hold on to it, and if you can, get more. Like the old people used to say 'they're not making anymore land.' It's extremely important because we have a legacy now, and we want to maintain that legacy of passing it on to our next generation, even if they have a half acre or a quarter of an acre.

Sarā Reynolds-Green

*Marshview Community Organic Farm, St. Helena Island SC
SAAFON Member*

“

Joseph has been training our grandson for several years now. He is graduating from high school this year and working on the farm full time. Our grandson is motivated, interested, and most importantly he has the love. We saw the love and desire when he was real little. Joseph makes the joke that he saw it when the child was born. He has always been very attached to his grandfather. Joseph has been teaching all the grandchildren how to drive and ride on the tractor since they were babies. The other children work on the farm but they don't have the love. Without our grandson we would think about leasing the land out to a farmer but not selling the land.

Helen and Joseph Fields

*Joseph Fields Farm, St. John's Island SC
SAAFON Member*

SERVICE: Out of Respect for Our Ancestors and Securing Prosperity for Our Children

“

Yes, I consider it to be very important [for my land to remain under Black ownership]. Out of respect for our ancestors, who worked really hard to ensure that the land got passed down to us... The reason why it is important to me at this stage of our life is because- not just to have the space for someone to own the land but to carry on the work of natural farming, sustainable farming... If the land is not utilized properly, what's the sense in passing it down... If your ancestors acquired land, especially at a time when they normally weren't acquiring land- my great-grandparents got this land, I don't exactly know how, but my great-grandparents got this land, passed it down to my grandparents, my grandparents to my mother, my mother down to me. So, what are we gonna do? What am I gonna do? I would think my grandparents would want me to add on, to grow beyond what they did. To grow the legacy.

Earcine Evans

*Francis Flowers and Herbs Farm
Pickens, MS
SAAFON Member*

“

They [the ancestors] had so much wisdom. They were future thinkers- forward thinkers. They had a gift for that I feel. To think ahead, to think about not just today but tomorrow and the future. And I think that was in the forefront of their mind. 'I may have little but I want my heirs and descendants to have more. And how can I do that and what can I do now to make sure that they have that.' That was purchasing that land and they knew that was valuable.

Sarā Reynolds-Green

*Marshview Community Organic Farm, St.
Helena Island SC
SAAFON Member*

“

Perhaps a community of homesteads- the ability to bring people- to spread the gospel really. It would be an educational and childcare center, children will be there learning. It would be a summer camp some of the time. Just kind of like a community hub based around food

Tony Gayle

Young farmer, GA





Interviews Summary

PROTECTION: Intercede to prevent land that's been "loved and labored on" from being occupied and used by an extractor. (*Teresa Springs, Sandra Simone*)

COMMUNITY & KINSHIP: Support SAAFON network farmers in bringing health to Black people through their land-based work (*Kevin Springs, Sandra Simone*) Visiting and working on farms with an elder mentor to receive knowledge and culture. (*expressed by almost all interviewed*)

EFFICACY: Help farmers to create a living for themselves and their families from being on the land (*Felicia Bell*). Have a cooperative of interlocking, interdependent, and complementary ecologically sustainable farm enterprises on the same piece of land. (*Tianna Neal*)

NURTURANCE: Tend to, cultivate and increase all that you have- your knowledge and wisdom, your family and relations, and the produce of the land. (*Sarā Reynolds-Green, Joseph and Helen Fields*)

SERVICE: Carry on and build upon the legacies and works of ancestors for the sake of the youth. (*Earcine Evans, Sarā Reynolds-Green*). Create a community hub based around food and farming with educational and child care components. (*Tony Gayle*)

In addition to these themes, our findings from interviews with SAAFON farmers reveal a need for labor on the farm. Many SAAFON farmers are specifically seeking young people with whom to share their knowledge. Elder farmers are very concerned about the future of their farms, and all want to keep ownership of the farm within their families if possible. They also want the land to be farmed for the benefit of the community they live in. Many are interested in leasing their land to younger farmers willing to farm it in an ecologically sustainable manner. Most telling is that nine out of ten elder farmers stated that it was extremely important that the land they farm stay in Black ownership.

The aspiring farmers and landworkers who were interviewed expressed that they did not want to build wealth at the expense of the health of the land. They saw the land and that which grows upon

it as more than a commodity, product, or means of creating profit and wealth. Some stated they were reevaluating whether land ownership itself is ethical because of land theft from indigenous peoples and tribal nations. The most common sentiment expressed by aspiring farmers and landworkers was the desire for apprenticeship opportunities with elder farmers. Aspiring farmers who were interested in or ready to start enterprises were generally interested in a wide range of farming arrangements, but most were interested in cooperative enterprise. Some were interested in selling and bartering surpluses and value-added products instead of running commercial farm operations. While some young farmers have family land, all of those who do not cited that their biggest barrier to accessing land was the cost of purchasing land and accessing non-exploitative financing.



Strategies for Interrupting Black Land Loss & Revitalizing Black Agrarianism

What is quite clear from the interviews is that the land is much more than just a means for creating wealth; it is an anchor of community and familial identity, security, and health. If economic enterprise does occur for SAAFON farmers, it is in service of these values.

Much of the published materials on land loss—literature, resources, technical support, and even [popular media content](#)—is centered around the racial wealth gap and the economic and political ramifications of land loss. SAAFON’s membership is telling a different story—that when Black landowners lose the land they lose so much more than money or the ability to make it. They lose who they are—their family legacy, ability to be healthy, and a way to serve their communities. If Black folk lose our cultural strategies then what we are left with is a disembodied collection of legal tactics, short-lived individual and collective pursuits for monetary wealth, and enterprises and activities that compromise the health of the land and water. There is so much more at stake in land loss than money. Not only does land loss mean the loss of a foundation of Black identity, but also the ability to sustain multigenerational Black communities deep into the future.

Strategies that SAAFON and its farmer membership see as essential:

SAAFON is recommending a shift in priority and orientation- one that emphasizes cultural views and practices as foundational in the effort to interrupt land loss. Cultural strategies are already being practiced, embodied, and activated by SAAFON membership, and other Black farmers in the Southeast

STRENGTHEN THE KINSHIP-BASED COMMONS

Create family trusts and estates with existing heir property and family land. Form cooperative governed land-bases and enterprises.

CONTINUE TECHNOLOGIES FOR CONNECTION AND CONJURE

Facilitate spaces for embodiment, healing, and learning

UNDERSTAND AND ADDRESS DOMINATION AND EXTRACTION

Defend farms from exploitation and development

CLOSE THE GENERATIONAL RIFT AND HONOR OUR INHERITED LEGACIES

Create spaces for intergenerational fellowship and exchange



Heir property represents the closest resemblance to the kinship-based commons presently under the legal system in the United States. We need to utilize strategies to protect heirs' property *that do not eliminate it as a commons*. We must figure out creative ways of functionally maintaining family land as family land. For example, Ms. Sará Reynolds-Green spoke of a family reunion coming together each year to pay the taxes through a homecoming celebration. Not only is the family ensuring that the land is paid for, but they are bringing their children, telling stories, cooking together, listening to music, and fellowshiping. For Joseph and Helen Fields, *"the most important thing is for the land to remain in the family and never to be sold. To go from one generation to another."* Sandra Simone's, Helen and Joseph Fields', and Sará Reynolds Green's respective farms have been in their families for over a century.

For those who do not have land in their families, we need to strengthen the kinship-based commons tradition by creating new cooperatively or individually-owned farms that can be cohesively transferred intergenerationally. We must, as Ms. Earcine states, *"grow beyond what they [the ancestors] did. To grow the legacy."*

The greatest wealth is the land's ability to support human life and health. As Sará Reynolds-Green put it, *"the land is the key to our life, and without it we cannot all be healthy."* In ancestral African agrarian communities, compromising the ecological health and integrity of the land and the water is the gravest error and prohibition. Thus, practicing ecological farming is also an honoring of our ancestral legacies.

How can Black farm organizations intercede and defend Black farms from development? How can these organizations advocate for a new way of looking at and working with the land while still living under the system of capitalism? How are we assisting Black farmers to succeed economically while trying to build a generative and healthy relationship to the land?

Closing the generational rift in rural Black communities is essential to nurturing, honoring and being of service to our inherited legacies. This looks like bringing together the holders and seekers of Black agrarian technologies together for intergenerational exchange and relationship-building. There is a shift happening within the regeneration of Black agrarianism. Many aspiring Black farmers look different from the current demography of Black Southern farmers. Many are from outside the South, from urban or suburban areas, are women, and/or are gender non-conforming, and are interested in ecological and community-based agriculture as opposed to conventional farming. It is essential to bridge these differences via intergenerational work, which SAAFON is uniquely poised to do.

Passing on stories, knowledge, and folk memories of lineages and places is at the core of Black agrarianism. SAAFON members offer examples of intergenerational work—fostering a love for the land in their children and grandchildren, running youth leadership programs on the farm, farm-to-school, hosting work-stays, and holding labor exchanges. Through making kinship across generations we can make resilient and generative land ownership transfers that interrupts Black land loss.



Philip R. Barker: Olusanya, LLC, Oxford NC SAAFON member

Every single SAAFON member interviewed described in some way the importance of working with youth. On her farm, Ms. Sará teaches the youth:

“to learn life skills including building, fishing, canning, how to cook and harvest their food, and of course ongoing cooking classes. All your entrepreneurial skills, leadership skills, character development, marketing, it’s like a total package to educate a child to be self-sufficient - and the importance of it. We give the history of why you’re on this land, the purpose of you being on the land, and what you can gain from the land, and it’s a legacy that you’re passing on, that you want to pass on to the next generation.”

It is clear that there is a deep crisis in not only Black rural landholding in the US, but also the continuation of Black land-based cultures. SAAFON holds that a greater attention must be brought to the ways in which cultural strategies serve as a bedrock for the revitalization of Black agrarianism. The values of Black agrarianism—protection, kinship and community, efficacy, nurturance, and service—originate in the kinship-based commons and are interwoven into each generation’s unique practice of Black agrarianism. These values are guiding principles for any organization, person, or group of people engaging in the work of revitalizing Black Agrarianism. The culture is the core. The preservation of land is coming from a cultural place - families instilling in their children the value of the land.

Indeed, the most emergent message from SAAFON membership is to connect the youth to the tradition of Black agrarianism and land-based life. Ms. Earcine Evans said it simply:

“

I was raised by my grandmother, and because of what she taught me, it convinced me to come back home and live on the land. Because of her I had something to come home to.”

Acknowledgements

Many hands have made this report possible. Much appreciation to Tamara Jones, former SAAFON Executive Director from 2016 to 2019, for providing critical framing and support in the beginning of the project. Thank you to the Black Land and Power Group of the National Black Food and Justice Alliance for providing a space for the sharing and analysis of ideas and political strategy. Thank you to Equity Trust for advising the creation of the interview/survey questionnaires. Huge thanks to our editor, Naomi Extra, for providing her amazing editorial skills and services. Immense gratitude to our farmer members whom we interviewed for the report. Above all, gratitude to Ma Cynthia Hayes for building SAAFON and leaving us with a rich and vital legacy.

I thank my father Stan McDonald and mother Joanne Rebbeck for putting into me an abiding love for the land and my grandparents and ancestors for putting that love into them. Thank you to my grandmother Martha McDonald for feeding my father, aunts, and uncles & keeping our family together. I dedicate this to all of my ancestors from North Carolina, the McDonalds, McKays/McKoys, McNeils, Moores, and Partridges. Thank you to the land for accepting me as I am and teaching me patience and trust. Thank you to all Black farmers, worldwide, who earn their living and feed their families from the land and endeavor to pass on their love, arts, skills, and talents.

Credits

Editor: Naomi Extra

Cover artist: Tia Haynes

Graphic designer: Keisha Cameron

Photographer: LeAnn Morrissette & Avery Jackson, from *With These Hands Series*

Staff

M. Jahi Chappell, *Executive Director*

Whitney Jaye, *Director of Strategic & Programmatic Development*

Alsie Parks, *Director of Field Organizing*

Jason Lindsay, *Farm Practices & Resource Coordinator*

Avery Jackson, *Storyteller & Communications Coordinator*

Tamara "Tammy" Harris, *Agroecology & Education Resource Coordinator*

Maya Jorden, *Operations & Administration*

Noah McDonald, *SAAFON Research and Land Work Coordinator*

Board

Ma Cynthia — *Co-founder 1950 - 2016 Always with us*

Dr. Owusu Bandele — *Co-founder, Louisiana Professor Emeritus of Sustainable Agriculture - Southern University*

Yvette Browne — *Board Chair, US Virgin Islands Farmer - Sejah Farm /St.Croix Island Food Security Coop*

Jesse Buie — *Board Vice Chair, Mississippi Farmer - Ole Brook Organics, Inc Member, National Organic Standards Board*

Dr. Cindy Ayers Elliot — *Board Treasurer, Mississippi Farmer - Footprint Farms*

Terry Hayes — *Georgia*



Author/Researcher

Noah McDonald is a land steward, researcher, and culture keeper coming from seven generations of rural folk from the upper reaches of the Cape Fear River in North Carolina. Noah's upbringing in rural central Ohio fostered an abiding love of rural people, culture, and landscapes.

Noah holds a B.S. in Biology and Religious Studies from Guilford College in Greensboro, NC. From 2018 to 2019, Noah served as the Cynthia Hayes - Fannie Lou Hamer Fellow at SAAFON, identifying a collective landholding model for the prevention of land loss within SAAFON's farmer network. In 2019, Noah worked a season as a farm apprentice at Soul Fire Farm in Petersburg, NY. In 2020, Noah returned to SAAFON to continue articulating and redefining its land work.

Noah is passionate about learning and exploring Black agrarian legacies through raising animals and heritage grain, legume, and vegetable varieties and doing deep dives into archival materials. For Noah, intimate and loving relationship with the land, air, and water is the foundation for a good, healthy life. You can visit their up and coming blog at noahpedia.co.



BLACK FARMING. BLACK HISTORY. BLACK CULTURE.

Juneteenth 2021

A publication of the Southeastern African American
Farmers Organic Network
Copyright © June 2021