

“HEAVEN ON EARTH:” RACE, FOOD, AND SPACE IN BLACK RELIGIOUS
FOOD PROGRAMS

by

PRISCILLA MCCUTCHEON

(Under the Direction of Steven R. Holloway and Hilda E. Kurtz)

ABSTRACT

This dissertation draws from theorizations on racialized public and private spaces to examine the day-to-day activities, rhetoric, and goals of three black religious food programs: a mainstream black Protestant church, a black Christian nationalist organization, and a Muslim black nationalist organization. I conceive of these food programs as distinct racial projects that are simultaneously a part of larger racial projects. Wheat Street Baptist Church, located in Atlanta, GA operates the Action Mission Ministry, a traditional emergency food program whose goal is to feed the hungry and clothe the poor. I argue that through food and faith, blacks seek to encourage black people in the hopes that they will be able to make substantive life changes. The Nation of Islam owns Muhammad Farms, a sixteen hundred acre farm in southern Georgia, United States. In this paper, I argue that the Nation of Islam uses community nationalism, evoking common tragic and triumphant images of rural land, to appeal to blacks who may not share their ideological beliefs. Finally, I argue that Pan African Orthodox Christian Church represents a modern day African American Land Ethic.

Through understanding the practices and principles of this land ethic, we are one step closer to making the alternative food movement more inclusive. In this dissertation, I utilize archival and textual research, along with participant observation and open-ended interviews to get a true sense of the operations of these food programs and how they are tied into racial projects and racial formation.

INDEX WORDS: Place, black racial identity, black counterpublic, Black church, black nationalism, emergency food

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PRISCILLA MCCUTCHEON

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MA, University of Georgia, 2006

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PRISCILLA MCCUTCHEON

Major Professors: Steven R. Holloway
Hilda E. Kurtz

Committee: Nik C. Heynen
Sandy D. Martin

Electronic Version Approved:

Maureen Grasso
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
August 2011

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my entire family. I love you and could not have done this without you.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

In October 1995, approximately one million black men gathered to hear speeches from well-known black scholars, leaders, and activists including: Dr. Betty Shabazz, Marion Barry, Niam Akbar, Dr. Cornel West, Rev. Joseph Lowry, and Dorothy Height (CSPAN 1995). The intention of the Million Man March, hosted by the Nation of Islam, was to be a public showing of black men that highlighted their progress, but also struggles facing the “black community.” While black women were explicitly not invited (with some protesting the patriarchy evident in the very idea of the march), they were allowed on the panel as a show of their solidarity for black men (West 1999). Taken separately, these speakers could not have been more ideologically diverse. This public display of racial solidarity among such a diverse group of people (Bierbauer 1995) represented collective hopes and plans for progress. It further signals the complexity of interrogating a racialized group of people who are internally diverse, but possess similarities based on a shared history.

Geographers are increasingly analyzing race and its connection to place and space (Inwood 2009; Heynen 2009; Alderman and Dwyer 2008; Guthman 2008; Slocum 2007; McKittrick and Woods 2007; McKittrick 2006; Schein 2006; Tyner 2006; Wright et.al 2003; Kobayashi and Peake 2000; Wilson 2000; Woods 1998). Some acknowledge race as a social construction, moving beyond the

black/white dichotomy to examine mixed-raced households (Wright et.al 2005). Others interrogate the racialized landscapes visible in memorials, further analyzing what these memorials tell us about the surrounding neighborhood and the power relations within it (Inwood; 2009; Alderman and Dwyer 2008). Still others highlight the intersectionality of race with other nodes of identification including gender and class (Heynen 2009; McKittrick 2006; Wilson 2000). There is also a growing body of geographic literature in which scholars interrogate the pervasive whiteness in seemingly progressive social movements (Guthman 2008; Slocum 2007). Geographic literature is continuously evolving, with researchers finding new and innovative ways to examine race.

This study seeks to add to this literature, by interrogating racialized public and private spaces of the black counterpublic (Harris-Lacewell 2004; Squires 2002; Dawson 2001; Fraser 1994) to examine the day-to-day activities, rhetoric, and goals of three black religious food programs. The three programs include a mainstream black Protestant church, a black Christian nationalist organization, and a Muslim black nationalist organization. The diversity of these programs reveals how both differences and commonalities define a racialized group of people. Wheat Street Baptist Church (WSBC), a traditional black Protestant church on the historic Auburn Avenue in Atlanta, Georgia operates an emergency food program where volunteers serve food two days a week to approximately four hundred people. The Nation of Islam (NOI), a black nationalist religious sect, owns Muhammad Farms, a sixteen hundred acre tract of land in southern Georgia. The Pan African Orthodox Christian Church

(PAOCC), a black Christian Nationalist organization, purchased over four thousand acres of land on the border of Georgia and South Carolina that they named Beulah Land Farms.

I conceive of these programs as black counterpublic spaces in which black people¹ engage in religious discourse, but also discourse about matters of concern to other black people (Harris- Lacewell 2004; Dawson 2001). The black counterpublic is a separate sphere, a response to exclusion from the larger Habermasian public sphere (Fraser 1994; Habermas 1989), where blacks in identifiable public and private spaces discuss matters of concern to black people as a group (Harris-Lacewell 2004; Dawson 2001; Black Public Sphere Collective 1995). In this dissertation, I operate under the belief that there continues to be evidence of one black counterpublic. While this black counterpublic is internally heterogeneous to be sure, it remains important as highlighted by Harris-Lacewell (2004) to acknowledge shared race-based experiences and goals, historically and contemporarily, amongst racialized groups; failing to do so risks obscuring a vital collective aspect of racialized identity.

The discourse occurring in the black counterpublic is often diverse, reflecting a wide array of racial projects. In each of the food programs, black people construct their own visions for a better world that they seek to spread outside of the walls of the food program, through outreach to the hungry, the oppressed, and in some instances black people collectively. They do so by

¹ In this dissertation, I operate within the belief that race is a social construction. Throughout each manuscript, I will occasionally switch between using the term black and African American. This switch, unless noted, reflects my research participants' use of either one or both terms during in archival research, interviews, and during participant observation.

constructing place (Cresswell 2004; Martin 2003; Cresswell 1996), through their daily actions and goals for the program. Their actions and goals reflect broader racial projects that connect and distinguish these food programs from one another.

A racial project, as formulated by Omi and Winant (1994:56) “is simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines”. Omi and Winant (1994:60) are worth quoting at length on the role of racial projects with processes of racial formation:

The theory of racial formation suggests that society is suffused with racial projects, large and small, to which all are subjected. This racial ‘subjection’ is quintessentially ideological. Everybody learns some combination, some version, or the rules of racial classification, and of her own racial identity, often without obvious teaching or conscious inculcation...Race becomes ‘common sense’ – a way of comprehending, explaining, and acting in the world...Under such circumstances, it is not possible to represent race discursively without simultaneously locating it, explicitly or implicitly, in a social structural (and historical) context. Nor is it possible to organize, maintain, or transform social structures without simultaneously engaging, once more either explicitly or implicitly, in racial signification.

The papers that make up this dissertation explore the distinct ways in which racial projects are premised upon and intertwined with the construction of places. Omi and Winant (1994) understand race as a social construction that has possessed different meanings throughout history. While I agree with their theorization on racial formation, I further argue that place is equally important to understanding the process of racial formation. Therefore, it is important to highlight the explicit place-based activities and goals of each black religious food program.

At each food program, volunteers and farm workers possess a vivid memory of place. In some instances, this place may be their surrounding urban neighborhood or acres and acres of rural land (Cresswell 2004; Foote 1997; Casey 1987). Volunteers use this memory as a motivation frame (Martin 2003; Snow and Benford 1988) that inspires activism in their community. For example, PAOCC members remember Beulah Land Farms as a place that has always been a literal site of struggle and liberation for black people. Their memory of place informs their present day work at the farm. The actors in these three food programs explicitly work to create places (soup kitchens, neighborhoods, farms) that enable their continued efforts at distributing food as well as messages and encouragement about community and race.

Considering place as a part of racial formation helps to reveal the homogeneity and heterogeneity of the black community. Both are crucial to understanding the experiences of blacks in the United States. For example, volunteers at Wheat Street Baptist Church envision a very specific neighborhood

with affordable housing for all people. Moreover, their views about what is means to be black are tied to this specific place, Auburn Avenue, a neighborhood with a prominent Civil Rights history. The NOI, on the other hand, evokes a common memory of rural land for all black people, and use Muhammad Farms as an example of the possibilities if blacks were to obtain and farm rural southern land. The PAOCC believes that place can ultimately be heaven on earth for black people; for them, it is at Beulah Land Farms in Calhoun Falls, SC.

Macro, Micro, and Meso-Level Racial Projects

Racial formation, as understood through Omi and Winant's (1994) conceptualization, includes both macro-level and micro-level racial projects. In this dissertation, I add meso-level racial projects to reflect sustained efforts to change the racial order. Before detailing each level of racial projects, there are a few points worth noting about my conceptualization. First, racial projects within levels overlap and reflect the internal heterogeneity and homogeneity among black people. For example at the macro-level, Black Nationalists and Black Liberal Integrationists share common goals of community uplift. They operate simultaneously as separate and overlapping black political ideologies. Second, racial projects are both a reflection of and connected to racial projects at different levels. For example, landownership as a meso-level racial project may be connected to a macro-level racial project of black nationalism and actualized at the micro-level through a black nationalist's group's everyday work to obtain more land for black people. Finally, the racial projects that I present are in no way an exhaustive list that adequately represents the experiences of all black

people. However, they are an example of the unlikely spaces that racial projects operate in and a step in connecting these projects to the process of racial formation.

Macro-level racial projects

Macro-level racial projects are those that focus on “the racial dimensions of social structure” (Omi and Winant 1994; 57). Macro-level racial projects, in the context of these three food programs, include overlapping black political ideologies. Black political ideologies help black people to contextualize the meaning of blackness in the U.S. racial order (Harris-Lacewell 2004; Dawson 2001). They include contemporarily, Black Liberal Intergrationism, Black Nationalism, Black Conservatism, and Black Feminism (Harris-Lacewell 2004). Black political ideologies have been researched by scholars who document their formation and changes over time (Harris-Lacewell 2004; Dawson 2001). While macro-level racial projects are not the focus of this dissertation, the actions and goals of volunteers should be contextualized as a part of macro-level racial projects that seek to transform the U.S. social order.

Meso-level racial projects

Meso-level projects are not included in Omi and Winant’s present conceptualization of racial projects. However, I argue that they are an important link between macro and micro-level racial projects. Meso-level racial projects represent sustained collective efforts to change the U.S. social order. In the context of this dissertation, I broadly identify four meso-level racial projects that

are grounded in place: emergency food, food for spiritual and emotional fulfillment, spirituality as a response to racial oppression, and landownership.

*Emergency food is a type of meso-level racial project where volunteers utilize food to fulfill the material needs of black people.*² At Wheat Street Baptist Church's (WSBC) Action Mission Ministry (AMM), volunteers' primary goal is to feed hungry people in the surrounding neighborhood. They operate as a traditional religious emergency food program, whose mission is to feed the hungry and clothe the poor. The Pan African Orthodox Christian Church (PAOCC) also places emphasis on emergency food. Their goal is to be an emergency food source for black people all over the world.

A second meso-level racial project is the use of food for emotional and spiritual fulfillment. Volunteers in each food program believe that uplifting black people is a part of their mission. While for some, it is an explicit racial project, for others it is done in more subtle ways through food preparation and distribution. At the AMM, emergency food program volunteers attempt to create a feeling of home for those coming in to be served. To PAOCC members, black people should take joy in both the production and consumption of food in a communal setting; food is a source of spiritual fulfillment and emotional upliftment.

² Emergency food as a meso-level racial project is complex. In her book *Sweet Charity*, Poppendieck (1998) cites the many ills of emergency food discussing at length the ways through which emergency food programs reinforce an unequal and oppressive U.S. system. How then, could a concept that may be considered a part of the system of oppression be used to change the U.S. social order? I argue that the use of emergency food takes on distinctive uses for each black religious food program and is a part of their efforts to provide material fulfillment for black people in geographic proximity to these food programs and throughout the world. While one or more of these food programs may suffer from the ills that Poppendieck (1998) describes, their work is a part of larger racial projects aimed at improving the conditions of black people, and should not be dismissed.

Moreover, food is a part of their black Christian nationalist ideology. The NOI links food production and distribution to their conservative black nationalist ideology where they emphasize purity for all black people. Food, in their opinion, has always been used as a source of racial oppression.

A third meso-level racial project is employing spirituality as a response to racial oppression. Spirituality, as expressed through black religious organizations, has a history of being tied to struggles for liberation (Harris-Lacewell 2004; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990). Studies of black religious organizations reveal that spirituality, to varying extents is connected to liberation but also assimilation (Harris-Lacewell 2004; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990). While AMM volunteers use spirituality to work with the least of these on Auburn Avenue, they do not explicitly cite spirituality as a response to racial oppression. However for the PAOCC, spirituality is one in the same. Their founder, Albert Cleage, argues that the fight for black liberation is a part of God's mandate for black people. NOI members preach that Islam is the true religion of black people lost during the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. For black people to ever progress and be free from white racial oppression, they must follow the NOI's distinct interpretation of the tenets of Islam.

Finally, *I argue that landownership is a meso-level racial project that appears in distinct ways in each food program.* Dawson (2001, 96) says that "blacks have tried to gain land, or control over the institutions associated with it in territories where they have resided, since the end of slavery." The desire to control the use of land is evident in the discourse of the AMM as they discuss

their need for affordable housing in their urban neighborhood. The desire to obtain land as a tool for self-sufficiency among blacks is a part of the discourse of both the NOI and the PAOCC. For both, land equals power. The NOI further asserts that land is needed for geographic separation from white people.

These four meso-level racial projects help to reveal the internal heterogeneity and homogeneity among black people. There are broad themes that represent sustained efforts and patterns across all three food programs. However, each individual meso-level racial project has somewhat different meanings for each food program. These distinct meanings help to illuminate the internal heterogeneity among black people and the need to consider differences alongside similarities, based on a shared history. Moreover, the intricacies evident in meso-level racial projects illustrate the need to understand the daily experiences of black people through micro-level racial projects that are grounded in everyday activities.

Micro-level racial projects

Micro-level projects operate at the level of everyday experiences. Race, in micro-level racial projects is understood as common sense, an everyday part of our socialization as human beings (Omi and Winant 1994). For example, simply noticing that a person is black is a micro-level racial project that includes a set of assumptions about what it means to be black. Race in the black counterpublic can be understood as black common sense, the belief that blackness has political meaning (Harris-Lacewell 2004). Each food program

reveals the way in which race is understood as a part of everyday experiences that is also connected to broader social structures.

Race and Community through Emergency Food

Building a sense of community is often not the first phrase that one thinks of in defining an emergency food program. In Chapter 2, I delve into the day-to-day actions and overall goals of the Action Mission Ministry (AMM), an emergency food program located at a black Protestant church on the historically black Auburn Avenue in Atlanta, GA. Wheat Street Baptist Church (WSBC) has a history that is steeped in the Civil Rights Movement. One of its major sources of engagement with the community has been through serving food, though their method for doing so has changed over the years. I engaged in archival and textual research, extensive participant observation serving emergency food with volunteers for over a year, and open-ended interviews with a substantial number of volunteers. I find that volunteers are combining food, faith, and a vivid place memory to define their ideal place, the Auburn Avenue neighborhood. They are participating in everyday talk to create a feeling of home for those coming in to be served. However, emergency food is not their end goal. They hope that the people of Auburn Avenue, their people, can make substantive life changes that include having a material residence, through affordable housing, in the neighborhood.

Reclaiming Rural Land through Farming

In Chapter 3, I analyze the connection between rhetoric, land, and blackness. The Nation of Islam (NOI) owns approximately fifteen hundred acres

of land in southern Georgia in hopes of serving as a catalyst to build a system of black-owned farms that will feed the 40 million black people in America. Through analyzing their extensive books, archives and textual documents, many of which are located on their publicly available website, I find that they are employing a rhetoric that connects rural land to blackness. They highlight the tragedy for black people - slavery and sharecropping - but also triumph - black landownership that is associated with rural land. I argue that they employ narratives of both tragedy and triumph not only to unite black people, but to give them a reason to want to return to the land and provide food for other black people.

A Modern Day Example of an African American Land Ethic

In Chapter 4, I explore the concept of an African American land ethic (AALE) using the Pan African Orthodox Christian Church's (PAOCC) work at Beulah Land Farms. In year 2000, the PAOCC secured over four thousand acres of land on the waterfront border of Georgia and South Carolina. They grow fruits and vegetables, but also raise cattle, chicken, and fish using organic and holistic methods. In this paper, I suggest that an African American land ethic consists of four identifiable principles and practices: black agrarianism, land ownership and possession, sustainable agriculture, and an explicit connection between spirituality and the land. I specifically interrogate the connection between spirituality and the land through the PAOCC's use of the Promised Land, a term that has spiritual meaning, is biblically based, but is also a very real place for Beulah Land Farms members.

I use the African American land ethic to speak to the larger frustrations of the alternative food movement that seeks to transform the U.S. food system. The alternative food movement remains persistently white, even as food activists seek to reach out to food-insecure communities of color. I suggest in this chapter that alternative food movement scholars should consider why many African Americans may be averse to getting their hands dirty, and recognize that alternative and racialized land ethics co-exist with their own. Doing so may help alternative food movements expand the horizons of their own movement.

Data Collection and Analysis

This research uses archival research, textual research, participant observation, and semi-structured open-ended interviews to understand the activities and goals of each religious food program. Archival research gave me the opportunity to engage with historical documents (Harris 2001). Through doing so, I was able to understand how and why the food programs were founded. In some cases, archival and textual documents were extensive. At Wheat Street, archival and textual documents included sermons and newspaper articles. The NOI has a massive collection of past and current documents. The PAOCC has less available archival and textual material, but two books written by their founder and internal information provided me with a wealth of information on the theology of the church.

Through participant observation, I was eventually able to blend in with volunteers and engage in a somewhat natural observation. At the AMM, I helped to prepare and serve food one to two days a week with volunteers over a year

long period. At the PAOCC, I worked on their farm for approximately four months with other PAOCC members. My activities included pruning trees in the cow pasture, tagging cows, and working in the gardens. I was unable to engage in participant observation with the NOI. While I initiated contact and they never provided a firm “No,” they did provide reasons for my not being able to work on the farm. Because I am a woman, I would need to have a female guide to work with me at all times and also female living quarters. Since neither existed, I could not participate in the activities of the farm. Participant observation served invaluable to my research process and in my opinion, helped food program volunteers to open up more freely to me during the interview process.

I performed interviews with AMM food program volunteers along with PAOCC members and farm workers to understand their motivations and goals for volunteering. I sought to address five major themes during the research process: previous and current involvement in the food program, day-to-day activities and overall objectives, spatial purposes of food programs, racial identity, and religious ideology. Conducting open-ended interviews was invaluable; new themes arose as the interviews progressed.

Data were coded with the help of Atlas ti software to reveal etic themes based on my initial research objectives and theoretical framework (Hay 1976). Through the data collection and coding process, emic themes also arose in multiple interviews. Landownership, as I will discuss in the conclusion, was a consistent theme across all three black religious food programs in both an urban and rural context. Data were coded using critical discourse analysis to

understand the context of the statements and how they relate to the overall research goals. Discourse analysis connects the cultural context of statements to the reality that these statements construct (Wait 2005; Foucault 1972).

Examining my own positionality proved to be an important aspect of the research project for all three organizations. Positionality, according to Hay (2005, 290) is a “researcher’s social, locational, and ideological placement.” I found through my research process that my positionality is not only influenced by my race, class, and gender but other perceived characteristics that I did not anticipate. As Pattillo-McCoy (1999) discusses, volunteers sometimes assumed that I could, in a sense, finish their sentences or even that I agreed, as a black person, with their stance on issues pertaining to the black community.

Conclusion

My examination of the racial projects encompassed within these three food programs allows me a window into how social movements have adapted to address a changing racial order where the goals of black people are less clearly defined than they were during the mid-century struggle for civil rights. All three groups were highly active during the Civil Rights Movements. During this time, there was at least on some levels, a common enemy: a racist and oppressive system that limited the economic, social, and political life chances of black people. However, lived relations of race and expressions of racism have changed over time, and each organization has evolved to meet the changing needs of black people. For example, the Pan African Orthodox Christian Church, a religious organization dedicated to black liberation and black Christian

Nationalism no longer finds that blackness alone suffices for organizing.

Likewise, the NOI, a historically controversial and polarizing black nationalist organization, is attempting to reach out to black people of varying political ideologies with a message of unity and community uplift.

I hope to provide further insight into the activities and goals of black people in each of the food programs, examining as well how they engage in conversations that result in discursive or material transformations of place. They not only reflect the diversity of actions and opinions among black people, but also how place and space are connected to them. Each chapter exemplifies the way in which race, food, religion and place all have different meanings as individual terms but also as a collective.

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CHAPTER 2

FAITH, FOOD AND THE EVERYDAY STRUGGLE FOR BLACK URBAN

COMMUNITY³

³ McCutcheon, P. To be submitted to *Urban Geography*

ABSTRACT

In this chapter, I delve into the day-to-day actions and overall goals of the Action Mission Ministry, an emergency food program at Wheat Street Baptist Church in Atlanta, GA. Wheat Street Baptist Church is located on Auburn Avenue, a street with a prominent past steeped in the Civil Rights Movement. The neighborhood has changed over the years, suffering a similar fate of many black urban neighborhoods. While the past is memorialized in the landscape, volunteers at the Action Mission Ministry seek to redefine their neighborhood. They are using both food and faith along with a vivid place memory to define a new Auburn Avenue. They are engaging in everyday talk to recreate a feeling of home for many homeless people coming in to be served. Volunteers hope for a future neighborhood that has affordable housing for all. I conducted archival and textual research, along with extensive participant observation while serving emergency food with volunteers for over a year, and open-ended interviews with a substantial number of volunteers.

INDEX WORDS: Emergency food, black counterpublic, black political ideologies, black church, neighborhood, place-making, place-frames, Wheat Street Baptist Church, Action Mission Ministry

INTRODUCTION

Dominant academic and popular discourse often portrays disadvantaged black urban neighborhoods and their black residents either as victims of structural forces or as places where unmotivated and behaviorally problematic people congregate (Jargowsky 1997; Massey and Denton 1993; Wilson 1987; Mead 1986; Lewis 1966; Drake and Cayton 1935; Dubois 1903). This essay understands black people⁴ as agents of change, materially and discursively, in their neighborhoods. Theoretically, I combine black counterpublic theorists' analysis of identity formation in black spaces, with geographers' understanding of the social processes that construct place. Empirically, I interrogate the daily actions and discourse of black emergency food program volunteers located at a prominent church in Atlanta's historically black Auburn Avenue neighborhood. I utilize a mixed method approach that includes archival research, semi-structured open-ended interviews with volunteers, and extensive participant observation at the emergency food program. I argue that black volunteers, within the space of their emergency food program, recreate a feeling of home for their guests,⁵ through the ways in which they prepare and serve food, all while preaching a message of hope for brighter days. I further argue that volunteers offer emotional and spiritual fulfillment to encourage guests to make substantive life changes and to counter the invisibility of homeless people in the neighborhood. Volunteers' ultimate solution is not just to serve emergency food, but is instead to

⁴ In this paper, I understand race as a social construction, and use the term black, following the lead of my research participants.

⁵ Guests is the term that emergency food program volunteers use to refer to the people coming in to be served.

create a neighborhood where every person, regardless of income, has a place to call home. Ultimately, this paper illuminates overlooked spaces of the black counterpublic where identity formation, along with discursive and material place construction occurs. Moreover, it highlights the intersection between race, religion, food, and place.

Wheat Street Baptist Church (WSBC) is located in Atlanta, GA on Auburn Avenue, a street and neighborhood that was home to some of the nation's most prominent Civil Rights leaders (Alderman and Dwyer 2008; Henry 2004) and that Dwyer (2002: 34) refers to as "the one-time heart of the city's Black community." Auburn Avenue has changed drastically over the years, and one could argue that its prominence is a thing of the past. Like many urban neighborhoods, there is a large population of homeless and low income people, along with vacant housing (Owens-Jones 2010; Henry 2004). It is in the context of urban blight that WSBC, through their Action Mission Ministries (AMM), serves emergency food. Volunteers believe themselves to be intimately tied to a community of black people.

I understand the black community through the theoretical conceptualization of the black counterpublic, which refers to the discourse and racial identity formation, negotiation and contestation taking place among blacks in alternative public spaces, spheres, and formal organizations (Harris-Lacewell 2004; Dawson 2001; Reed 1986; Fraser 1994). Harris-Lacewell (2004:11) interrogates the "everyday talk" occurring in spaces of the black counterpublic. These spaces include urban black churches, many

of which were established during the late 1800s and early 1900s and continue to stand despite operating within an urban landscape that is constantly changing (McRoberts 2005; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990). Importantly, the black church⁶ is not an internally homogenous or singular black counterpublic space; within black churches, organizations serve varying functions. The organization that I choose to study operates both as a part of and also an autonomous entity from the church, making it unique.

Little attention has been paid to the neighborhood context in which black counterpublic spaces operate. I draw from research on place construction that considers the meaning and memory of place, how space is transformed into place, and the power relations that create place (Cresswell 2008; Cresswell 2004; Cresswell 1996; Malkki 1992; Lefebvre 1991; Tuan 1991; Tuan 1977). I also borrow from Martin's (2003) discussion of how activist organizations understand their neighborhoods through a variety of place frames, further using them to define and employ their activist goals. I argue that within black counterpublic spaces, individuals are discursively and materially defining place, their surrounding communities, through everyday talk.

WSBC's Action Mission Ministry (AMM) is similar to many emergency food programs that Poppendieck (1998) describes. Its mission is to "feed the hungry and clothe the poor" (Matthew 25:35). However, volunteers are not one dimensional, and do not believe that their program is the solution to urban

⁶ Throughout this paper, I use the term black church. This by no means signifies a homogenous community or religious experience; individual black churches are diverse to say the least. Scholars of the "black church" use this term not to signify sameness but a history where race and liberation have often been central to its religious teachings.

poverty. Instead, it is a present day response that is a part of a larger vision to address structural inequalities and encourage self-help. It is tied to WSBC's understanding of Auburn Avenue that historically includes establishing a farm in the 1950s, being the initial site for the Hosea Williams Feed the Hungry Program, and currently serving over eight hundred guests per week.

This paper will proceed as follows. I first give a brief history of Auburn Avenue and WSBC. I then discuss my theoretical framework, placing emphasis on black counterpublic spaces and the black people who are actively engaged in defining and changing their neighborhoods. I then present my methodology, which includes interviews, participant observation, archival research, and discourse analysis as my analytical tool. Finally, I present my results. Volunteers at the AMM are using both food and faith to encourage their guests. Ideally, for the short time that they eat, guests will have their short term needs met. Moreover, volunteers strive to make guests feel at home, instilling hope in them to improve their conditions. Volunteers understand that hope alone will not change the character of the neighborhood. Instead, more affordable housing is needed to recreate a feeling of home throughout the entire neighborhood.

HISTORY OF AUBURN AVENUE AND WHEAT STREET

Auburn Avenue

During the latter part of the 19th century, Auburn Avenue was considered a vibrant and bustling neighborhood (Rutheiser 1996). Because of segregation, blacks were bounded into certain neighborhoods where they

began to build businesses to fulfill their economic and social needs (Owens-Jones 2010). As barriers to residential segregation were torn down, beginning in the late 1960s, middle and upper middle-class blacks moved to other areas of Atlanta, including the West End where the Atlanta University Center was located⁷ (Rutheiser 1996). The neighborhood began experiencing drastic decline during the 1970s and 1980s. The I-75/I-85 downtown connector was built, which literally split Auburn Avenue in two parts, separating the residential area from the commercial area. This caused many of the neighborhood's businesses to close. Following the 1980s, perhaps the largest effort to revitalize the area occurred during the 1996 Summer Olympic Games hosted in Atlanta, GA (Owen-Jones 2010). At that time, one of Atlanta's largest international attractions was the Martin Luther King Jr. monument, located on Auburn Avenue. At the time, the monument was woefully underfunded in comparison to other national monuments (Alderman and Dwyer 2008). They utilized this opportunity to attempt to make the street more attractive through adding new street lights and signs to the neighborhood (Owens-Jones 2010). Following the 1996 Olympic Games, there were additional efforts to revitalize the neighborhood, including the establishment of mixed use housing. Recently, the Integral Group announced their newest plans for neighborhood development. Auburn Pointe will be built on the land where Grady Homes, one of Atlanta's

⁷ The Atlanta University Center is the largest consortium of Historically Black Colleges and Universities in the United States. At that time, it included: Atlanta University, Clark College, Interdenominational Theological Center, Morehouse College, Morris Brown College, and Spelman College.

largest housing projects, was recently torn down. According to the Integral Groups website, they are

working with residents, the Atlanta Housing Authority, city leaders and the private sector to transform an outdated economically challenged inner-city neighborhood into a vibrant multigenerational community with distinctive and diverse architecture that celebrates the area's culture and history.

(Auburn Pointe 2011:1)

The demographic that the new development targets is unclear. However, one can imagine that it will be vastly different from the former residents of Grady Homes.

Wheat Street Baptist Church

Wheat Street Baptist Church (WSBC) was founded in 1869, rebuilt in 1921, and today stands as a “mighty fortress on Auburn Avenue” (About Wheat Street 2011). Volunteers recall when WSBC's sermons were broadcast to the entire community through loud speakers, with just as many people listening on the outside as there were inside the church walls.

WSBC has always been a church whose spiritual mission is complemented by political, economic, and social service to the community (Branch 1989). Rev. Borders, the church's long serving pastor, is a notable leader in the Civil Rights movement who led the desegregation of Atlanta's public bus system. Wheat Street opened one of the first black owned credit unions in the city and continues to maintain sizeable landholdings on and around Auburn

Avenue (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990). They also briefly obtained farmland during the 1950s in rural Georgia in an attempt to grow fruits and vegetables for the neighborhood grocery store. WSBC, throughout its history, has provided support and meals to anyone who was hungry in the community.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Black urban neighborhoods have undergone drastic changes; scholars study their structures along with causes and responses to poverty. Often, this research fails to consider spaces of agency within black neighborhoods where individuals and institutions hold planned and unplanned conversations about what can be done to address often deteriorating conditions. The nature of these conversations depends on the people involved, but also the spaces in which they occur. Furthermore, these conversations may lead to a discursive and material characterization of place. Neighborhood characteristics develop based on a memory of place, along with visions of what an ideal neighborhood is for the people that reside in it.

Urban Black Neighborhoods

Research on black urban neighborhoods dates back to the late 1800's (DuBois 1899). In *The Philadelphia Negro*, DuBois (1899) investigates the economic and social problems affecting blacks in Philadelphia's inner city. While there may have been street demarcations separating poor and middle income blacks, all resided in the same inner city area. DuBois asserts that while whites should work for racial equality, blacks with means have a responsibility to help

out the poorest. Drake and Cayton (1945) map economic hardships in Chicago's inner cities, concluding that poor black neighborhoods are economically disadvantaged at higher rates than other ethnic minority communities.

Scholars cite several major causes of urban poverty. Blacks, through segregation, were concentrated into high density areas in inner cities that became known as ghettos (Jargowsky 1997; Wilson 1980). They were unable to obtain loans in majority black inner city areas, due to racist lending practices (Massey and Denton 1993), making it difficult for these neighborhoods to flourish economically. Those who could afford to move into suburban neighborhoods were met with organized and violent resistance in the form of neighborhood improvement associations, violent boycotts, and restrictive covenants all meant to keep blacks out (Delaney 1998; Massey and Denton 1993; Wilson 1987). Even in the 1990's, four out of five people in high poverty inner city neighborhoods were minorities (Jargowsky 1997). Jobs, once located in central cities moved to suburban areas (Jargowsky 1997; Wilson 1987), and manufacturing jobs were replaced with low paying service jobs. Eventually with the dismantling of formal racial barriers, many in the black middle class moved to suburban areas, which some scholars believe further contributes to the cycle and concentration of poverty (Jargowsky 1997; Wilson 1987). Massey and Denton (1993: 8) are wary of this hypothesis, noting that "concentrated poverty would have happened during the 1970s without black middle-class migration."

While discourse on the economic effects of residential segregation on black urban neighborhoods is clear, research on the social and cultural effects of

urban poverty is less certain and undoubtedly more contentious. Some posit that inner city blacks possess a culture of poverty where actions such as having children out of wedlock, crime, and drug and alcohol abuse are not shunned, but rather justified (Lewis 1966). Wilson's (1987) approach attempts to not blame the victim. In his analysis of black inner city urban neighborhoods, he finds that social and cultural ills can often be attributed to demographic changes that increase social dislocation. However, critics like Diamond (2011:2) challenge Wilson's "proximity to the culture of poverty rationale."

Researchers and policymakers offer solutions to the problems facing inner city neighborhoods. Massey and Denton (1993) contend that both race-based and class-based policies must be undertaken to address segregation and economic distress that include tackling poverty, low performing schools, and crime. Wilson (1989) suggests macro-level economic policies along with on the ground job training to create a skilled workforce. Jargowsky (1997) offers a vision of inner cities as inclusive communities as opposed to separate and segregated communities. AMM volunteers acknowledge many of the causes and proposed solutions to urban poverty. However, they work within an institution and neighborhood that, in some ways, has always collectively developed its own unique responses.

Space and Place-making in the Black Counterpublic

Habermas (1989: 4) initially theorizes the public sphere as a "realm of freedom and permanence," where citizens engage in discourse around societal matters and public norms; this discourse then becomes available to

all (Asen 2000; Fraser 1994; Calhoun 1994; Habermas 1989). Within this early work, Habermas refers to a singular public sphere, paying little attention to the multiple nodes of identity such as race, class and gender that shape access to the public sphere. Fraser (1994) critiques such a narrow vision and argues that there are instead subaltern counterpublics comprised of groups that are excluded from the dominant or mainstream public sphere. As Fraser (1994), Dawson (2001), Harris-Lacewell (2004) and others have shown, subaltern counterpublics create alternative spaces where the marginalized can freely discuss matters of concern; these subaltern spaces include racialized counterpublics.

According to the Black Public Sphere Collective, the black counterpublic is a “sphere of critical practice and visionary politics,” (Black Public Sphere Collective 1995: 3) where activists, everyday people, and scholars alike gather in everyday public and private spaces, and in doing so challenge the exclusionary spaces of the broader public sphere. Much discourse in the black counterpublic centers on redefining black identity, which is a collective process that accounts for both shared racial goals and group progress while also taking into account individual differences (Harris-Lacewell 2004; Dawson 2001; Brown and Shaw 2002; Dawson 1994). Despite the demonstrated importance of the black counterpublic, some scholars (Dawson 2001) believe that it no longer exists because of the vast diversity among blacks and the dismantling of formal racial barriers.

In her seminal work *Barbershops, Bibles, and BET*, Harris-Lacewell (2004) offers a nuanced analysis of discourse occurring in the black counterpublic. She calls these conversations “everyday talk,” (2004: 12) which includes the day-to-day interactions and conversations that blacks collectively have in black spaces that in some ways inform individual and collective identity formation. These conversations also lead to the formation of overlapping black political ideologies.

Harris-Lacewell (2004) highlights four black political ideologies operating in present times: black Nationalism, black Feminism, black Conservatism, and black Liberal Intergrationism. Black political ideologies are not a replication of similar political ideologies in the broader public sphere. Instead, they operate under what Harris-Lacewell (2004: 23) terms “black common sense,” the belief that blackness is a political category. Most black political ideologies, excluding black conservatism, emphasize community thought and action.⁸ I use Harris-Lacewell’s analysis of black political ideologies to inform my understanding of conversations occurring at the AMM. However, my primary goal is not to determine whether or not a volunteer’s statement can be categorized into a specific ideology. For my purposes, an individual’s political ideology is important inasmuch as it informs their understanding of Auburn Avenue as a neighborhood.

The spaces that define and constitute counterpublics are significant. According to Harris-Lacewell (2004), these spaces include beauty salons,

⁸ For a more detailed discussion of African American political ideologies, see p. 25-33 of *Barbershops, Bibles, and BET*.

barbershops, and black churches; all are formally or informally used to combat racial exclusion and to pursue political, economic and educational goals. The black church is a space of the black counterpublic where everyday talk that occurs goes beyond religious and spiritual matters. It should be understood within the historical context of the periods following emancipation and during the Civil Rights movement (Battle 2006; Pinn 2002; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; Frazier 1974; Wade 1971; Woodson 1921; Du Bois 1903). Many black churches are focused on building a communally grounded sense of black identity where individual blacks collectively develop morals and values through both formal and informal discussions.⁹ Lincoln and Mamiya (1990: 4) assert that these morals and values represent a “dialectic between resistance and accommodation.” At the pole of resistance, the black church was one of the only black-owned institutions that actively challenged racial oppression. At the pole of accommodation, the black church serves to integrate blacks into white society, and adopt certain aspects of Anglo culture (Stewart 1999; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990). It is then not surprising to see a number of black political ideologies at play between members of a congregation and sometimes within the same person.

During and after the years of the Great Migration (1916-1970), black churches took on economic, cultural, and political roles in urban cities (McRoberts 2005; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990). Black spirituality is not

⁹ There are some scholars who disagree with the portrayal of the black churches as social minded institutions and argue that the community outreach activities of many black churches has been overstated (Reed 1986).

experienced in a vacuum, confined to God and the walls of the church (Stewart 1999). Many black preachers encourage their congregations to become involved in their communities. A 1994 study of one hundred and fifty of Atlanta's black churches reveals that over eighty seven percent are involved in their community in ways including Head Start Programs, mental health counseling, and food distribution centers. These scholars find that black churches in Atlanta continue to be engaged in their neighborhood and stress their potential to aid in Atlanta's revitalization, paying special attention to Wheat Street's history of community engagement (Ward et.al 1994). The AMM is the source of much of this community engagement.

The AMM is a space where the walls of the church meet the people of the community. Though many black churches are considered to be community minded, this does not mean that all who attend black churches are deeply engaged in the community. Reed (1992) calls the assertion of black churches as social minded a myth. While the AMM sits directly besides Wheat Street, the food ministry is housed in the fellowship hall, a drastically different space than the sanctuary of the church. When walking into the doors, there are pictures of church activities, but also flyers advertising job fairs, free drug testing, and HIV/AIDS treatment. There are many volunteers who are not members of the church, but come on Monday's and Wednesday's to serve food.

Though the AMM was officially founded by WSBC's current pastor Dr. Michael Harris, Rev. Borders laid the groundwork for the current mission. During one point, the Hosea Williams Feed the Hungry Program was located in the

basement. A men's shelter was located downstairs while a women's shelter was located upstairs. The current AMM was founded in the early 1990s and incorporated in 2003. It is its own separate 501c3 organization giving it some level of autonomy from the church. The AMM is not led by WSBC's pastor; Instead, there is an entirely separate leadership council.

While Harris-Lacewell (2004) provides a detailed account of black spaces, she pays little attention to the neighborhood context that these black spaces operate within. In my estimation, both are affected by the other. To truly understand the functions of black spaces, we must not only consider their neighborhood context, but how they discursively and materially characterize and influence the neighborhood.

The materiality of place is a social construct, and how individuals come to understand and experience place is based on their own positionality, but also historical and complex power relations visible in the landscape (Cresswell 2004; Harvey 1996; Tuan 1977). Cresswell (2008, 2004) provides various definitions of place, tracing its use throughout history and in present day research. I borrow from his and others discussions of place memory, ideal places, and the importance of home to contextualize the reasons behind and purpose of the discourse and goals of AMM volunteers

Place and memory are dialectically related (Cresswell 2004). Casey (1987, 186-187) refers to places as "containers of experiences." What is visible and memorialized in the landscape tells us a lot about who is included and excluded from history. While some memorials pay homage to history's

winners, others reveal visible struggle and violence associated with the memorials and surrounding landscapes (Cresswell 2004; Foote 1997). Historically, Auburn Avenue was a street where the winners are memorialized in the landscape today. AMM volunteers speak fondly about Auburn Avenue's illustrious history in their memory of the street and surrounding neighborhood. Memorialization on Auburn Avenue creates an ironic juxtaposition, where the past is held up as a symbol of black progress, alongside urban decay. The MLK Memorial Site, an example of progress, sits only a block away from barren land and boarded up housing, which are visible signs of urban blight. While many of the winners of history have died, they are commemorated alongside the current living residents, many of whom are poor or homeless and rendered invisible in the landscape.

Ideal places are places that feel like home. Often, the justification for certain types of housing and neighborhoods is that they are providing people a nice place to live (Cresswell 2004; Reid and Smith 1993). In decaying urban neighborhoods, these places can be exclusionary. Reid and Smith (1993) describe conflict over creating a nice place to live on the Lower East Side in New York City. While the city's goal was to create a nice place to live by moving out unwanted people, residents in the neighborhood resisted gentrification. Often, a nice place to live is a neighborhood where the poor homeless are removed from the landscape to attract a higher and whiter tax bracket. AMM volunteers want to make Auburn Avenue a desirable neighborhood, but believe that this should include the infrastructure to house

lower income people who already reside on Auburn Avenue. There is a visibly large amount of abandoned and vacant land. Because of this, a nice place to live is representative of any place to live for many in the neighborhood who are homeless.

Homeless people are thought to be without place (Cresswell 2004). Home is not simply a material structure, it is also a feeling of comfort associated with the structure. In many cities, it is illegal to sleep on the streets, in parks, and in other areas where the sight of homeless people disrupt resident's nice place to live. At the AMM, volunteers include homeless people in their construction of an ideal neighborhood; a clear departure from what Bullard (2011:1) calls the city's "plan to shrink black Atlanta." A considerable portion of this plan is to encourage gentrification due to development in Atlanta's poor black neighborhoods. Through the very act of feeding people, volunteers hope to provide a connection or a sense of belonging to place that may nor may not already exist. While other business owners may criminalize homeless bodies, on Monday's and Wednesday's, these bodies are made visible. To volunteers, these people are a legitimate and welcomed part of the neighborhood. They utilize the unlikely space of an emergency food program to not only make their guest feel welcomed, but to ultimately transform and their neighborhoods. Their methods for doing so are representative of place-based spatial strategies.

Neighborhood groups employ place as a part of the way that they define their activist goals. Martin (2003:733) interrogates the "potential

relationship between activism based on an idea of neighborhood and the material experiences of that place.” She argues that social activism is often connected to a particular construction of place. Borrowing from Snow and Benford’s (1988) explanation of collective-action frames, she interrogates how neighborhood activist organizations utilize these frames to recognize their motivation, diagnosis, and prognosis for the neighborhoods that they seek to transform.

Motivation frames are the reasons that people or neighborhood groups decide to act. In her study of the Frogtown neighborhood, Martin (2003) finds that some people and organizations believe it to be their responsibility to serve their neighborhood for a multiplicity of reasons. First, groups define the neighborhood’s problem, a diagnostic frame. In diagnosing the problem, groups may understand some neighborhood characteristics to be out of place with the neighborhood’s true identity. Diagnostic frames are not always local; groups may contextualize neighborhood problems in the larger scale of the city, state, and perhaps the nation. Finally, neighborhood organizations decide to take action, prognostic frames, to improve their surrounding area.

Martin categorizes and analyzes the statements of neighborhood organizations seeking to transform their neighborhood. However, in her analysis, there is less discussion of the process through which organizations come to define, diagnose, and provide solutions to neighborhood concerns. On the other hand, Harris-Lacewell’s (2004) discussion of black

counterpublic spaces speaks more to the process through which blacks form and contest black identity. I utilize both in my understanding of how the AMM categorizes Auburn Avenue. Cresswell (2004) further allows me to uncover the multiple layers of meaning in AMM volunteer's vivid imagination. Volunteers hold onto a very specific understanding of the type of place that Auburn Avenue is and should be, and frame their emergency food program around this vision.

Emergency Food

Poppendieck (1998) describes emergency food programs as band-aid solutions that only disguise the problem of hunger and in some ways contribute to it. Emergency food is problematic in seven ways: not having enough food, lack of choice for consumers, nutritional shortcomings, unpredictable changes in the food supply, disparate accessibility, lack of organization, and feelings of shame by those on the receiving end. She notes the frustration of many volunteers who realize that they are not addressing the underlying structural problems at play, and are in some ways contributing to it. Poppendieck (1998:188) further states that "the emergency food program is permeated with" religious volunteers who cite a mandate from God. Volunteers' believe that they are a blessing to others by serving food while simultaneously being blessed through giving.

Within the walls of some emergency food programs, volunteers work to "create environments that enhance dignity and self-respect" (Poppendieck 1998: 245). Emergency food program volunteers may attempt to emulate a

restaurant style of service through giving those coming to be served a sense of choice. However, Poppendieck (1998) interviews one food reprocessing director who argues that most food program volunteers who attempt to instill dignity into their guests are well-intentioned middle class white people who are economically and socially distant from the people that they are serving.

My goal in this dissertation is not to privilege the AMM as a model emergency food program. The AMM is not exempt from many of the ills that Poppendieck (1998) describes. Volunteers themselves believe that there is no ideal emergency food program, and can list the problems within their own program. However, my goal is to explore how the particularities of the AMM collide to create a racial project that is full of contradictions but ultimately reveals the heterogeneity and homogeneity among black people. Both differences and similarities are being played out in the unlikely space of the AMM, an emergency food program, where social distance is literally not as black and white as Poppendieck (1998) describes. AMM volunteers feel a connection to those coming in to be served that is based on many factors that include religion, race, and at times similarities in economic status.

Finally, the AMM should be understood within the context of a church entrenched in the Civil Rights movement. WSBC has always had a deep commitment to fighting injustice, often through food. At the AMM, food and faith meet to provide short term material needs. Volunteers use food to feed people emotionally and spiritually. They do so through venturing outside of the traditional ways of serving emergency food. Instead, they serve in a

family style setting in an attempt to create a feeling of home for their guests that will ideally lead to hope to inspire substantial life changes. The emergency food program is not the solution to the problem, as volunteers well know. There are larger structural inequalities that contribute to the need for an emergency food program. Nevertheless, the AMM is a black space where volunteers actively engage with each other and guests, discursively creating their ideal neighborhood.

METHODS

This research utilizes qualitative data from adult volunteers at the AMM. Archival research provided an opportunity to engage with past documents and contextualize findings (Harris 2001). Documents include two books of sermons, and archived and current newspaper articles from *The Atlanta Daily World*, the *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, and the *Overground Railroad*. I use the King James Version of the *Holy Bible* to understand religious statements. All materials help to contextualize statements made during interviews and also relate them to the broader community context that the statements were made in.

I conducted participant observation for a year and a half, volunteering weekly or bi-weekly. The majority of volunteers at the AMM have known each other for years and over time have developed a tight knit group that was somewhat difficult to break into. I understood my role to be that of an outsider and knew that it would take time to build trust and develop a more natural relationship with volunteers.

After volunteering for six months, I identified a core group of twenty eight volunteers. There was little time to conduct interviews during food service and preparation, so most were done either before or after. During open-ended interviews (Harris 2001), I sought to address five major areas: previous and current involvement in the food programs, day to day activities and program objectives, spatial purposes of the food programs, racial identity, and religious ideology. I asked additional questions that were tailored to the interviewee. I coded and then analyzed them using critical discourse analysis (Wait 1997; Foucault 1972) with the help of Atlas ti software. The analytical process was ongoing, reflexive, and rich due to my continued engagement with the AMM.

Positionality

For the analytical process to be truly reflexive, a continuous examination of my positionality, in relation to my proposed research participants, proved to be central to the research process (Robinson 1994). Volunteers understood me to be a researcher, but as time progressed, a member of their community who they were proud of for pursuing her PhD. Like the other volunteers, I am black, sharing many personal and professional attributes with them. This may have increased their willingness to express a wide range of opinions with me about their personal motivations for serving emergency food. While making a conscious effort to remind myself and my fellow volunteers of my outsider position as a researcher, I experienced many of the same situations that Pattillo-McCoy (1999:8) discusses in her book *Black Picket Fences*. She says that

as a fellow African American I was supposed to know the answers to many questions that ethnographers must ask in order to go deeper than mere descriptions...overall, being black facilitated entry and the formation of informal ties, but it was also necessary to consciously assume an outsider position.

A sense of familiarity was evident between me and volunteers. The tone of interviews suggests that volunteers, to a degree, are engaging in everyday talk with me as a black person who is simultaneously the interviewer. I was told that what allowed them to let me in to their food program was the belief that I had genuine intentions, and participated over an extended period of time.

ANALYSIS

AMM volunteers engage in everyday talk in the space of the emergency food program. They discursively create a neighborhood, where all are welcomed and have a place to call home. Food provides bodily sustenance for the AMM's guest, and is often the only meal that they will receive that day. Volunteers also employ a mixture of food and faith in an attempt to encourage those coming into be served by providing guests what volunteers believe to be culturally appropriate and tasty food, served in a family style setting. For volunteers, feeding people materially, but also spiritually and emotionally will give them the emotional wherewithal to address larger structural problems that are visibly present on the outside of the food program's walls.

The Auburn Avenue of today is a place that is both reminiscent of the past, but has also undergone drastic changes. If one were to take a walking

tour of Auburn Avenue, beginning at the far east of the street, they would first encounter Lotta Frutta, a six year old Cuban Fruteria. During my numerous visits, the clientele that I witnessed coming in during the mornings was racially diverse, but considerably whiter than any other eating or shopping establishment that I frequented during my months there. The owner informed me that many of the people coming in are new transplants to the area. Walking west from La Frutta, the sign for the Martin Luther King Jr. National Historic Site is clearly visible.

The MLK Jr. National Historic Site takes up the next two blocks, and includes Dr. King's childhood home (Figure 2.1), a museum, the tombs of both Dr. King and Coretta Scott King, and Ebenezer Baptist Church (Figure 2.2). There are numerous row houses (Figure 2.3), connected to Dr. King's childhood home that no one presently resides in; instead, there are placards describing what they were used for in the past and how they contributed to a sense of unity among Auburn Avenue residents.



Figure 2.1



Figure 2.2



Figure 2.3

After passing the historic Ebenezer Baptist Church, the feeling of the street and essentially the neighborhood changes drastically. Wheat Street Towers (Figure 2.4), a senior citizens home partially owned by the Wheat Street Charitable Foundation is the high rise, deteriorating building on the left. The building also houses Wheat Street's Credit Union. In the next block stands Wheat Street's Baptist Church (Figure 2.5) whose signage is so prominent that it can be seen from miles away. The church is an architecturally historic and impressive structure. The fellowship hall, where the AMM feeds out, is the large building on the side of the sanctuary and not wholly visible from the street. Wedged in between the church and the fellowship hall is the old parsonage, also commemorated with a placard. According to volunteers, Rev. William Holmes Borders (Figure 2.6), Wheat

Street's longest serving pastor would sit on his porch with a bullhorn speaking to everyone who walked down the street.

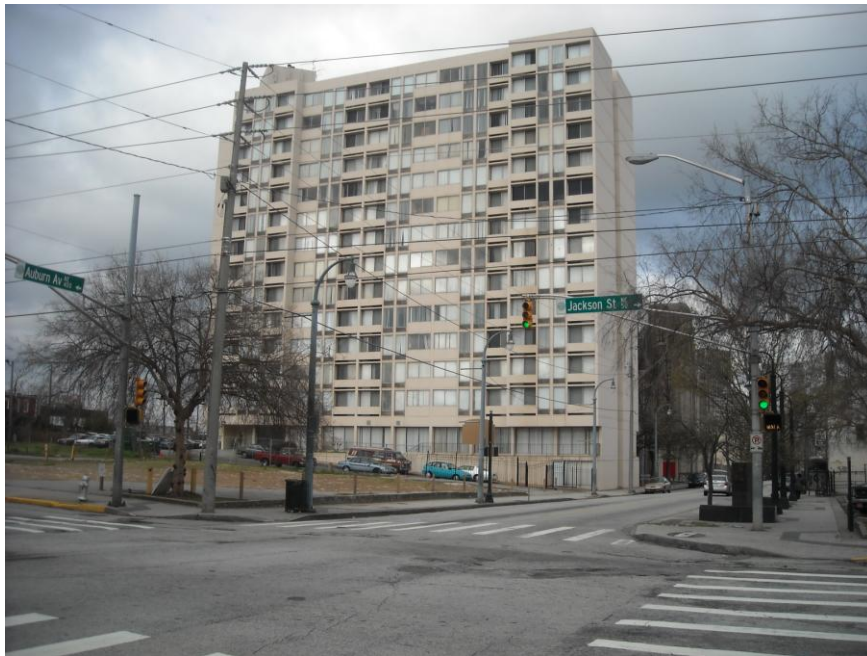


Figure 2.4



Figure 2.5



Figure 2.6

The feeling of the neighborhood becomes disjointed if one were to travel even further west down Auburn Avenue. One would also notice Atlanta Life Insurance Company (Figure 2.7) and the Peacock Club, both historically prominent businesses on Auburn Avenue that continue to operate today. One would also come upon the Auburn Avenue Research Library. Mixed in with these historic institutions is dilapidated and boarded up housing.

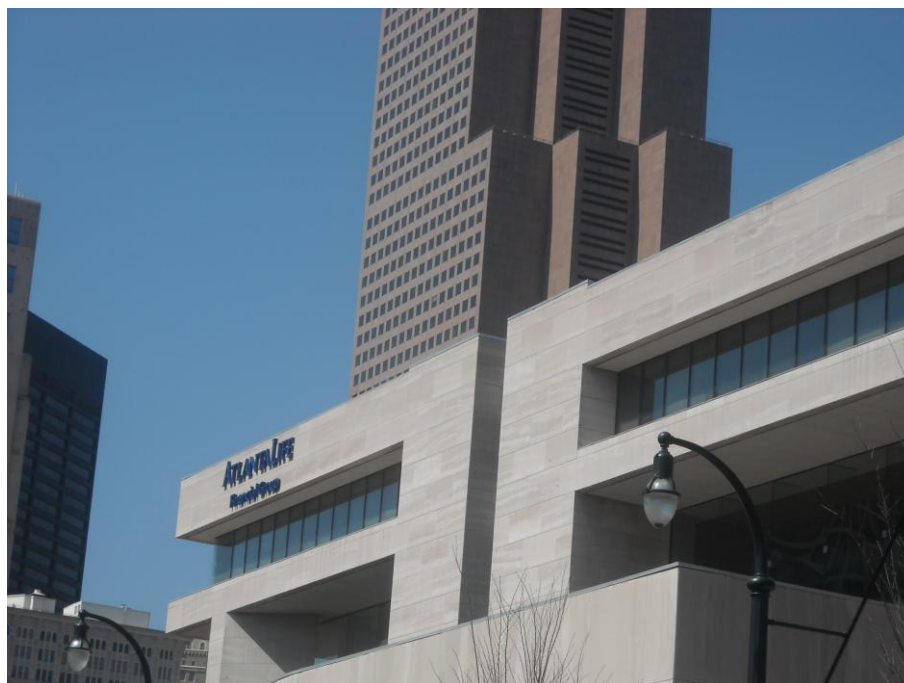


Figure 2.7

The most striking feature of the neighborhood is that aside from Wheat Street Towers, there are few housing options for working class people on the street and in the surrounding neighborhood. The largest example of affordable housing on Auburn Avenue is Big Bethel Towers Apartments that has one hundred and eighty units, of which the rent is based on income. There are also new buildings cropping up on the street and in the surrounding neighborhood that clearly cater to a higher clientele. The high prevalence of empty land and land with boarded up housing units (Figure 2.8) signals a life that no longer exists on Auburn Avenue. The past is alive on Auburn Avenue, memorialized in the landscape. However, any person willing or able to look past these memorials will also see poverty and homelessness. More importantly, they will see the irony of a landscape where the past appears more vital than the present.



Figure 2.8

The Ever Present Memory of a Street Paved in Gold

Volunteers remember the Auburn Avenue of the past as a neighborhood that flourished economically, politically, and socially. While blacks were bounded into certain neighborhoods due to discriminatory housing practices, they created businesses and a community atmosphere that volunteers remember fondly. These businesses included clothing stores, dry cleaners, barbershops, beauty salons, and grocery stores, for example. Volunteers do not recall a utopian place, but rather a neighborhood where everyone had an opportunity to succeed. Sister Winfrey*¹⁰ says that

The whole corridor on Auburn. All that was black owned businesses. Everything we needed we had it. We had the drug stores, the movie theatre, the ten cents stores, the doctors, the

¹⁰ Real names were not used to protect the confidentiality of participants.

lawyers, the entertainment centers. From Auburn up until
Piedmont.

Volunteers remember Auburn Avenue not only as a bustling economic street and district; they also remember it a place that they could call home. Many grew up on the street and in the surrounding neighborhood. Some, like Sister Sandra*, grew up in the neighborhood's public housing.

When we moved into Grady Homes that was in 1945. That was the opening. It was exciting for us. Most of us came for neighborhoods where we had the outdoor programs. We knew we were living in the first condominiums in Atlanta. That's when they opened the housing projects up to us.

Grady Homes, recently demolished, was one of the largest housing projects in Atlanta. Sister Sandra* recalls that Grady Homes had a feeling of community in it, and everyone who lived there knew each other. She believes that even if people reside in public housing, they should have pride in themselves and their neighborhood. She says about housing projects in general that:

We probably have more doctors and lawyers and entrepreneurs
coming from housing projects than any other neighborhoods

While Sister Sandra* acknowledges that the conditions of Grady Homes deteriorated over the years, she still believes that they can serve a much needed purpose. Without a past memory of public housing that is in some ways positive, she might deduce that it is unnecessary and unworthy of being saved.

Volunteers possess a strong place memory of Auburn Avenue and its people. Cresswell (2004:85) reminds us that “some memories are allowed to fade-are not given any kind of support. Other memories are promoted as standing for this and that.” A major telltale sign of whether or not a memory stands the test of time is if it is memorialized. This memorialization may be through buildings or monuments, rendering the past very much visible to its residents. Until recently, the remnants of Grady Homes were visible, and I would argue that they existed as a type of memorial. While to some, they represented the end of an era of drugs and crimes, to others like Sister Sandra* they represented progress and possibility, a historical characteristic of the Auburn Avenue neighborhood.

I further argue that AMM volunteers’ past memory of the neighborhood is a motivation frame that serves to encourage their activism in the food program. Martin describes motivation frames as the sometimes intangible characteristics and values of a neighborhood that cause people to act. In her discussion of Frogtown, she notes that some neighborhoods “highlighted the neighborhood as a residential community with a particular history” (Martin 2003: 739). At the AMM, some portions of their motivation frame are based on a discursive and tangible remembrance of place. They remember a street and a neighborhood that while literally not paved in gold, created a feeling of life for all who visited and lived on it because it contained everything that they had. Without question, the past memory of Auburn Avenue informs volunteers’ present day actions. However, their connection to the past does not imply that they are interested in

recreating the past. Instead, it is used almost as an abstract source of hope, and as a visual representation of the ability of black people to work together to form a thriving neighborhood. Volunteers understand that the neighborhood has transformed, and seek to tailor their hopes and dreams to a drastically changing landscape.

Auburn Avenue, as evidenced by the earlier discussion, is experiencing the fate of many black urban neighborhoods across the nation. Dawson (2001) questions the existence of the black counterpublic in modern times, due to the dismantling of formal racial barriers and an increase in class division among African Americans. As many middle class blacks moved out of neighborhoods like Auburn Avenue, it might follow that unity would decrease. However, I believe that a common memory so visible in the present landscape is one factor that motivates volunteers to collectively define their new vision for the neighborhood. A past memory of unity remains, and is carried on through everyday talk among volunteers and those coming into be served.

Man Needs Food

Throughout Wheat Street's history, they have preached and put into practice their belief that people need food to seek out and take advantage of long term substantive life changes. Their former pastor preached about the importance of having basic bodily needs; without meeting these basic needs, individuals are unable to obtain jobs, seek housing, and improve their overall conditions in life (Borders 1943). Volunteers remember that if hungry people came by the church, Borders would take them to get a meal, getting to know the

person and inquiring about why they were hungry. In 1959, he, without the congregation's knowledge, purchased a farm twenty miles outside of Atlanta. The farm was to be used to grow for the local Auburn Avenue supermarket, but also provide a place where black boys could go to get away from city life (English 1967). Deacon Samuel, a long time member and leader at Wheat Street, recalls that:

Back in the day, the vision of the farm was to raise enough meat and vegetables in order to sell it to the people who lived in the community. The prejudice and hatred stopped that because they burned the farm and forced us to sell it. I never saw it, but they said it was a beautiful thing with all of the livestock and the gardens. That's one of his visions that didn't work out.

In 1971 Hosea and Juanita Williams, not members of Wheat Street, were given the permission to establish the Hosea Williams Feed the Hungry Program in its basement (English 1967).

Presently, volunteers engage in outreach with the neighborhood through serving emergency food. The AMM was incorporated in 2003, and emergency food represents only a portion of the services that they provide. They also operate a food and clothing pantry and are a part of the USDA SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance) Program. Sister Hunter* is in her 80s and was one of the first people to begin serving food at Wheat Street and later in the AMM. When I asked her to describe why she joined the food ministry, she says that

I want to be in the food ministry to guarantee that we would feed these people as long as they need to be fed...they want a hot meal. Even in the summertime, you get tired of sandwiches. You want something hot and we always have something hot.

Most all AMM volunteers gave the above reason for wanting to serve food. Their reasons are not complicated; there is a need for food and they seek to serve the need. Many of their guests are regulars and use the program for their bi-weekly source of nourishment. The volunteers believe that they could be doing more, but also that their guests have needs and circumstances that go far beyond their reach. At the AMM, they are constrained by their own institutional resources. They have a small budget, and feeding and clothing people are two of the only things that they can afford to do. However, I argue that serving emergency food allows them to connect with people and subsequently the neighborhood in distinct ways. The way in which they serve food is their attempt to encourage people who have been rendered invisible on Auburn Avenue. They do this by infusing the feeling of home in the food in the preparation and serving of food.

AMM volunteers must prove themselves as worthy cooks before entering the kitchen. They pride themselves on preparing and serving quality food that taste good, setting themselves apart by seasoning food to perfection. Brother Brawley,* a native of the Virgin Islands and longtime head cook at the AMM describes his cooking process below:

Yeah, I'm the type person that I cook for myself...that's why everybody kept coming. The food was seasoned. The other person

would make shepherd pie with ground beef with no onions or nothing. I don't do that. Mash potatoes, I put butter, milk; I put cheese in the top of it. I put a mixture of cream cheese. The same way I cook for myself, I cook for them.

Sister Hunter* echoes his thoughts:

We have a good cook here. He doesn't have any special elaborate dishes, but he seasons what he serves so well, it keeps you coming back...Even the simplest object, he can serve it and season it so well, you just love it. Even spaghetti. It's so good.

AMM cooks' attempt to tailor their food to meet the needs and desires of as many people as possible. They strive to "put a little soul"¹¹ in the food that they are cooking by "doctoring up" canned products that might otherwise taste plain and also by preparing home cooked and culturally appropriate meals. For example, cooks may add even more chicken to canned chicken noodle soup and frozen vegetables to make it tastier, but also more nutritious (Figure 2.9). A cup of soup is always supplemented with slices of bread, desert, and fruit if available. At times, the cook prepares dishes from scratch like fried chicken, pairing it with greens, rice, and sometimes cornbread dressing, describing it as his best attempt at making home-cooked meals.

¹¹ I choose not to use the term "soul food," because my focus here is on the process of cooking vs. the actual term. Furthermore, the definition of the term "soul food" is hotly contested.



Figure 2.9

A “feeling of home” is apparent in the way that food is served, and the message of hope that accompanies it. Guests sit communally around a table (Figure 2.10) that seats twelve. Leaders believe that this individual table like setting will increase a feeling of togetherness among those coming in. One minister says that

we want you to look at one another...there may be people around
this very table that are able to help you.

To Rev. Harvey, eating together is about more than just sitting around a table. It is about looking other people in the eye and forming connections that may improve individual’s life chances. Without tables, even more people could fit, but Action Mission Ministry remains adamant about creating a family style structure that takes longer to set up and clean up, but achieves goals of forming community. They believe that for their guests, this setup makes the actual

consumption of food more personal and in a sense, more enjoyable. During my time observing the program, I sometimes witnessed couples eating with one another. Also, people who know each other outside of the AMM came in together, saving a spot for their friends so that they could eat and converse with someone that they know.



Figure 2.10

Through serving food, I argue that volunteers also seek to recreate a feeling of home. Cooking with soul is a phrase used to describe how African Americans, historically in the south, prepared certain foods (Opie 2008; Witt 1999). Opie (2008) says that food is often prepared and consumed in communal style settings. AMM volunteers prepare and serve food with soul. By doing so, they create a feeling of belongingness and togetherness. I further link this to Cresswell's (2004) discussion of the relationship between place and homelessness. Homeless people are delegitimized in a society that places a

higher value on people who have an address than those who do not. At the AMM, volunteers attempt to recreate home by preparing, serving and distributing food in a family like setting, a creating a replication of home inside of the emergency food program's walls.

AMM volunteers do not simply serve food in a communal style setting to make guests feel at home. Guests are also made to feel comfortable so that they can receive food, but also the word of God, a message that volunteers' strongly believe will give them hope to make substantive life changes. First and foremost, the AMM is a religious mission whose primary stated goal is to "serve the needy and make disciples of all people" (About Wheat Street 2011).

Ministers deliver a sermon to the first one hundred and fifty people in the door; hope is at the heart of their message. While many come early to just receive food, others bring their Bibles and respond to what the pastors are preaching. For example, during a sermon on April 11, 2010, Rev. Harvey* preached about having a vision and making a plan. He said that:

Every man was given a certain amount of talent...God does not like mess...God wants us to let our light shine...Be that which God would have you to be.

In a November 1, 2010 sermon, Rev. Barrow spoke from a book that he read about Martin Luther King Jr. He said that every man has a talent, and innateness, something from within. Both he and Rev. Harvey preached that God sees something in every person in the room. Aside from the pastor, other AMM volunteers believe that one of their jobs is to give people hope. Arlene says that:

Some of them just have gave up. And they need some attention and some encouragement. People to encourage them, so they can get up off the street and get back to the environment that they use to be in. By them coming here, it help a whole lot of them, to get up and have faith to get on up and do what they 'been doing.

She is serving food but also providing hope; for volunteers, the two are inextricably intertwined. Faith gives people something to believe in the face of what may seem like insurmountable obstacles.

Black religious spaces serve multiple purposes for the church and unchurched alike. The space of the AMM is unique because it is both separate from and connected to Wheat Street. At the AMM, there is a certain level of autonomy in how they run the program. They operate a mission that serves God, but also meets the needs of their “guests.” For volunteers, hope is a universal message that surpasses religious boundaries. Hope, coupled with meeting the immediate material needs of hunger, may help to make their message of change and progress more believable.

To further conceptualize what the actions of AMM volunteers tell us about volunteers’ vision for Auburn Avenue, it is helpful to return back to Martin’s (2003) analysis of place frames. Borrowing from Snow and Benford (1988:192), she says that “prognostic frames identify the actions that collective organizations take; the solutions that they propose to solve the problems that they have identified.” AMM volunteers are taking action to define the identity of the neighborhood. Through serving food and preaching faith, they hope that people

coming into be served will be able to make more substantial changes in their lives. The emergency food program is a short term response. Their true prognosis for Auburn Avenue is as a place that contains affordable housing for all.

Man Needs Shelter

Volunteer's actions within the church walls connect to their broader vision of affordable housing on Auburn Avenue. They cite the need for an increase in the quality and quantity of neighborhood housing. They all say that without people having a place to call home, it is literally impossible for them to improve their life conditions. Sister Winfrey* airs her frustrations below:

I can tell you what I'm seeing, and I don't think it's right. All the public houses, they're knocking it, they're taking it down...the ones back at Wheat Street, nothing was wrong with those apartments out there...and if you go up and down Auburn Avenue, it's condos.

Who can afford \$200,000, \$300,000 condos? It's not for you, it's not for me. So who it's for...Half of the buildings are empty.

She expresses her anger that what she deems to be perfectly adequate housing is being torn down. Because the affordable housing is being replaced by more expensive condominiums, the people who need it are displaced and many have become homeless.

The solution for volunteers is easy. Abandoned and vacant land should be replaced with more affordable housing that is geared towards the displaced low income residents on Auburn Avenue. Sister Williams* says that:

If I hit the lottery, I would build a big dormitory for women and a big dormitory for men and they have somewhere where they could say this is my own. I would build them something where they would have a place to lay their heads and they would have their own locks on their doors and they wouldn't have to worry about somebody stealing. I would give them a comfortable place to call home. Something to have for themselves. And I believe that would help them to want to do more for themselves. Having some kind of sense of ownership.

Other volunteers express the need for subsidized housing. Below, is Sister Sandra's* dream for Auburn Avenue which includes short term housing, where residents must agree to have jobs.

I would buy up this whole block. I would like to have a block of apartment buildings with 1, 2, and 3 bedrooms. I would like to put all those that are able and want to help themselves.... Put them in those apartments...And then the residents should know that we're going to let you stay here 6 months. You got to work. We're going to feed you, clothe you, and everything you need...They need help. If you don't have any place to help them, you don't have any room to criticize.

When Rev. Harvey* begins his sermons, he starts by telling everyone that they are somebody regardless of whether or not they have an address to call their

own. He strongly believes that they have just as much of a right to occupy space on Auburn Avenue as does any business or homeowner.

The need for more affordable housing is AMM volunteers' prognostic place frame, which might seem ironic, since their primary day to day activities are serving emergency food. In the AMM and at Wheat Street, food has always been one of the primary ways that they engage with the community. They use the food program to see outside the walls of the AMM developing a broader neighborhood vision. Volunteers also serve food, because with few resources, it is one of the few things that they can materially do for people. However, serving emergency food is not their ultimate solution. With additional economic resources, they would make the necessary strides to build more affordable housing.

My goal in this section was to illuminate the complexities of a black religious food program, its daily actions, and broader visions for the neighborhood. The AMM is a black counterpublic space, where volunteers through informal interactions, form opinions about the neighborhood. AMM volunteers are representative of the do it yourself mentality of many individuals and institutions in the black counterpublic. Through food and faith, they seek to encourage their guests, by attempting to provide the feeling of home; for many, the materiality of having a roof over their head does not exist. By engaging in everyday talk, volunteers surmise ways to transform their neighborhood. Despite the fact that some of their visions reach beyond their actual means, they work to instill hope and faith in themselves and their guests so that they can go out and

make real life changes. However, volunteers' understand the reality of the neighborhood outside of the walls of the food program, and stress that more affordable housing is absolutely necessary for residents to truly get out of their situations. Given adequate resources, they would make these material changes in the neighborhood.

CONCLUSION

Wheat Street's motto is of a church that is "God's mighty fortress on Auburn Avenue, where the doors swing back on welcome hinges" (Action Mission Ministry 2010). At the AMM, these doors open Wheat Street up to the neighborhood, and the community to Wheat Street. The relationship between the AMM and Auburn Avenue is not one-sided. AMM volunteers are attached to the neighborhood and rely on it for its identity. Their sense of topophilia, or love of place, withstands the changing and deteriorating conditions of the neighborhood (Tuan 1977). When Auburn Avenue was known as a street that was paved in gold, Wheat Street was feeding it. Its methods of doing so were merely different. I suspect that that AMM will continue serving emergency food as long as the need remains.

This study illuminates the place-making ability of black counterpublic spaces. Action is not confined to the walls of the AMM. Instead, volunteers are discursively recreating the entire community. They discuss causes of urban poverty, along with traditional and unconventional responses and solutions. Volunteers believe that both food and faith are needed to address urban poverty. Their responses and solutions should be contextualized within the historic and

current role that black churches play in black neighborhoods as spiritual and religious institutions, but also community centers for the church and unchurched alike.

The absence of a meaningful discussion of urban black churches in geographic literature robs these spaces of agency. They are a visible part of urban neighborhoods, but like many black counterpublic spaces, continue to operate away from the gaze of white society. What these churches do is often not mentioned, understated, and misunderstood. I focus on the place-making ability of volunteers in a black urban church's emergency food program. They are not only engaging in everyday talk in this space; they seek to affect change on a neighborhood-wide level.

During late 2010, it was announced that Wheat Street leased four acres of the church's landholdings to Truly Living Well Center for Urban Agriculture. Auburn Avenue will soon get its first organic urban farm. When interviewed about the new garden, Wheat Street's current pastor says that "Wheat Street has a historic tradition of being a part of feeding people" (New Urban Farm in Old Fourth Ward 2010). Rashid Nuri, the founder of Truly Living Well notes that "food is a foundation of community life." Wheat Street Gardens is being built on what used to be Section 8 housing, demolished in 2008, and also named Wheat Street Gardens.

This new development represents the complexities in understanding how the AMM's vision lines up with their goals. To be fair, Wheat Street and not the AMM leased the land. Moreover, in a community practically devoid of grocery

stores and fresh produce, few would dismiss the need for a community garden. However, the garden is being built on what used to be publicly subsidized housing, and I would argue its existence might lead to this land being a contested space. According to Schmelzkopf, those who seek to build urban gardens might face resistance from other interest groups including those who believe that “low income housing has first priority” (Schmelzkopf 1995: 378). It is impossible to predict the future, but this garden is potentially (if not already) a contested space, creating a series of conflicts between the church and the community, the church and the AMM or a host of other groups with different visions for the land. Only time will tell.

Future research with the AMM is rich, due to the wealth of information and research threads that arose during data collection. I intend to interrogate even more how the AMM’s ideological message lines up with their neighborhood vision, and whether or not a “do it yourself” type of mentality places an unreasonable amount of pressure on the AMM to perform a service that the government should be performing. I will further investigate how individuals in the community respond to the AMM’s visible engagement with the poor. Also, how well does the AMM’s vision align itself with the vision of Wheat Street’s leaders, and is Wheat Street as engaged in the community as it has been in the past? Finally, I intend to engage with the newly built urban garden that I detail above. My current and future research with the AMM and Wheat Street reflects an understanding of the many responses to declining community conditions.

More importantly, this research reveals a nuanced connection between race, place, religion, and food.

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CHAPTER 3

**RETURNING HOME TO OUR RIGHTFUL PLACE: THE NATION
OF ISLAM AND MUHAMMAD FARMS¹²**

¹² McCutcheon, P. Submitted to *Geoforum*, 6/16//2011

ABSTRACT

In this chapter, I analyze the connection between rhetoric, rural land and blackness through examining the Nation of Islam's work at Muhammad Farms. The Nation of Islam owns approximately fifteen hundred acres of land in southern Georgia in hopes of serving as a catalyst to build a system of black-owned farms that will feed the 40 million black people in America. In this paper, I utilized both archival and textual research to understand the context of their rhetoric around Muhammad Farms and how this fits into their organizational goals. I found that the Nation of Islam is employing a rhetoric that connects rural land to blackness. They highlight the tragedy for black people - slavery and sharecropping - , but also triumph - black landownership that is associated with rural land.

INDEX WORDS: Black nationalism, community nationalism, rural land, landownership, slavery, sharecropping, Nation of Islam, Muhammad Farms

The only revolution based on loving your enemy is the Negro revolution. That's no revolution. Revolution is based on land. Land is the basis of all independence. Land is the basis of freedom, justice, and equality.

(Malcolm X 1965: 4)

INTRODUCTION

The Nation of Islam (NOI) has been dedicated to land acquisition and to addressing hunger and unhealthy eating habits since its founding in 1931. This dedication became even more obvious when Minister Louis Farrakhan, the current leader of the NOI, announced his recommitment in 1991 to the “3Year Economic Savings Program” (2005). The trademark of the program was the purchase of farmland in Bronwood, Georgia, a place originally chosen not solely due to land availability, but because the NOI preaches that southern rural land is a part of the homeland for black people¹³. Purchasing the land on which to establish Muhammad Farms further allows the NOI to renew its commitment to food production. They dream that Muhammad Farms will be a catalyst through which to develop a system of black owned farms that will feed all 40 million black people in the United States (3 Year Economic Savings Program 2005). Food security is seen by the NOI as not only a means to alleviate hunger but also as a

¹³ For the remainder of the paper, I use the term black or black American (in a few instances). I do so, through the understanding that race is a social construction. The NOI does not distinguish between black and black American. It believes that its message applies to blacks throughout the Diaspora. However, the NOI was founded as a response to the conditions that black Americans were facing and much of its message is geared towards black Americans.

way to build self-determination, unity, and ultimately a self-sustaining black community (Farrakhan 2005).

The purpose of this article is to examine how the NOI, often characterized as a radical and fringe organization, promotes black nationalism to the black community through food production and by encouraging land acquisition by black people. I explore the ways in which the NOI uses rural land to attempt to unify black people, particularly black Americans, around a common memory, but also around common goals for the future. Examining the NOI's claiming of southern rural land as black land through their work at Muhammad Farms not only moves the study of black identity outside of urban communities, it adds to geographic literature that seeks to challenge the notion of rural land as white space.

In order to understand how and why the NOI is attempting to spread their message, I contextualize it as a black nationalist organization operating within the black counterpublic. The black counterpublic is a term used to broadly describe real and virtual spaces where black people come together for "personal, professional, or frivolous reasons" (Harris-Lacewell 2004: 4). These spaces may include black churches, barbershops, beauty salons, magazines, and internet blogs (Harris-Lacewell 2004; Dawson 2001; Fraser 1994). In these spaces and often embedded in seemingly casual conversations, a diversity of black people discuss, debate and devise strategies to address matters of concern to the black community. This paper is grounded in the understanding that there is one black counterpublic, internally heterogeneous, but sharing the commonality that race continues to be a significant factor in the lives of blacks. The black counterpublic

is an identity-making space defined by identifiable and overlapping black political ideologies, one of which is black nationalism.

The NOI is among the more well-known black nationalist organizations in the United States (Ogbar 2004; Squires 2002; Dawson 2001; Esseini-Udom 1962). Black nationalists isolate race as the key factor affecting the life experiences of blacks, and are weary that America will ever live up to its promises of racial equality (Harris-Lacewell 2004; Ogbar 2004; Dawson 2001). Scholars identify multiple strands of black nationalism, including cultural nationalism, economic nationalism, revolutionary nationalism, separatist nationalism, and community nationalism (Brown and Shaw 2002; Dawson 2001; Esseini Udom 1962). As I will discuss in greater detail in the following pages, the NOI can be characterized as espousing community nationalism in their work at Muhammad Farms. The impact of black nationalist groups like the NOI on other black political ideologies is often unknown and underappreciated (Ogbar 2004; Dawson 2001); consideration of whether or not members of the broader black counterpublic understand or embrace the separatist goals of the NOI is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, I focus on the ways in which the NOI reaches out to blacks throughout the black counterpublic through the promulgation of black rural land, in which they espouse community nationalist ideas.

Significantly, scholarship on rural land routinely excludes the non-white 'other' (Agyeman 1998; Cloke and Little 1997). Indeed, representations of rurality and rural life are replete with...devices of exclusion and marginalization by which mainstream 'self' serves to

‘other’ the positioning of all kinds of people in the socio-spatial relations of different countrysides (Cloke and Little 1997:1).

As a result, the experiences of people of color in rural landscapes have been woefully understudied. The connection between rural institutions, like slavery, and the present day experiences of blacks on rural land has received little attention (Snipp 1996). Agyeman and Spooner (1997: 211) remind us that the “geography of people of colour is not purely an urban phenomenon,” and argue the connection between race and rural land deserves careful analysis. They challenge the notion that the rural landscape is the space of white middle class men, and instead assert that rurality is socially constructed. This paper heeds their call to investigate the socially constructed relationships of non-whites, e.g. blacks, to rural land. Through the NOI’s rhetoric¹⁴ in which they connect rural land to blackness, they create what Tyner (2006: 76) calls “scenes of oppression” that black people throughout the black counterpublic may relate to.

The NOI believes in a fundamental link between black identity and rural land. They complicate understandings of what rural land means in the context of blackness, by contrasting the violence associated with rural land - slavery, racist sharecropping practices, and land loss with triumph - historical black land ownership and the NOI’s present ability to feed black people. I argue here that Muhammad Farms is a tangible example of the NOI’s commitment to community

¹⁴ In using the term rhetoric, I am not implying that the NOI’s words are empty, without substance or evidence. They provide evidence to back up their claims. However, NOI leaders are most known for their ability to draw in large groups of people through the way that they use words in both writings and speeches.

(black) nationalism. The paper is divided into four sections. First, I present the NOI's vision for Muhammad Farms and the history of the NOI. Second, the theoretical framework for this study contextualizes the NOI's discourse of black land ownership within the black counterpublic. Following a brief articulation of methodology, I offer an analysis of the NOI's work in relation to Muhammad Farms: in order to move one step closer to feeding 40 million black people, the NOI works through Muhammad Farms to evoke a tragic yet triumphant memory of rural land for blacks, and uses a range of strategies working alongside non-NOI blacks toward what they believe should be universal black goals of owning land and growing safe and healthy food.

FEEDING 40 MILLION BLACK PEOPLE

The Nation of Islam was founded in Detroit, Michigan. Master Fard Muhammad travelled from house to house preaching to blacks that Islam was their true religion, lost during the Trans-Atlantic slave trade (Ogbar 2004; Robinson 2001; Gardell 1996). Membership grew drastically under Elijah Muhammad (E. Muhammad), who was committed to building a black nation. E. Muhammad also appointed the NOI's most well-known minister, Malcolm X. In 1964, X parted ways with the NOI to practice orthodox Islam after making a pilgrimage to Mecca and also hearing about E. Muhammad's personal indiscretions. The NOI's current leader, Louis Farrakhan, was appointed National Representative in 1975. He organized the 1995 Million Man March, drawing over two million black men to the capital in Washington DC.

The NOI's belief system includes principles that contribute to purity and self-improvement for all black people (Curtis 2006). While the NOI's message is geared towards all blacks, they assert that the majority of blacks have not evolved to accept the NOI's insistence on black separation from whites. Instead, most blacks are bamboozled by the idealistic outcomes promised along with integration. The NOI has historically distanced themselves from black Christians and others who promote nonviolent resistance and integration. Popular black leaders like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. were openly called "Uncle Tom Negroes," a derogatory term sometimes used by blacks to describe black people who behave as though they are subordinate to white people. Above all else, blacks are encouraged by the NOI to create their own nation free from white control (Gardell 2006). One method of doing so is to purchase land for food production and economic development.

Muhammad Farms

Minister Louis Farrakhan purchased Muhammad Farms in 1991 as a part of a revitalization of the NOI's ongoing "3 Year Economic Savings Program," begun by E. Muhammad in 1964. Farrakhan indicates that:

Our major goal is to develop a sustainable agriculture system that would provide at least one meal per day, according to the teachings of the Most Honorable Elijah Muhammad, for the 40 million black people in America. Also, this system should provide the necessary raw materials for the production, clothing, and housing for the 40 million or more black people in America. This requires the

attainment, proper utilization, and conservation of the land. (Goals of MuhammadFarms.com 1)

NOI leaders are aware that this cannot all be done on a 1556-acre tract of land. Instead, they envision a system of black-owned farms that includes 51 million acres of land. Ideally, all production should be organic. To achieve this goal, the NOI needs more farm workers than they presently have at Muhammad Farms. (Goals of MuhammadFarms.com 1).

Muhammad Farms is located in Bronwood, GA. a predominantly black town in Terrell County. In 2009, Terrell County's population was 10,320 people, of whom 60% were black, 38% were white, and 1.5% were Latino. The median household income is \$27,000, just over half that of the state as a whole (\$51,000) (American Community Survey 2005-2009). Of some interest here, the number of black farmers in Terrell County is in no way proportionate to the black population. According to the USDA's National Agricultural Statistics Service (2000), there are 274 farm operations in Terrell County. Out of these, 263 are white-owned and 11 are black-owned.

The NOI grows a range of crops on Muhammad Farms. Fruits and vegetable crops include corn, watermelon, eggplant, cantaloupe, cabbage, broccoli, okra, potatoes, hot pepper, and spinach. Legumes include navy beans, lentils, black beans, and grains include both wheat and brown rice. (R.

Muhammad 2010). Crops grown on the farm are a part of their goal to provide one healthy meal a day for all black people living in the United States.¹⁵

The Muhammad Farms website suggests that the majority of their produce is shipped to mosques in major cities including Atlanta, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Nashville, New York City, Newark, Richmond, and Washington DC. They also encourage NOI members and non-members to form buying clubs so that they can distribute their produce in bulk (Moving Melons and Produce). While there is no evidence on the website that they distribute food within Terrell County, this is not that surprising since the majority of their distribution is currently to NOI centers such as mosques in major cities.

In sustained outreach both to and beyond the NOI membership, Muhammad Farms hosts black visitors from NOI mosques across the country along with other non- NOI groups who come and tour the farm to get a sense of farm operations. In recent years, visitors have come from NOI mosques and study groups in Albany, Augusta, Birmingham, Chattanooga, Chicago, Cincinnati, Macon, Nashville, and New York. School groups from Culture Arms Us and Black Stone Academy in Atlanta, GA have also visited (Visitors at Muhammad Farms 2005).

Dr. Ridgley Muhammad (R. Muhammad), the NOI's Minister of Agriculture, is committed to providing resources through the websites of the Minister of Agriculture and Muhammad Farms. On the Ministry of Agriculture website, he lists black NOI members across the nation with expertise in a variety of areas

¹⁵ At present time, the NOI does not grow everything needed to fulfill their goals. For example, there is no indication that they grow cotton, necessary to meeting their goals of clothing black people.

that include: farming and gardening, buying club, cooperative corporations, credit union/banking, news, communications, food processing, legal, milk and dairy, special events, commodities, transportation and logistics, and harvest. The Muhammad Farms website includes information on how to set up food cooperatives and syllabi for teaching food sources. The NOI also uses these websites to publish a weekly newsletter on food and agricultural issues written by R. Muhammad and other Muhammad Farms workers (Nation of Islam Minister of Agriculture Website).

Farming serves multiple purposes for the NOI, which believes that “the farm is the engine of our national life,” and is one step toward providing independence for black people without government assistance (R. Muhammad 2005). In the NOI’s opinion, the ability to use land to grow food, along with building black institutions to support the black community, is the root of all wealth. They preach that for black people, “real value rests in land, seeds, and clay, and trees” (R. Muhammad 2005). The NOI works to ensure that farms are producing food for black people, and discourages all current black farmers from renting their land.

The NOI’s vision for Muhammad Farms is both straightforward and complex. Ideally, they want to use the land to begin to provide safe food, housing, and clothes, and eventually create and sustain a system of farms that will provide the above for all black people in the United States. The NOI also hopes that the land will be used to return blacks back to their African culture and

roots. Muhammad Farms cannot do all of this alone, and serves instead as a catalyst to create a system of black farmers and black-owned land.

While the NOI's goal of feeding 40 million black people may seem lofty, it is grounded in the NOI's history as a black nationalist organization committed to serving black people both inside and outside the organization. Moreover, Muhammad Farms is a symbol of what can be done if blacks are to pool their resources. In an effort to rally blacks behind their message, the NOI promotes community in both rhetoric and action. Community is a theme that weaves itself throughout the black counterpublic, through blacks collectively feeding and building economic institutions to support one another. While the NOI's efforts to build black institutions around Muhammad Farms and to work with non-NOI members to do so may seem antithetical to its historically separatist stance, situating the NOI within the full diversity of the black counterpublic lends valuable insight into why and how the NOI is attempting to reach blacks among a diversity of political ideologies.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Black Counterpublic

To understand the black counterpublic we must first reflect on scholarship on the public sphere. Jürgen Habermas' (1989) theory of the public sphere stems from his early work titled the *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. In it, he describes the public sphere as "a realm of freedom and permanence" (Habermas 1989, 4) in which public norms and discourse become available to all. The public sphere occurs when groups of private citizens come

together to discuss matters of concern to society. Habermas argues that while the earliest public sphere was comprised of only a small sector of European society, the sphere expanded to include different groups as society expanded.

Critics of Habermas' formulation respond that the expansion considered by Habermas never reached far enough to include women and minorities (Squires 2002; Fraser 1994). Experiences of exclusion from the Habermasian public sphere must be understood through the proliferation of subaltern counterpublics, spaces within and from which to spread discourse that may be "in opposition to those of the dominant public" (Maguire and Mohtar 1994, 240). The black counterpublic is an example of one such subaltern counterpublic.

The black counterpublic was prefigured by W.E.B. Dubois' (1903) characterization of America as a divided nation and of blacks and whites as separate nations. Dubois' seminal formulation is a conceptually useful introduction to the black counterpublic, which is defined by The Black Public Sphere Collective as

a sphere of critical practice and visionary politics, in which intellectuals can join with the energies of the street, the school, the church, and the city to constitute a challenge to the exclusionary violence of much public space in the United States (Black Public Sphere Collective 1995, 3).

Within the black counterpublic, blackness is an asset used to define blacks' own beliefs and set of rules about society. Members of the black counterpublic ask and answer a multitude of questions including "[what is] the position of blacks in

society, who to form coalitions with, and [whether] separation is beneficial to black achievement” (Dawson 2001).

The questions listed above are sometimes asked and answered through black media spaces, which publicize topics that are presumably of interest to other black people. They serve as an important element of a black counterpublic and include television stations/shows, newspapers, magazines, novels, and increasingly the internet (Harris-Lacewell 2004). According to Harris-Lacewell (2004:10), the “black media maintains an African American readership...by carving out a role as a racial institution.”

Harris-Lacewell (2004) draws on Dawson’s (2001) typology, identifying four overlapping black ideologies that operate within the contemporary black counterpublic: black Liberal Integrationism, black Conservatism, black Feminism, and black Nationalism. Black liberal integrationists desire the same privileges afforded to other groups in society, and believe that changing and petitioning the government is the method for doing so. Black conservatives do not believe that blacks should receive undue benefits due to racial oppression, though they acknowledge the historical impact of racism. Black feminists highlight the intersection between race and gender, stressing that the experiences of black women are unique. Finally, black nationalists privilege race as the most important factor affecting the daily life experiences of blacks (Harris-Lacewell 2004; Dawson 2001).

Black political ideologies are not always mutually exclusive. While different black political ideologies offer particular responses to racial oppression,

they also share overlapping principles. Moreover, it is possible for a person to harbor more than one black political ideological tradition. Harris-Lacewell (2004: 21) finds that black “individuals...make use of these ideological traditions by sampling from the menu of available belief patterns.” Following this reasoning, it then becomes quite possible for a person who follows tenets of black nationalism to occasionally espouse black conservative viewpoints. The unifying factor among them all is the belief that “blackness,” historically and/or contemporarily, has meaning.

Significantly, diversity among black people and black ideologies co-exists with an emphasis on community throughout the black counterpublic. Individual achievements and struggles are viewed as dialectically related to community achievements and struggles. Blacks are inclined and encouraged to adopt positions that are seen as favorable to the majority of black people. Leaders who do not do so can be labeled traitors to the race.

Community is also emphasized as well in understandings of private property. While property is understood as offering a form of freedom, the individual freedom that it offers blacks is tied in the minds of many to the achievement of blacks as a whole. Property ownership for blacks has always been racialized, and blacks experienced property losses and gains collectively. Following slavery, black Americans’ attempt to obtain land and form free communities was challenged by the U.S. government, often using violent methods. Black farmers lost their land in record numbers disproportionate to whites (Wood and Gilbert 2000). The NOI believes that blacks should

emphasize community, by obtaining property to create a system of black-owned farms to feed all black people.

Understanding the tremendous complexity of the black counterpublic is necessary to contextualize the day to day operations and overall goals of the NOI's rhetoric ¹⁶and programs around food and health. The NOI actively positions itself as a black nationalist organization within the black counterpublic. They are attempting to grow food as one step towards feeding 40 million black people. Whether or not they ever feed all black people in the United States, they are rhetorically feeding blacks a unified vision of black landownership and food production. That vision is grounded in multiple strands of black nationalism.

Black Nationalism

Black Nationalism “has been a resilient and enduring element of African-American Politics” (Brown and Shaw 2002: 22), and according to Dawson (2001), it has had the largest role among black political ideologies in influencing black public opinion. While scholars characterize black nationalism in slightly different terms, (Ogbar 2004; Dawson 2001; Brown and Shaw 2002; Esseim-Udom 1962), Dawson (2001:86) broadly defines black nationalist ideology as

based on the contention that understanding the plight of blacks and achieving black salvation must be based on taking race and racial oppression as the central feature of modern world history.

¹⁶ In using the term rhetoric, I am not implying that the NOI's words are empty, without substance or evidence. They provide evidence to back up their claims. However, NOI leads are most known for their ability to draw in large groups of people through the way that they use words in both writings and speeches.

Dawson further identifies multiple strands of black nationalist thought: cultural nationalism, revolutionary nationalism, and community nationalism, several of which can be discerned in the stances of the Nation of Islam.

Cultural nationalism emphasizes individual black liberation first before blacks as a community can be liberated. Cultural nationalists believe that self-hate and ignorance about black history are two of the primary reasons that blacks are unable to progress. Minister Farrakhan, the current leader of the NOI, is considered a cultural nationalist; he not only emphasizes blackness as more important than class or gender, he also preaches that blacks can only progress if they unify and adopt a conservative way of life (Dawson 2001).

Revolutionary nationalists draw their inspiration from Malcolm X and the Black Panther Party. They are often labeled communists who believe that blacks should be the leaders of a revolution that should center on the fight for economic equality. “Self-determination and the liberation of blacks is the primary goal” (Dawson 2001, 112) of revolutionary nationalists. Similar to community nationalist, they aim to build black-owned and -run organizations.

Community nationalism is grounded in the quest for “self-determination, black control of political and economic institutions in the black community, and the building of autonomous black organizations” (Dawson 200: 101). Community nationalism has a long history among blacks in the United States. Brown and Shaw (2002: 26) note that “since the 1830s, black leaders have convened various national black political assemblies to chart the future course of ‘the race’ free from white interferences”. In recent times, these include most notably the

1995 Million Man March and the National Urban League's annual State of Black America conference and report. Many of these conferences and groups preach self-reliance, a concept that has been central to black political thought since the founding days of many black civic organizations and churches.

It should be noted that community nationalism "rejects separatism and withdrawal from the state" (Dawson 2001, 101). While the NOI's work reflects elements of cultural and revolutionary nationalism, I suggest here that what Dawson refers to as community nationalism is more central to the NOI's work on Muhammad farms than the other strands of black nationalism. This may seem counterintuitive, given the NOI's historical position with respect to forming a separate black nation.

Though the NOI's end goal remains the formation of an autonomous black nation, the portions of their message that seem to garner support from blacks outside of the organization emphasize community nationalism and community autonomy in the form of black-owned businesses and black-run organizations and institutions. The NOI recognizes that while community nationalism has strong support among blacks, the belief that blacks should form their own nation within a nation or an entirely separate geographic nation is less well-received across the black counterpublic (Dawson 2001). The NOI seems aware of the parts of their message that have the broadest appeal, emphasizing these in their preaching and programmatic outreach.

The black counterpublic, then, is constituted both from commonalities based in part on a shared history, and from heterogeneous perspectives and

ideologies. The diverse political ideologies that make up the black counterpublic are grounded in the experiences of blacks in a racialized landscape, and share an emphasis on fostering community through thought, action, and property.

Black Nationalism and Land

For black nationalist organizations, the desire to control, create, and reclaim black land is a crucial component of their ideology. Some proponents of black nationalism not only profess that a separate black nation is needed for blacks to progress, but also that black nationalist ideology is inextricably tied to and reproduced on the land. Some advocate a return back to Africa that might include a literal return or an “imaginative return” (Tyner 2006, 125). Others believe that blacks constitute a nation within a nation (Dawson 2001; Kelley 1996), and that one location for a nation might be the rural southern portion of the United States.

Rural southern land has a sordid history among blacks, especially black Americans, that includes enslavement, limited land ownership after slavery, and drastic decreases in land ownership following Reconstruction (Bandeale 2007; Smith 2007; Ficara 2006; Wood and Gilbert 2000). Dawson (2001, 96) describes the “bitterness of blacks over their inability to protect their land, property, and families.” Black rural land loss is partially attributed to the Great Migration. Between 1916 and 1930, blacks relocated from the rural south to urban cities in record numbers. Blacks who did not sell their land along with those who stayed in the rural South struggled to maintain their landholdings.

In this article, I argue that rural land rhetoric is used by the NOI to appeal to blacks with varying political ideologies. In *The Geography of Malcolm X*, Tyner (2006) argues that while woefully understudied, geography is central to Malcolm X's rhetoric; X utilized space to create a connection to blacks in the United States and throughout the Diaspora. Tyner notes that in a 1964 speech, Malcolm X:

constructed composite landscapes, scenes of oppression and exploitation that his African-American listeners would understand. And it was through this process that Malcolm X was able to rail against social injustice, and it was through this 'geo-graphing' that Malcolm X assumed the role of the jeremiad (Tyner 2006, 77).

I use Tyner's (2006) understanding of the connection between race, space, and rhetoric in my analysis of the NOI's work. They are constructing a "composite landscape" (Tyner 2006, 77) through presenting the tragedy and triumph of rural land. The NOI recognizes the reality and narrative of landloss, using it to unite black people around a common cause. They present this reality as a shared grievance that all blacks should have, urging them to buy land, grow food, and build economic institutions to begin to uplift the black community.

METHODS

I utilize archival and textual research in this project. Archival research provides an opportunity to engage with past documents and to contextualize my findings (Harris 2001). Key texts authored by leaders of the NOI included *Message to the Black Man in America* and *How to Eat How to Live* by Elijah

Muhammad. Online information published by the NOI was invaluable, and I drew heavily on materials published on the websites of the NOI (www.noi.org) and Muhammad Farms (www.muhammadfarms.com). Both sites include archived speeches by Minister Elijah Muhammad and by Louis Farrakhan; the sites are updated on a daily basis and include open letters written by leaders and members of the NOI along with a host of articles for their newsletter. The materials published on these websites are crucial to my understanding of the NOI's rhetoric because they speak for themselves, revealing their motivations behind the work that they do.

I utilize critical discourse analysis to analyze data. This was done to understand the cultural context underlying statements and the societal realities that these statements construct (Waitt 1997; Foucault 1972). The analytical process was ongoing, reflexive, and rich due to my continued engagement with up-to-date information on the NOI's websites.

For the analytical process to be truly reflexive, a continuous examination of my positionality, in relation to my proposed research participants, proved to be central to the research process (Robinson 1994). Though difficult to initiate contact, I was eventually able to speak with leaders at Muhammad Farms and a farm worker. All persons that I spoke to seemed interested in the proposed project that was intended to investigate the intersection of food, race, religion, and place in the work of Muhammad Farms. I proposed to conduct research through their internship program, but was told that it was no longer in operation. Also at that time, they did not have accommodations for women to work on the

farm. They initially agreed for me to visit Muhammad Farms, but I was unable to make contact to set up a firm date.

I cannot speak with certainty about the reasons that I was unable to conduct interviews and engage in participant observation. I do recognize that my identity as a black woman, who is not a member of the NOI and who is affiliated with a major predominantly white research university, may have influenced their perception of me. Justifiably, the NOI is a closed organization that has contended with government informants and wiretaps throughout its history (Gardell 1996). My intent is to be as forthcoming as possible; answering questions about who I am and my motives for conducting this research. Though it is possible that I could have visited the farm without revealing my true intentions, I respect the organization's right to say yes or no to my research. Fortunately, the NOI has not closed the door, and I remain committed to interviewing members and conducting participant observation in the future.

ANALYSIS

The NOI attempts to spread their message about rural land and its possibilities throughout the black counterpublic, by encouraging black people to think and act as a community. In this section, I demonstrate the various channels through which they engage blacks both inside of and outside of their religious sect, including a personal encounter. I then consider the content of their message, in which the NOI weaves together a triumphant and tragic past of rural land, vivid in the black American imagination, and uses Muhammad Farms as a tangible example of the possibilities for prosperity among black people.

Spreading the Word to the Black Community

The NOI understands the importance of black media spaces, utilizing existing ones and establishing their own to spread their message. Their target audience is not only like-minded black people. Instead, they aim to reach out to a diversity of black people who possess a range of ideological perspectives.

The NOI utilizes a variety of black information networks to spread the word about Muhammad Farms and the possibilities for progress if blacks were to collectively increase their land holdings. Black information networks are in part comprised of “schemas, such as the rule that news from the grapevine is more reliable than information from outside the community” Dawson (2001, 69). The NOI is attempting to ensure that they are an active part of the “grapevine” by emphasizing blackness as a unifying factor. They use their traditional media spaces like their newspaper, the *Final Call*, but are increasingly relying on the internet to spread much of their message.

The NOI uses the internet, for example to broaden support for Muhammad farms and for black farmers more generally. The Muhammad Farms’ website links to individual black farmers by state, their contact information, and the produce that they are selling.¹⁷ The majority of farmers identified in this way are non-NOI members, as indicated by the absence of the use of Sis., Bro., or Min. before their names. The Muhammad farms website also links to black farmers’ organizations, directing readers to seek help in establishing a food cooperative, for example, from the Federation of Southern Cooperatives, one of the largest

¹⁷ I do not assume that they have coalitions with individual black farmers or organizations on their website, and would have to interview representatives of these organizations to capture their opinions of the NOI.

organizations committed to increasing black landownership (Federation of Southern Cooperatives Land Assistance Fund 2010).

The public support of black farmers perhaps more formalized in the buying clubs which the NOI operates in Kansas City Kansas, Huntsville AL, Sandersville GA, Tulsa Oklahoma, Birmingham AL, Tuscaloosa AL, and Cincinnati OH. Buying clubs enable the affordable purchase of organically grown fresh vegetables and wheat flour every month. Some of these buying clubs urge members to join in order to support both Muhammad farms and local black farmers who are not members of the NOI (R. Muhammad 2011).

The NOI's willingness to support the activities of non NOI black farmers and activists is non-trivial. It signals to blacks outside of the organization that "we are in this together." Despite ideological differences, increasing black owned land and providing safe and healthy food to black people is something that the NOI believes a diversity of blacks can rally around. The NOI's insistence on engaging blacks who may not agree with their ideological stance in its entirety is not just limited to acknowledging them in publications. The NOI values one-on-one interaction with non-NOI members in spaces dedicated to discussing black land loss and unhealthy eating habits.

Some such interactions take place at conferences and meetings. In 2010, the Minister of Agriculture attended a meeting with a network of Black Farmers and Advocates to discuss black land loss, particularly the Pigford vs. Glickman settlement that was still pending at that time. A 2009 meeting of this network enabled interactions between the NOI and groups such as the Mississippi Family

Farmer's Association and the Land Loss Prevention Project, among others (Network of Black Farmer Organizations and Advocates 2009). The NOI also reaches out beyond its membership when hosting its Founder's Day Conference and Minister of Agriculture Conference in Bronwood where they offer tours of Muhammad Farms, workshops on farming and black landownership, and opportunities to taste food grown on the farms (9th Annual Founders Day Celebration 2010; Minister of Agriculture Conference 2007).

A personal experience with an NOI farmer exemplifies members' willingness to engage in conversation with black non-NOI persons. At a large sustainable agriculture conference, I happened to sit by an NOI farmer at a black farmer's dinner. We conversed at length about the importance of safe and healthy food, land acquisition, and what it means to be black generally. We spoke about my research on black religious food programs. Our debate about gender was lively; his beliefs about gender roles are connected to health, uplifting the black family, and ultimately the black community. Though his views on gender were different from my own, he listened to my opinions remarking that they gave him something to think about. We spoke at length about religion; after inquiring about my religious beliefs, he did not lecture that Christianity is the white man's religion, a belief heavily espoused in NOI rhetoric. He spoke fondly about the black church in which he grew up in and which he still visits on occasion. Based on my knowledge of the NOI, this conversation was remarkable in that his willingness to engage with me was not confounded by my appearance, religious background, or views on gender roles.

The above conversation represents everyday talk in action. According to Harris-Lacewell (2004, 12), the theory of everyday talk in the black counterpublic “posits that although none of the individuals engaging in the conversation will be instantly convinced by the arguments of others, all will be affected by their participation in this conversation.” My conversation with the NOI member was not planned. Instead, it was a casual conversation, indicative of what occurs in the black counterpublic. Portions of the conversation were heated, and I am convinced that neither of us parted ways entirely convinced by each other’s stances. I cannot speak for him, but my personal take away message was that commonalities based on blackness and the importance of land and food took precedence over our many other differences.

Remembering a Triumphant and Tragic Past

In both formal and informal settings, the NOI works to present a collective and unified black history, within which black identity is deeply connected to the land. They emphasize common experiences derived from a shared history of slavery. The NOI tells a story that is retold through black oral and written histories, and also by scholars studying rural black life and black land loss. The NOI remembers two important aspects of the past to help create a collective and communal black identity. First, they are remembering triumph, including the forty-five years after slavery when black landholdings were at their highest. Through doing so, they give blacks hope and a reason to want to return to rural land. Second, the NOI is remembering tragedy, mainly the vast numbers of blacks who lost their land following this triumphant time period. By remembering a collective

tragedy of black land loss, the NOI invokes a shared grievance intended to foster a sense of unity among blacks. The tragic and the triumphant together serve as a call to action, using Muhammad Farms as an example, to increase black land ownership.

During the triumphant period of black landownership in the southern Black Belt¹⁸, blacks owned individual farms and were also part of larger resettlement projects where they were able to farm, attend school, and sometimes attend church in a communal setting (Hargrove and Zabawa 2007). Pennick et.al (2007) finds that land ownership is at its highest in 1910, when blacks possessed over 15 million acres of land.¹⁹ According to R. Muhammad, in Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, and Mississippi blacks owned between 40% and 50% of all farms, during the 45 years after slavery, though it is unclear how large these farms were (R. Muhammad 2004).

Leaders of the NOI draw lessons from the 45 years following slavery about the power of black landholdings to contribute to black prosperity. They seek to demonstrate that not only did owning rural land increase black land ownership, it improved other areas of black life and black identity formation. Black rural landownership allowed blacks to accumulate enough capital to own other types of businesses that sustained black life (R. Muhammad 2005). More

¹⁸ Though the term Black Belt was once used to describe the dark soil of the region, the Black Belt eventually came to describe a region of counties, over 50% black that spanned several southern states.

¹⁹ The NOI does not give the source and exact dates for these landownership statistics. For example, Hargrove and Zabawa (2007) find that while many blacks worked the land after slavery, few were actually landowners. However, both agree that land ownership diminished drastically over the years.

broadly, according to the NOI, black land ownership proved to blacks that they had the intelligence to not only own land, but prosper from it.

The NOI also connects past triumph to hopes for a glorious future. In the most recent interview by the Minister of Agriculture with Spot TV, he speaks about the Reverse Underground Railroad, an NOI sponsored effort. He encourages black retirees to sell their property up north and buy cheaper land down south. He also states that during the upcoming Muhammad Farms Founder's Day, the NOI will host a tour of property in Terrell County to give blacks ideas of what they can get for their money if they simply move back to the predominantly black counties in the rural south. R. Muhammad argues in the interview that while many blacks are moving down south to cities like Atlanta and Birmingham, the true chance at prosperity is in small predominantly black rural counties (R. Muhammad 2011).

While the NOI emphasizes a triumphant past and future for blacks on rural land, they simultaneously recall a tragic past that influences blacks' present perception of rural land. In a speech given by the Black Farmers and Agriculturalist Association, and published on the Muhammad Farms website, Gary Grant asserts that the 1900 U.S. Census began a reign of terror enacted by whites towards blacks (Grant 2006), noting that "[t]he fear and jealousy of white America rose up to take away the gains acquired by Blacks working hard and using their rights to buy and own property" (Grant 2006, 3). Whites became aware of the large landholdings that blacks had amassed and began to systematically disenfranchise them. Between 1920 and 1992, the number of

black farmers declined by 98%, a statistic supported by scholars Wood and Gilbert (2000).²⁰

Black land loss can be attributed to individual acts of violence against black landowners along with systematic actions taken by the U.S. government. R. Muhammad (2011) speaks about these actions in the article “Planned Demise of Black Farmers by the U.S. government”. He asserts that lynching by whites is one of the many ways that blacks were taken from the land. These individual acts occurred alongside more systematic changes in agricultural equipment and technologies that disproportionately affected black laborers and land owners. Technologies include the development of pesticides and synthetic fertilizers. Many black landowners who attempted to adapt to technological changes, were unable to receive public and private loans due to discriminatory practices, a claim that is in part substantiated by the U.S. government in the Pigford vs. Glickman settlement.

Pigford vs. Glickman is a part of H.R. 4783, a bill designed to compensate black American and Native American farmers for years of discrimination by the U.S. government. In 1997, Timothy Pigford filed a lawsuit against Dan Glickman, the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture. Eventually, all black farmers who filed discrimination claims against USDA between 1983 and 1997 were included in this class action suit. While some black farmers received a settlement of \$50,000 in 1999, many were unaware of the suit and did not file their claims in time. USDA reopened the case and allowed the farmers to file under Pigford II.

²⁰ The number of white farmers has also declined, though the decline is not nearly as drastic. According to Wood and Gilbert (2000), while the percentage of black farmers declined by 98% from 1920-1997, the percentage of white farmers declined by 66%.

In 2010 after years of protest, current Secretary of Agriculture Vilsak and Attorney General Holder agreed on a \$1.25 billion settlement of the late claims. All in all, approximately 23,000 farmers filed claims, and approximately 13,500 were approved to receive settlements of \$50,000.²¹ In addition, a hold was put on property foreclosures for claimants whose files were under review (Cowen and Feder: 2010; Jefferson 2010). While the money is directed towards black farmers, it is the largest monetary settlement that blacks have historically received from the U.S. government. However, the NOI takes issue with some of the information included in the Pigford settlement. According to R. Muhammad, only “10% of the 19,000 Black farmers on the books of the USDA were given any relief in the two Pigford Black farmer lawsuits” (R. Muhammad 2010), reinforcing the NOI’s belief that the government did not take full responsibility for their role in black land loss. Even in the midst of a “victory” for black farmers, the NOI reinforces the connection between racism and the experience of black people on rural land.

The NOI strategically invokes a racialized memory of place, rural land, as a call to action for all black people. Cresswell (2004, 87) defines place memory as “the ability of place to make the past come to life in the present and thus contribute to the production and reproduction of social memory”. The NOI believes that even blacks who have no tangible connection to Muhammad Farms or rural land, have a memory of it that is largely grounded in slavery and the years after. The NOI is placing blacks back onto rural land both literally through

²¹ The overwhelming majority of claimants filed under Track A. Track A claims were expedited and the maximum amount received was \$50,000. Track B claimants had to provide more evidence and experienced a lengthier process. The maximum amount received was \$50,000.

Muhammad Farms, and figuratively by showing the pain and triumph that accompanies it.

Importantly, the NOI is utilizing spatial rhetoric to present a collective history. Community nationalism, the belief that black people must work together, is a theme that runs throughout the black counterpublic. Community nationalists believe in the broader goal of black people working collectively to uplift the black community through black-owned and -operated institutions. For the NOI, Muhammad Farms is one such institution that if used in conjunction with other black owned farms can feed and be an economic catalyst for the entire black community.

Muhammad Farms as a Tangible Representation of Possibility

Muhammad Farms is a physical manifestation of the possibilities for racial uplift if blacks pool their resources. If all of Muhammad Farms is utilized for food production, it can feed only 5,000 black people one meal a day all year long. To feed the 40 million black people in America, over 6.3 million acres of farmland is needed (R. Muhammad 2005). R. Muhammad further underscores the need for land to grow food by referencing NOI founder Elijah Muhammad: “we need the land not only for economic development and wealth, but our very health depends on it” (R. Muhammad, 2005).

The NOI reinforces the need for Muhammad Farms by providing written information and giving speeches on diet related health disparities between blacks and other groups. They note the high obesity rate among black people and the lack of quality grocery stores in inner city communities (Cooper 2011). R.

Muhammad refers to three major fast food restaurants as “McDeath” (McDonalds), “Murder King” (Burger King), and “Sintucky Fried Chicken” (Kentucky Fried Chicken) (R. Muhammad 2011). The NOI also provides instructions and workshops on “how to eat to live,” a principle that began during the early days of the NOI (E. Muhammad 1967). During their 2011 Saviours Day (the annual Founder’s Day gathering for the entire NOI), NOI member Brian Muhammad (2011) remarked that, “how to eat to live cannot be practiced until you control and grow your own food” adding that “the quality of fresh food available to the public are degrees lower than what was available in the 1930s.”

Muhammad Farms is enmeshed in the NOI’s Economic Blueprint of 2010, which spells out another step towards providing adequate housing and building more black owned institutions on black owned land. It includes ten instructions on how to find land and also the importance of registering with a network of black farmers through the Muhammad Farms website. According to *Muhammad Speaks*, the Economic Blueprint includes five major categories: food, clothing, shelter, technology, and health. For example, under food, the NOI encourages blacks to use farmland to raise animals for meat (excluding pork) and also for produce and dairy products. They list “good” stores like Salaam Restaurant (owned by the NOI) and Shabazz Bakery. Within the health category, they include medical research and abide by their “how to eat to live” principle. Land for housing is a part of the shelter category (Muhammad Speaks 2010). Each component is laid out in a circle and includes stations for: food markets, health, jobs, education, arts and culture, and also an area with communal, but single

family housing (Nation of Islam Minister of Agriculture 2011). This is a visible representation of the NOI's dream for a system of black owned farms. Farms will not only be used to grow food on, but also as a catalyst for building self-help among blacks, if the land is also used for food production, along with economic, political, and cultural purposes.

The NOI's insistence on building black power and autonomy is community nationalism in action. Community nationalists operate under the belief that "before a group can enter open society, it must first close ranks" (Ture and Hamilton 1967). For the NOI, closing ranks signifies that all blacks use "black common sense" (Harris-Lacewell 2004, 23), banning together regardless of religious or political affiliation.²² Most importantly, blacks must be self-reliant (McCutcheon 2011).

Muhammad Farms goes beyond the purpose of feeding people; it is a symbol of self-reliance. The goal of self-reliance is derived from the traditional exclusion of blacks from various social, economic, and political sectors of American life. It is defined as the ability of blacks to collectively define their own economic, social, and political outcomes (Tyner 2006; Harris-Lacewell 2004; Dawson 2001). The emphasis on self-reliance is grounded in the belief that while many sectors of society may by law be integrated, no one is going to look out for the best interest of blacks but blacks themselves (Harris-Lacewell 2004). Obtaining land, growing food, and ultimately using the capital from the land to create black-owned businesses is self-reliance in action.

²² Harris-Lacewell defines black common sense as the belief among blacks that "blackness is a meaningful political category."

Retaining the Original Tenets of the NOI

While community nationalism is evident in the NOI's doctrine at Muhammad Farms, there are separatist portions of their rhetoric that receive less attention. E. Muhammad's below assertion is one example:

We want our people in America whose parents or grandparents are descendants from slaves to be allowed to establish a separate state or territory of their own, either on this continent or elsewhere. We believe that our former slave masters are obligated to provide such land and that the area must be fertile and minerally rich. We believe that our former slave masters are obligated to maintain and supply our needs in this separate territory for the next 20 or 25 years, until we are able to produce and supply our own needs (E. Muhammad 1973, 161)

E. Muhammad reinforces one of the NOI's guiding principles. Geographic separation is needed for blacks to prosper, and should be subsidized by their "former slave masters" for at least two decades (E. Muhammad 1973). Most recently, R. Muhammad (2011) espoused a similar belief. Following a discussion in which he emphasizes the importance of blacks moving back down south, he makes this statement. "We can take over legally through the political and economic systems available to us as American citizens. We could do the proper thing according to the law and take over some states." The NOI continues to

advocate the creation of a black nation as the ultimate manifestation of black autonomy.

This language demonstrates the ways in which the NOI is employing particular aspects of their rhetoric to blacks who may or may not have a similar black nationalist ideology. The belief that blacks should create a separate nation, stated above, is not the primary focus of their message on the Muhammad Farms website. It is not even the focus of R. Muhammad's interview where he speaks for the bulk of the interview about the importance of black landownership, and the need for safe and healthy food among all Americans. However, he adds the phrase "take over" to the very end of the conversation, an indication that he is aware of the portions of his message that carry the most weight with other blacks.

CONCLUSION

According to the University of Chicago's 1993-1994 black politics study, two-thirds of Afro-Americans considered Farrakhan a good leader. Only 28% considered him dangerous. A 1994 poll revealed that '70 percent of African-Americans felt Farrakhan says what the country should hear'; '67 percent saw him as an effective leader'; '62 percent held him to be good for the black community'; and '63 percent believes that he speaks the truth'. (Robinson 2001, 123)

Perhaps the NOI has conducted their own secret public opinion poll, finding that of all elements of their message, an emphasis on community may be

most appealing because it has historically appealed to blacks with varying political ideologies. They aim to speak to all black people through numerous information networks by emphasizing community uplift. Through this paper, I assert that the NOI uses a common memory of rural land to encourage a collective black identity. By doing so, they are employing community nationalism, an idea that permeates the black counterpublic.

The ability to define blackness is a primary feature of the black counterpublic (Harris-Lacewell 2004). The NOI is reintroducing and redefining blackness in a rural context. While I would argue that the connection between black identity and rural life has always been relevant, people of color have received little attention in rural geographic studies (Agyeman 1998). The NOI can possibly accomplish two goals through their rhetoric. First, by literally placing black people and black identity formation back on rural southern land, this may give black people a reason to want to return to this land. Second, black-owned land can ideally be used to feed black people safe and healthy food.

I intend to continue examining the work of the NOI focused on black identity and rural land. Future studies will include interviewing members at Muhammad Farms to get an individual perspective on how rural land fits into the NOI ideology, and also a firsthand view of the work being done at Muhammad Farms. The NOI is a small religious organization in numbers, but is able to reach blacks through an ideology that is uniquely geographic. This research is a step in examining this relationship between race, religion and place.

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CHAPTER 4
BEULAH LAND FARMS: A CONTEMPORARY EXAMPLE OF AN
AFRICAN AMERICAN LAND ETHIC²³

²³ McCutcheon, P. To be submitted to *Agriculture and Human Values*

ABSTRACT

Scholars are increasingly studying and analyzing the whiteness of the alternative food movement. In this paper, I argue that one way to counteract this pervasive whiteness is to explore the concept of an African American land ethic with distinct but overlapping principles. They include African traditions, black American Agrarianism, sustainable land practice, and the connection between spirituality and the land. To do so, I use the Pan African Orthodox Christian Church's work at Beulah Land Farms, exploring more deeply how they connect spirituality to the land. They do so through the concept of the Promised Land, a concept that for them has both spiritual and tangible meaning through their farms in Calhoun Falls, SC. I argue that the Promised Land is such a powerful concept because they actually possess the land that they believe has been promised to them. I use this as a starting point, in my efforts to interrogate more deeply this and other components of an African American land ethic. I utilized archival and textual research, participant observation, open-ended interviews, and discourse analysis in this research project.

INDEX WORDS: Alternative food movement, community food security, sustainable agriculture, black agrarianism, black environmental thought, black liberation, Promised Land, Beulah Land Farms, Pan African Orthodox Christian Church

From the beginning, Afro-America has had a hang up...blacks have come to measure their own value according to the number of degrees they are away from the soil (Cleaver 1967: 57-58).

INTRODUCTION

The alternative food movement (AFM), a movement based on sustainable agricultural and community food security, is a space where well-meaning and often white food activists “bring” healthy food and growing practices into communities of color. Through their activism, intentionally or unintentionally, white food activists also impress cultural values onto these communities (Alkon and McCullen 2010; Guthman 2008a, 2008b; Slocum 2008, 2007, 2006). Researchers are increasingly aware of, and are beginning to formulate strategies aimed at addressing, the pervasive whiteness in the AFM (Alkon and McCullen 2010; Slocum 2006). According to Guthman (2004), a considerable portion of AFM discourse links a romantic view of the dirt or land with its potential to grow safe and healthy food through sustainable agriculture practices. The assumption of a peaceful and harmonious relationship with the land discounts the varied experiences of African Americans, which in turn may partially explain the reluctance of many African Americans to fully embrace the AFM’s practices and goals.

In this article, I develop the concept of an African American Land Ethic (AALE) to partially explain the pervasive whiteness of the alternative food movement. The concept of a land ethic, as an ethics-infused stance toward land stewardship, was introduced into American thought by Aldo Leopold’s *Sand*

County Almanac, in which he argued that “an individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts”; and understandings of “community” should include all living things (Leopold 1987: 204). I suggest here that even the simple assertion that individuals are a part of a community holds different meanings for different individuals and groups, meanings that are shaped both by historical and present-day experiences in physical and social landscapes. While some African Americans participate in the alternative food movement, on the whole, the AFM has not given much credence to distinct orientations toward land and agriculture, to which many African Americans may subscribe, missing out on an important opportunity to include communities of color in the quest for healthier and more accessible food. I argue in this paper that the lack of recognition of an African American land ethic results, in part, from broader misinterpretations of the relationship between African American people and the environment.

I draw on recent scholarship of how African Americans relate to the environment and to agriculture to suggest that an African American land ethic is simultaneously African, American, and African American. Broadly, an African American land ethic is shaped by linkages between agricultural practices and African traditions, the use of organic and sustainable growing practices, an emphasis on communalism, and a relationship between spirituality and the land. I do not wish to suggest that one land ethic encompasses the experiences of all African Americans; clearly, African Americans are too diverse to expect that to be the case. However, the conceptualization of an AALE offered here is informed

by my understanding of shared history in relation to land as shaped by slavery and passed down through oral and written traditions.

The components of an AALE are not just separate principles that individual black farmers practice on a daily basis. They are tied to larger racial projects (Omi and Winant 1994) that are a reflection of, and a response to racial supremacy. Possession, a chief component of an AALE, is not simply about the ability of individual black people to own land. It is about the way in which African Americans, as a group, have been kept from the land by both individual acts of violence and U.S. government sanctioned actions. If we think of possession or landownership as a racial project, we understand it as a project that speaks to both structural and individual oppression.

I draw on a case study of the Pan African Orthodox Christian Church's (PAOCC) Beulah Land Farms in Calhoun Falls, South Carolina to highlight the interplay of spiritual and material relations that shape an AALE. The PAOCC, originally called the Shrine of the Black Madonna, was founded in Detroit (Michigan) by Albert Cleage, the creator of black liberation theology (1972). At Beulah Land Farms, church members come together to grow organic fruits and vegetables, raise cattle, and live in a communal setting. Through their work growing and distributing food, the PAOCC exemplifies the elements of an African American land ethic indicated above. In the discussion of the PAOCC in this portion of the dissertation, I focus on the ways in which the connection between spirituality and land, guides much of their work. I do so in the recognition that much work remains to be done on my part to flesh out a robust understanding of

an African American land ethic, but that discerning the role of spirituality in the land ethic is an essential first step.

This paper will proceed as follows. First, I discuss my theoretical framework, where I explain how an AALE might help us understand the dearth of people of color in the largely white AFM. Second, I describe the methodology for this study, which includes archival and textual research, extensive participant observation, semi-structured open-ended interviews, and discourse analysis. Third, I sketch the history of the PAOCC and offer an analysis of what the PAOCC tells us about an AALE through their understanding of the relationship between spirituality and the land.

WHITENESS IN THE ALTERNATIVE FOOD MOVEMENT

Many in the [food] movement seem oblivious to the racial character of these [alternative food movement] discourses, and so are ignorant of the way in which employment of these discourses might constitute another kind of exclusionary practice.

(Guthman 2008a:434)

The alternative food movement (AFM) is broadly characterized by two interrelated movements: sustainable agriculture and community food security. Allen (2004, 2) writes that “because the issues [these movements] address are so important, they have attracted a broad range of participants and have become significant social movements.” The goal of sustainable agriculture is to produce safe and healthy food over a sustained period of time. While conventional agriculture prioritizes high yield production, sustainable practices privilege local

communities, small scale farming, and fewer chemical inputs (Allen 2004; Dahlberg 1991; Beus and Dunlap 1990). The Community Food Security Coalition (CFSC) provides examples of practices intended to increase community food security. For example, farmer's markets give consumers the opportunity to have face-to-face interaction with those who grow their food. Community gardens enable community members to work the land, consume the produce grown, and sometimes sell it at reduced prices to other community members (CFSC 2011).

Many in the AFM are dedicated to changing food production and distribution practices, but also the broader and unequal systems within which they operate. Efforts of the alternative food movement are geared towards poor communities of color. Food insecurity is often at its highest in low-income central city neighborhoods along with rural areas. Research shows that people in these communities tend to have access to fewer grocery stores, but more fast food restaurants than people in suburban and often white communities. Residents of these neighborhoods must often rely on corner stores with limited food choices, including canned food and spoiled produce, for their daily nourishment (Winne 2008; Morris 1992). A lack of quality available food is directly related to increased health risks for diabetes, obesity, and some types of cancers (CFSC 2011; Winne 2008; Kantor 2001; Fisher and Gottlieb 1996).

Activists who come to low-income communities of color do so with feelings of purpose, and are eager to enact their plans of bringing safe and healthy food to underserved communities. Activists sometimes find themselves frustrated

when faced with resistance by some in these communities. In a recent study, Guthman (2008a) analyzes emails and questionnaire responses from students in her “Agriculture, Food, and Social Justice” class, many of whom conduct their mandatory fieldwork in poor communities of color. Guthman (2008a) notes some students’ disappointment that some people in these communities do not have the same level of excitement that they do about eating local and organic food. One student says that upon visiting a farm to pick organic food, the African American youth and their leader were annoyed to have to work for white farmers without pay. Guthman says the question if they only knew what they were eating came up often from students, which implies that “they” are somehow different from the activists, and privileges particular cultural practices associated with the AFM.

Whiteness is embedded in statements such as if they only knew where their food came from (Guthman 2008a). Whiteness privileges white bodies by assuming and promoting a set of values as “normative” values that all people should adopt. People of color, however, can never enjoy the full privileges of whiteness, even if they adopt certain cultural norms (Slocum 2006; Kobayashi and Peake 2000; Lipsitz 1995). Slocum notes that whiteness cannot be reduced to racism or privilege, and often operates as an exclusionary space, sometimes without the knowledge of the white people that comprise the space (Slocum 2006:526). Whiteness is so dominant that its values are conflated with “American culture”, rendering whiteness invisible to some, yet always present and powerful (Lipsitz 1995).

The spaces of the AFM, including farmer's markets and CSAs, are largely white spaces that privilege a set of cultural values that often go unnoticed (Alkon and McCullen 2010; Guthman 2008a; Slocum 2006). Whiteness not only encompasses race, but intersects with class; white AFM spaces largely cater to middle class and/or affluent white people. Some well-meaning food activists are aware of the whiteness of AFM spaces, and seek to make them more inclusive by attempting to establish farmer's markets and urban gardens in communities of color. However, even within communities of color, urban gardens and farmers' markets remain spaces where white "hippies" (Stowe 2007) are the norm. In her study of farmer's market and CSA managers, Guthman (2008b) finds that many insist that their activism is color-blind, while others believe that certain groups are not concerned with healthy organic food. Simply put, there seems to be a fundamental disconnect between well-meaning white activists and communities of color. A part of this disconnect is the assumption that all people, regardless of race, see an unwavering beauty in the land and its bounty, a promise that is not tainted by a history of terror and struggle (Guthman 2008a; Guthman 2008b; Smith 2007).

Guthman (2008a) presents a compelling argument about the influence of race on present conceptions of the land and its "beauty" that undermines such an assumption. In this paper, I begin to answer what I perceive to be the implicit question in her assertion, which is: How do groups with a complicated history of racial oppression in agricultural work view the land? A dominant land ethic undergirds the work of the alternative food movement, where activists seem to

assume that individuals long to “get their hands dirty” and develop a more intimate connection with the land. I suggest that African Americans have an intimate connection with the land, but one that is complicated by racist practices that forced their forbearers to work the land while also making possession of the land difficult, if not impossible.

Acknowledging a complex history is one step. Contextualizing this history as a part of a distinct, yet equally relevant land ethic moves us closer to understanding the diversity of influences that affect the relationship between black people and the land. An African American land ethic as I conceptualize it here is not only historical, but continues to resonate in modern times. As a first step in a much larger project, I explore one manifestation of such a land ethic in the PAOCC’s work at Beulah Land Farms.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

One hundred and forty seven years after the Emancipation Proclamation freed slaves from forced agricultural labor, African Americans continue to maintain complex relationships with the environment (Smith 2007). Recent scholarship offers an increasingly nuanced understanding of the relationships between African Americans and the environment, finding that this relationship is directly influenced by past and present inequalities. Scholars argue that the definition of the environment should be expanded to include activities and principles that are outside of its traditionally narrow conservationist boundaries (McCutcheon 2011; Chesney 2007; Ferrell 2007; Densu 2007; Bandele 2007;

Hargrove and Zabawa 2007; Hill 2007; Pennick et.al 2007; Smith 2007; Washington 2007; Finney 2006; Woods 1998).

Finney (2006) argues that we must expand the definition of environmentalism beyond a “save the earth” approach to consider as environmental actors people like her father who tended the land of a white family for over fifty years. Such a conceptual shift, she argues, will result in more African Americans becoming involved in activities associated with the “mainstream” environmental movement, while the movement will grow into one that is more broadly focused. Finney (2006) rejects the categorization of all African American environmental participation as environmental justice activism, and challenges the mainstream environmental movement to open its doors to more people of color. I share Finney’s perspective in my understanding of an African American land ethic that first, helps us to explore African American’s complex engagement with agriculture and second, challenges the mainstream alternative food movement to confront its racial exclusiveness, and opens its doors to more people of color.

The 2007 Black Environmental Thought Conference, hosted by Tuskegee University, represented an attempt to disentangle the roots and present proliferation of black land principles and practices. Conference presenters examined the roots of black environmental thought, tracing it back to indigenous African cultures (Densu 2007; Bandele 2007). Others highlighted great African American thinkers who have contributed to sustainable agricultural practices. All attendees raised the question of what can be done to get more African

Americans to return to rural life and farming. Insights from work presented at this conference inform my understanding of an African American Land Ethic that could help explain black peoples' non-participation in the alternative food movement. I argue that a distinctive African American Land Ethic continues to inform many African American's relationship with land and agriculture, and is exemplified through the PAOCC's work at Beulah Land Farms.

Chesney (2007) presented at that conference an "Environmental Heritage Model" of African American's relationships with the environment that directly informs my conceptualization of an African American land ethic comprised of interrelated influences and dimensions. Chesney (2007) takes into account West African traditions, the Middle Passage and slavery, and landownership²⁴ in a model that also includes the land principles of Aldo Leopold and David Thoreau, W.E.B. Dubois and George Washington Carver, among others. Chesney suggests that this model can be used to address environmental injustices against African Americans, hunger, and reconnecting black people back to rural land. The Environmental Heritage Model is a useful starting point; I draw from Chesney's insights, but narrow the focus from the environment writ large to consider agricultural land and practices in more detail than Chesney has yet done. My aim here is to briefly (per space constraints) characterize an African American land ethic in terms of its basic principles and practices, and to consider a contemporary example of the land ethic as it informs the work of the PAOCC.

²⁴ For more information about Chesney's Environmental Heritage Model, please reference the proceedings from the Black Environmental Thought Conference at www.sare.org/content/download/50650/665630/file/landandpower.pdf

Specifically, I suggest that an African American Land Ethic is based on African traditions, African American agrarianism, sustainable agriculture, possession, and the overlap between the spiritual and the secular (Bandeled 2007; Densu 2007; Smith 2007; Carney 2001).

An African American Land Ethic

One might think that 250 years of slavery would have left black Americans permanently alienated from the American landscape. Forced for generations to work the earth without just reward, without the right to own land, without even the freedom to travel, what meaning could they find in America's pristine wilderness? Locked in a struggle for social justice, what interest could they have in the claims of nature?

(Smith 2007:1)

African Americans' historical understanding of land and agriculture might best be understood through DuBois' (1903) explanation of a double consciousness. During slavery and the years following it, the experiences of African Americans were shaped by their efforts to retain their African roots and modes of thought that were uniquely African American, while developing ways to cope with and respond to the contempt of whites. DuBois argues that blacks literally and psychologically live in two worlds. Blacks were legally excluded from integrating with whites and developed, to an extent, separate modes of thought and institutions. Some argue that these institutions constituted an entirely distinct public sphere, or black counterpublic, where blacks discussed matters of

concern to each other and developed solutions to problems addressing the black community (McCutcheon 2011; Harris-Lacewell 2004; Dawson 2001; Fraser 1994). Among ideas and relations discussed and developed within the black counterpublic have been black peoples' relationships with land and agriculture, in the context of a shared history of slavery and sharecropping. From a myriad of conversations within the black counterpublic, then derives a multi-faceted African American land ethic.

Significantly, an African American land ethic has an institutional basis in the 1890 institutions developed to assist African American rural farmers. Like many institutions of the black counterpublic, these historically black land grant institutions were formed in response to exclusion from the dominant public sphere, which in this case were 1862 white land grant universities that provided little support and outreach to African American farmers. Presently, there are seventeen 1890 institutions, along with Tuskegee University (1890 Land Grant College and University Initiative). While their missions have evolved to meet the changing needs and interests of their students and communities, these institutions remain engaged in sustained outreach with rural and mostly African American communities.

This paper is a first step toward conceptualizing the overlapping and interlocking components of an African American land ethic. Each component warrants a detailed analysis, a task that I will undertake in future work. In this essay, I draw from scholarship on African Americans' relationships to land, agriculture and environment to identify an AALE that is more than the sum of its

parts. An AALE is based on African traditions, African American agrarianism, sustainable agriculture, an emphasis on land possession, and the overlap between the spiritual and the secular (Bandeled 2007; Densu 2007; Smith 2007; Carney 2001).

African Traditions

Scholars have identified a number of African agricultural traditions brought to the Americas during the transatlantic slave trade²⁵. Densu (2007) describes five components of “indigenous African communities” that developed prior to colonization and imperialism. First, land was understood as both material and spiritual and neither dimension was in conflict with the other (Bandeled 2007; Densu 2007; Smith 2007; Levine 1977). Second, all individuals regardless of social standing had access to the land (Densu 2007; Chukwuynere 1998). Third, sustainable growing practices like crop rotation and planting a diversity of crops within the same field were the norm (Densu 2007; Richards 1985). Fourth, crops were to be used to feed the local community (Densu 2007: 101). Finally, land was worked on a flexible work schedule, and labor compensated non-monetarily. Densu’s (2007) explanation, portions of which are supported by other scholars, informs my understanding of an African American land ethic. The land ethic is shaped in part by African traditions that were brought over by slaves, and that continue to inform African American land practices in the present day

²⁵ It is difficult to know the extent to which these agricultural practices survived colonialism, but there is still evidence on smaller scales in African communities. I also do not intend to essentialize Africa as one homogenous place through explaining these traditions. However, scholars continue to parse out what traditions came from what African regions and countries, a difficult task without concrete knowledge of the geographical origin of all slaves.

Black American Agrarianism

Black American agrarianism includes themes of the land as beautiful, an emphasis on the ability of the land to feed black people, and a constant recognition of the terror that, in the United States, has blanketed African American's experiences with the land. Many African American leaders and farmers still identify racist practices that hinder their ability to own and farm land. Historically African Americans recognized the hypocrisy of some white proponents of American Agrarianism. For example, Thomas Jefferson, an architect of American Agrarianism, is known and revered for his widely influential beliefs in the agrarian basis for the prosperity of the United States. Jefferson's large slaveholdings and assertions that black laborers were not actually farmers weigh against him, however, among many African American agrarianists.

A history of racism, however, did not stop some African Americans from adopting views associated with American agrarianism. Smith argues, for example, that in the *Souls of Black Folk*, DuBois (1903) portrays rural southern African Americans as having an "organic connection to the land" (Smith 2007: 98). Booker T. Washington advocated private property ownership for African Americans, assisting many African Americans to obtain land to grow food on. On the other hand, he encouraged whites to let go of racist practices hindering black land ownership. The ideas of African American agrarianism remind us that the experiences of African Americans on the land were not developed in a bubble. Moreover, they are not totally distinct from American agrarianism.

Sustainable land practices

Sustainable agricultural practices are not unique to African Americans. However, many such practices were developed by black scientists and farmers who subsequently spread them through black information networks. Dr. George Washington Carver and Dr. Booker T. Whatley were notable black experts in farming and sustainable agriculture. Though the term sustainable agriculture did not exist at that time, Dr. Carver was one of the earlier proponents of its ideas. He trained black farmers at Tuskegee using very little resources. He urged them to use as few chemicals as possible, keep beneficial insects in their gardens, and use vegetable compost as a fertilizer (Densu 2007). Dr. Whatley, also an agriculture professor at Tuskegee University, insisted on crop rotation to keep the soil healthy. He initiated a U-Pick operation where patrons would pay a small fee to pick their own fresh produce. Dr. Carver, a well-known scientist and inventor, and Dr. Whatley are two visible examples of great African American thinkers who created, used, and disseminated sustainable agriculture practices. Moreover, they are associated with Tuskegee University, which continues to be one of the leading universities promulgating sustainable agricultural practices. While Dr. Carver's and Dr. Whatley's work comprise a small part of a much wider field of agricultural knowledge flowing through black institutions, I use them here to underscore the point that sustainable agricultural practices are not novel for African Americans.

Possession

Agrarians began from the premise that a positive relationship with the natural world arises out of an agriculture in which farmers have the authority, the means, and the incentives to stewardship.

(Smith 2007)

In Smith's (2007) history of black environmental thought and black agrarianism, she argues that "the slave system forced slaves into an intimacy with the natural environment but also tended to alienate them from it" (Smith 2007: 10). Like Chesney, Smith acknowledges numerous influences on African American environmentalism ranging from David Thoreau to Booker T. Washington. More importantly, she highlights the importance of possession in understanding this relationship. I suggest here that the complicated history of African Americans' land possession and dispossession plays a significant role in an emerging African American land ethic.

Smith (2007) uses the term possession to describe African American land ownership, arguing that for African Americans, land ownership is directly tied to citizenship and acceptance. Land ownership is about more than just acquiring and passing down wealth; it means "membership, political autonomy and personality, and community integrity (Smith 2007)." In Leopold's "Land Ethic," he argues against the practice of obtaining property solely for economic purposes, finding that the emphasis on property and economic status entails "privileges but not obligations." For Leopold, a land ethic is needed for humans to learn to live better with the environment as opposed to dominating it simply because they

own it. Significantly, Leopold's land ethic implicitly excludes those who do not own property and certainly excludes individuals and groups who were themselves once considered property, African American slaves did not own the property that they worked. Even during sharecropping, ownership was often an unfulfilled promise. Many worked and paid off debts on the land, but were never able to claim it as theirs (Smith 2007; Bandele 2007; Ficara 2006)

African American's connection to the land and their perception of the land is in part influenced by racial oppression and violent barriers put in place to prevent them from possessing land. Seeing the "beauty" in nature may be hampered by a troubling memory of the difficulties in acquiring and holding onto land, a touted part of the American dream. The concept of a land ethic implies a relationship with the land that historically for African Americans included labor without the economic benefit and emotional fulfillment of possession. Simply for many, the ends never justified the means.

An emphasis on private property through possession distinguishes the AALE from traditional environmentalism. Smith (2007) finds that privileging private property gives the property owners the right to dominate as opposed to conserve the land. However, Smith (2007: 96) states that "the black tradition suggests that support for property rights can also legitimate government regulation to protect the environment." In the AALE, private property does equate to power and control, which has often eluded blacks throughout history. At Beulah Land Farms, the power of possession increases PAOCC members' connection to rural land.

Spirituality and the Land

When I hear land, I think about connecting with, I don't know, connecting with things that are important to me, connecting with earth, having an opportunity to I guess utilize the resources that have been placed here by the spiritual, by those that we believe are in spiritual higher powers...I've come to this in more recent years, where I really have, I want to think that I have a real spiritual connection with the land.

(Jean* 2007)

Spirituality in the African American land ethic I outline here derives from both African and African American influences. African traditions of worship were often mixed with the African American experience of enslavement, in which spirituality is tied to a longing for freedom (Evans 2008; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990). Negro spirituals sung by slaves in the field often had themes of the land and liberation in them (Perkins 1922). While slaves may have viewed the land as oppressive, they also professed God's ability to transform it, and liberate them from the oppression of the land (hooks 1997). Slaves took some solace in the idea that even if white people controlled their livelihood, these same white people had no control over nature, which was in some ways liberating. hooks (2002, 69) demonstrates as much in noting that "the fundamental understanding that white folks were not gods helped imbue black folks with an oppositional sensibility."

I argue that in the AALE, there is no discernible distinction between the spiritual and the secular. The soil, the seeds, the fruits and vegetables, the

animals, and the people who work the land are all spiritual manifestations of God's power (Smith 1997; Carver 1927; DuBois 1903). For example Nelson, in her assessment of George Washington Carver's poems, finds that Carver did not believe that every natural event could be rationalized. Some were "outside of the reach of human understanding (Nelson 2001)" Whether or not her assessment is accurate, it is well documented that while at Tuskegee, Dr. Carver led Bible classes, where he spoke about being blessed to be able to do research on God's earth (Ruffin 2007, 47). While at times, the spiritual may be intangible, evoking an emotional reaction, the spiritual can also represent very real places or experiences.

Spirituality in the AALE does not solely include the African American Christian tradition. Other faiths comprised of African Americans also exemplify a linkage between spirituality and the land. For example, the Nation of Islam is farming over sixteen hundred acres of land in rural Georgia, and cites spirituality and their interpretation of Islam as one of the major reasons for claiming and working the land. The organization that this study focuses on is a Christian organization that believes in black nationalism. Spirituality in the AALE as elsewhere is not a one size fits all concept. There may be black people or black organizations who have a connection with the land, but who do not cite a spiritual connection. However, the AALE and its components do not have to apply to every black individual or organization and many may identify with a few, but not all. In the discussion of the Pan African Orthodox Church, below, I tackle the relationship between spirituality and the land by grounding it in the historical and

tangible experiences of African Americans and their search for the Promised Land.

Pan African Orthodox Christian Church

The Reverend Albert Cleage, a leader in the local and national Civil Rights movement, established the Central Congregational Church in Detroit, MI in 1953. He renamed the church the Shrine of The Black Madonna, placing a mural of a black Madonna holding the baby Jesus in each Shrine location. In 1970, he again changed the church's name to the Pan African Orthodox Christian Church (PAOCC). During the 1970s, Cleage preached and adopted principles of Black Nationalism as a part of his religious ideology, connecting the struggles of black people in the United States to those of black people across the African Diaspora. Cleage also changed his name to Jaramogi Abebe Agyeman, Swahili for "holy man and savior of the nation" (The Faith Project 2003). Presently, there are Shrine locations in Atlanta, Houston, Detroit, and Calhoun Falls, SC.

The PAOCC is most well-known for its teachings of Black Christian Nationalism and black liberation theology. Black Christian Nationalism (BCN) refers to the "promotion of black nationhood as a way for blacks to cope with their position and exclusion from a white society" (McCutcheon 2011). Black Christian nationalists reject individualism and believe that blacks should work together. Black liberation theology, founded by Reverend James Cone (1970; 1969) urges black people to work collectively for economic, social, and political progress. Cleage (1972), one of the earliest proponents of black liberation theology,

asserts that black liberation is not separate from religious teachings, but is based in the Old Testament themes of freedom from oppression. He argues that God wants black people to be liberated on earth, and not wait for peace in heaven. Most importantly, Cleage argues, black liberation should be taught in all black churches.

The PAOCC's theology has expanded over the years. PAOCC members currently believe that "blackness is no longer sufficient for unity." All black people do not act in the best interest of black people as a whole. Furthermore, other "isms," including "classism" should be added to our understanding of inequalities (Kimathi 2000). The PAOCC has not abandoned black liberation theology, but its members connect the struggle of black people in the United States to the struggle of other oppressed people throughout the world.

Beulah Land Farms

Beulah Land Farms, purchased under Jaramogi Agyeman's leadership, is an approximately 4,000 acre lakefront site in Calhoun Falls, SC. "Beulah" means to be married to the land. Biblically, "Beulah" is seen as an environment that stimulates a spiritual transformation and awakening. At Beulah Land Farms, church members live and work on the land, growing fruits and vegetables and raising poultry, cattle, and fish (Pan African Orthodox Christian Church 2009, 1). Members also attend church on the land, and regularly invite visitors from nearby black churches to worship along with them.

Cleage (1972, 200) believes that the black church should be the center of a nation within a nation. To do so, black people and their leaders must be of one

accord. Cleage (1972, 201) says that “the church must teach, and members must learn if we are to build a Black Nation,” grounded in communal values and not the individualism of white Western culture. Again, Cleage (1972) does not advocate geographic separation, but rather a group mentality that black people should adopt to support each other.

Spirituality drives the PAOCC’s current work at Beulah Land Farms. For the PAOCC, black liberation is a part of their spiritual mission, and God allows them to work and be at one with the land. However, it is important to reassert that spirituality is complex and tied to questions of freedom, liberation, and landownership. PAOCC members believe that it is part of their mandate from God to care for the land and use it as a tool of liberation for black people through their work at Beulah Land Farms.

METHODS

I utilized archival and textual research, participant observation, and open-ended interviews in this research project. Archival and textual research allowed me to study past documents and the context that they were written in. Texts include *Black Christian Nationalism* and *The Black Messiah*, written by PAOCC founder Albert Cleage. In both documents, Cleage lays out the vision for the church, and why he chose to emphasize black liberation in his theology. I was also able to obtain internal documents from the church including the booklet celebrating the anniversary of Cleage’s death, a separate church anniversary book, and an extensive guide to Beulah Land Farms. These documents were

invaluable in understanding the church's mission, theology, and goals for Beulah Land Farms.

I conducted participant observation at Beulah Land Farms two days a week for seven months. I was both an outsider and farm laborer during my time volunteering. My goal in doing so was to understand the day-to-day operations of the farm. My duties varied, but mainly included pruning trees and painting fences in the cow pastures, along with planting and weeding the garden.

Interactions with PAOCC members varied based on the task. My best opportunity to interact with members was while planting and picking crops in the garden.

Both men whom I worked with were long-time members of the church and provided a wealth of information. After volunteering for approximately six months, I was finally able to interview some members of the church. The PAOCC is a fairly closed organization and I was only allowed to speak with certain members. I asked them questions concerning the goals and personal experiences at the church and the farm, the relationship between race, spirituality, and food/agriculture, and the meaning of black liberation. I analyzed data using critical discourse analysis with the help of Atlas ti software.

I immediately began analyzing my positionality on the first day of the research process (Robinson 1994; Fuller 1998). I acknowledged my identity as a researcher, a black woman, but also a laborer. Because I worked in solitude for the first month that I was there, it was difficult to get to know anyone in the organization. As time progressed, I began working closely around other PAOCC members which relaxed both parties. Members seemed to appreciate my

knowledge of the church's history. Though the process was slow and arduous, my willingness to work on the farm eventually helped to build trust with PAOCC members.

ANALYSIS

In this section, I briefly explain how Beulah Land Farms encapsulates the various principles and practices of an African American land ethic. I then demonstrate the complicated relationship between spirituality and the land, best understood through the concept of the "Promised Land." I argue that possession allows the PAOCC to establish a grounded connection to their Promised Land, Beulah Land Farms. To ensure that this Promised Land flourishes, communal living is a necessity.

The PAOCC's African American Land Ethic

At Beulah Land Farms, there is evidence of the principles and practices of an African American land ethic described above. African traditions are used in the planting, growing, and harvesting of food. These traditions are not just the PAOCC's attempt to hearken back to a mythical remembrance of Africa that lacks specifics or particularities. Rather, PAOCC members spoke about specific African traditions that have been passed down orally through everyday talk. For example, they use oak ash as a fertilizer, a tradition that they believe their ancestors once used in West Africa. They also perform a ceremony before applying fertilizer, asking God to bless the land and the hands that prepared the land. PAOCC members abide by traditional tenets of Black American agrarianism, by privileging a rural way of life over the fast pace of the city. Many

are from Detroit and Houston, and all speak about the peace of mind that accompanies moving to rural land. They also utilize sustainable agriculture practices, including crop rotation and planting a diversity of crops including field peas, collard greens, and watermelons all within the same field. Likewise, they privilege a connection with the local community, offering food to anyone that comes by who needs it, and sell their produce at two local farmer's markets in the area. They emphasize possession, mainly the struggle that African Americans continue to have in purchasing and holding onto land. The PAOCC believes that landownership allows them to be self-reliant.

While the PAOCC encompasses all of these principles of an AALE, a spiritual connection to the land best encompasses their work at Beulah Land Farms. My goal in this section is tease apart the PAOCC's complex connection between spirituality and the land. Through doing so, I hope to illuminate not only that spirituality is a tangible and grounded concept to them, but also that it maintains an essential space in the AALE.

The Promised Land in Calhoun Falls, SC

The Promised Land

I just want to do God's will. And he's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people will get to the Promised Land...Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (1968)

I utilize the concept of the Promised Land to explore the relationship between spirituality and the land as it shapes the African American land ethic in play at Beulah Farms. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. spoke the words above on the eve of his assassination. In a speech titled “I See the Promised Land,” he detailed the struggles of different oppressed groups worldwide who seek justice, speaking at length about the economic and racial injustices plaguing Negroes. The Promised Land, in Dr. King’s speech, was understood in the context of the Civil Rights movement, and the fight for equality in an unjust world. The famous final lines of his speech are an example of how the spiritual often has tangible connotations for African Americans.

The Promised Land is a Biblical concept, dating back to the Old Testament, which refers to the land that God promised the Israelites. Among African Americans, the Promised Land has religious roots, but is compounded by the shared memories and/or experiences of slavery, Reconstruction, and the Civil Rights movement. For some, the Promised Land may represent a geographic location. For others, it may represent a feeling or emotion of peace and freedom from oppression (Sernett 1997).

Vernon Jarrett, a Chicago area journalist, observed in the documentary *The Promised Land: Take Me to Chicago* that “When I was a child, the Promised Land was a place with a name” (Geffen 1995). He and others who migrated from the rural south in the Great Migration stress that the Promised Land referred to a specific place, Chicago and New York for many, and represented (a hope for) better days. Though the

Great Migration by no means represents a spontaneous movement, it did, as Sernett (1997) observes, “possess a mysterious quality.” The mass numbers of blacks who day by day, left towns like Greenville, Mississippi to settle on the Southside of Chicago evoked in the minds of many the search for the Promised Land. African Americans often heard about the Promised Land from black preachers, but could never quite get there. Moreover, many who did reach the Promised Lands of Chicago, New York and other northern cities would later become disillusioned with ongoing racial discrimination and lack of equal economic opportunities in these areas. The Promised Land is a place and a feeling that, for many African Americans, has not yet come to fruition.

In the following section, I analyze the complexities of the Promised Land as a spiritual and tangible concept for the PAOCC and in the AALE more broadly. First, I explain the role of the Promised Land in the PAOCC’s religious tradition. Second, I argue that black people must be able to own the land for it to be truly tangible, as seen in the PAOCC’s expression of it. Simply put, a spiritual relationship to the land is linked to landownership; Third, I show how PAOCC members utilize the Promised Land in their daily actions. Fourth, I bring the concept of the Promised Land back to its broader discussion in the black religious tradition. For African Americans, the Promised Land has always been about movement toward places of promise and away from places of oppression, as demonstrated by the Great Migration. It follows that Beulah Land Farms may represent an important trend in the return migration of African Americans to the

rural south. The move back down south is not just about returning to places in which African Americans have roots; return migration south also opens new opportunities for landownership. In my conclusion, I offer recommendations, gained from my analysis of the Promised Land to the persistent whiteness in the AFM.

For the PAOCC, the Promised Land is tied to its tradition of black Christian nationalism, the belief that black people, with the help of God, should work to obtain land. PAOCC founder Albert Cleage (1972) interprets the Promised Land as evidence of God's support for black nation-building, likening the quest for land to the Biblical story in which God instructed Abraham to go out and find a Nation for the Israelites to settle on, and build institutions to ensure that the Promised Land would flourish. Cleage further notes that in the search for a Promised Land, many will be confused as to what they are actually searching for, if they think of it in purely geographic terms. The Promised Land is a place "flowing with milk and honey, where every man can sit with dignity under his own vine and fig tree" (Cleage 1972, 202). However, in Cleage's view, the Promised Land also requires that people live together in a community and work for a common goal.

The Promised Land is not only a part of PAOCC doctrine; it is a part of the history of the actual land that Beulah Land Farms sits on. In the 4th Pan African Synod Souvenir Booklet, PAOCC members recall that the land was first promised to slaves by their slave-master. On his deathbed, he said that he promised them that they could have whatever they developed. Despite his promise, the land was sold to the town. The former slaves were determined to

purchase the land and did so. Most of the former slaves stayed on the land because they believed that this was the land Promised to them by God (Kimathi 2008).

Beulah Land Farms represents God's ability to work through people to make the impossible happen. In 2000, the PAOCC managed to obtain over 4,000 acres of premier waterfront land on the coast of Georgia and South Carolina. The purchase was made possible through church member's monetary donations, and tireless work on the farm²⁶. Jonathan's²⁷ feelings about the land are printed in the PAOCC's 2000 Synod Business Directory. He says that:

Beulah Land is a vision made real. It represents the hope of a suffering people and the beauty, joy, power, and strength that we experience here. Beulah Land is God's power manifested in the world in which we live.

For members, the land is a living testament that God has set aside land for them to claim. Moreover, it is a living example to other black people that they do not have to wait until they get to heaven to obtain peace; this peace is waiting for them in Calhoun Falls, SC.

The PAOCC's belief in God guides their proposed uses and activities on the Promised Land. According to the PAOCC, the Promised Land should be a meeting place for all black people, and is the center of a nation within a nation. Georgia* says that Beulah Land is for

²⁶ I am not certain whether or not the land was always held by the descendants of the former slaves that owned the land. It seems that the land may have changed hands during this time, but the chronology is uncertain.

²⁷ Real names were not used to protect the confidentiality of research participants

black folks all over the world. When we get everything going. It'll be just like in the Bible. The Promised Land, Moses led his people to the Promised Land, we hope to lead our people to the Promised Land too.

The PAOCC aspires that Beulah Land Farm will be a training center, and research center for issues of concern to black people all over the world. The PAOCC hopes to build more black-owned institutions for spiritual purposes, spreading the church's mission to those outside of the organization. They also intend their land for "intellectual, financial, educational, and administrative" endeavors that will benefit blacks throughout the Diaspora (Kimathi 2004, 19).

As a reminder, PAOCC members maintain that "blackness alone is no longer a sufficient basis for unity" (Kimathi 2000, 11). While the PAOCC may be black-run and black-managed, the fruits of their labor are for all oppressed people. Earlier during the interview, Sister Georgia* says that people, regardless of race, are hungry. If they have food to share, they are more than willing to give it to anyone. This does not take away from the PAOCC's primary goal of black liberation as they understand it. Empowering black people also means assisting other oppressed groups.

Conceptually, the Promised Land leads us to greater understanding of how the spiritual can be tangible in the AALE. For PAOCC members, the idea of the Promised Land defines their vision and purpose for the land. In the next section, I argue that the Promised Land is in part so real and grounded to

PAOCC members because they own the land that they believe God promised to them.

Possession and the Promised Land

And they shall build houses, and inhabit them; and they shall plant vineyards and eat the fruit of them. They shall not build, and another inhabit; they shall not plant, and another eat; for as the days of a tree are the days of my people, and mine elect shall long enjoy the work of their hands (Isaiah 65: 21-23).

Possession or land ownership is emphasized in the above quote derived from the Biblical chapter Isaiah. The message is clear. PAOCC believe that God calls them to work hard, but also enjoy the fruits of their labor. In this section, I argue that a spiritual and emotional connection for African Americans to nature is in part dependent on possession in two interrelated ways. Possession is tied to black liberation, a spiritual mandate of the PAOCC's founder Albert Cleage. Possession also helps members to create a spiritual connection to the land and its beauty.

Black liberation is not only a political project of the PAOCC. It is an intrinsic part of their theology. The PAOCC believes that God wants black people to be liberated. To do so, they must build and possess institutions that will form the bases for liberation. At Beulah Land Farms, the PAOCC believes itself to be taking orders from God. I recount the below statement from Theodore* printed in *Synod 2004* at length:

Beulah Land is a perfect example of Black on Black Love. It has given me the opportunity to love a group of people who are struggling to be free. Beulah Land offers me more opportunities to change, be open, and do more for Black people.

In Theodore's* words, Beulah Land gives him an opportunity to work for positive change for black people. He can only do so because the PAOCC owns the land that they work on. Possession is required to make black liberation, a significant part of their spiritual mandate, a reality. Possession also helps PAOCC members to form an emotional and spiritual connection to the land. Smith (2007) notes that "black theorists considered property ownership and citizenship rights to be critical to creating an emotional bond to the land." PAOCC member's spiritual connection to the land is reminiscent of a Romantic land connection, where some words might be mistaken for Thoreau's words if one did not know the background of the church. Below, Sister Georgia* recalls the feeling that she gets walking to the farm office from her house, which is also on the land. She says that:

I think it connects as one. Spirituality and nature. Cause you can be outside and the trees. They're spiritual. A lot of people don't realize it but they are...God works through the earth. Like I'm walking sometimes and I could just pray. And you can just see the sky and it's awesome. It is just awesome. You have to have a mind for it too.

Sister Georgia believes that being one with the land allows her to become closer to God. She also says that the sky is “*awesome*.”

The ability of PAOCC members to see God’s beauty in the land signals a romantic connection to the land, despite the sordid and violent history that African Americans have as agricultural laborers. Remarkably, PAOCC members see God’s beauty in land that has been made so ugly historically through racist and unfair treatment towards blacks. Not only are PAOCC members living on the land, they have a spiritual connection to land, land sent from God specifically to liberate black people but also for blacks to enjoy its beauty.

Communal Spirit of Working Together

The most important single aspect of both our faith and our program is the fact that we have rediscovered the process by which the individual can be led to divest himself of individualism and to merge into the mystic, communal oneness of the Black Nation (Cleage 1972).

PAOCC members believe that God calls them to work as a community, a key component of Black Christian Nationalism. In their theology, they stress that God does not bless people “one by one,” but rather in groups. Cleage (1972) says that individualism in Western culture has “effectively blocked the power of God.” Moreover, working in groups should come easy to black people; community thought and action have always been a significant part of black life. Edward* sums up the connection between working in groups and God:

The western world teaches you about individualism. And we were teaching about groups. The group is a salvation. Just being in a group and being in a group of people working together is salvation. And you know, it honors the Holy Spirit. You know if you were like working together and any kind of group can work together and do a whole lot of things that are not Godly. But if it honors the spirit of the Lord and it can be holy and it can bring salvation.

The PAOCC specifically cites the Essenes as influential to their belief in community living and group work. The Essenes were a group of Jews who, approximately two thousand years ago, settled in the Judean desert. Their Manual, also called the Rule of Community, sets rules on how communities should behave along with rites of passage that should be set up to enter certain communities. According to Cleage (1972, 220), it “would be easier and more effective if we lived together in a commune as the Essenes did.” He says that for black people to progress, everyone must live together and learn from each other. Finally, those who do not want to work as a community and are only interested in individual gain, should leave the group

PAOCC members believe that the day-to-day activities of the farm should be carried out in groups. No one person can or should desire to do the work of the farm him or herself; working together is needed for the farms to succeed. Success is measured by the ability of the farm to sustain itself and its workers. Less tangibly, success is measured through a sense of connectedness to the

land that all whom I spoke with seem to possess. The below two excerpts from the PAOCC 2000 Synod Business directory exemplify this point:

I am very happy to be a part of Beulah Land and working with my brothers and sisters here whom I love. We are involved in a real life process to transform the world.

I can feel the presence of God each day...Each day I look forward the fellowship with brothers and sisters who have made a commitment to making Beulah Land a reality. It is an awesome feeling to be surrounded by people who truly believe that Beulah Land can change the world and are working and sacrificing daily.

PAOCC members enjoy the camaraderie that comes along with working in groups. Following the Essene Order, they live, eat, and worship together. They all speak with fondness about these activities and seem to take pleasure in the opportunity to enjoy the fruits of their labor as a community.

I experienced, firsthand, their strong emphasis on working as a community. I, along with another member pruned trees in the cow pastures. Because of the nature of the work, we rarely conversed except when walking to and from the cow pastures. During these conversations, he often spoke about the purpose of the work that he was doing which was to help make the farm a success. Every task does not require the input of more than one person to successfully complete it. However, even working in solitude is seen as community work, because it all helps the larger goal of building Beulah Land

Farms, the proposed capital of a black nation. My conversations with this PAOCC member reveals an important part of the PAOCC's creed, exemplified in the following quote: "the things I once thought that I could not do I realize with the group's encouragement, love, and understanding that I can do" (Malcolm* 2010).

Spirituality is a major principle in the AALE. While I am not implying that every African American farmer or farming organization has spiritual goals, I do emphasize the important role that spirituality has played throughout the history of African Americans. I hope, through this section, that spirituality has become more tangible. For the PAOCC, an example of an AALE, spirituality not only informs their abstract views towards nature. It also informs their daily practices on the land.

My goal, through this section, was to interrogate the nuanced relationship between spirituality and the land for the PAOCC and to demonstrate that their spirituality is tied to place, possession, and finally a communal style of work. My analysis of the relationship is an important step in teasing out the various overlapping components of an African American land ethic. Lastly, I argue that the PAOCC establishing land down south might be representative of a larger trend of reverse migration.

Returning Home

According to a 2004 Brookings Institute study, the two states experiencing the largest increase in black residents from 1995-2000 were Georgia and North Carolina (Frey 2004). Both states were among the top ten states experiencing

the largest losses between 1965-1970. Bilefsky (2011) notes in a recent article in the New York Times that according to the US Census, approximately half of blacks leaving New York in 2009 moved to the South. George Mason University professor of History Spencer Crew, quoted by Bilefsky (2011), indicates that blacks are returning to the South because they have “emotional and spiritual” roots there. More tangibly, moving South may offer better prospects for land ownership. A woman quoted in the article, who is moving from Queens, NY to Atlanta, GA with her son, says that “in the South, I can buy a big house with a garden compared with the shoe box my retirement savings will buy me in New York” (Bilefsky 2011). If we are to believe that the South might possibly represent the Promised Land for blacks today, then the ability to own substantial portions of the land is a part of the dream. On one hand, many blacks moving to the south are moving to cities like Atlanta, Birmingham, and Charlotte for a wide range of reasons including better jobs and the opportunities to be closer to family. However, Falk et.al (2004, 505) find that “the Return Migration appears to be one where African Americans are abandoning urban residences and moving to smaller scale living, including residences in rural places”. I speculate that this move may in part be due to an increased possibility of possessing land in the south. Not only is the designation of the North as the Promised Land shifting, but also what the Promised Land stands for may be changing. Only time will tell whether or not this shift in migration patterns will have substantive impacts on rural areas of the south.

CONCLUSION

Well-intentioned activists and scholars acknowledge the pervasive whiteness of the alternative food movement. I argue that food activists and scholars have skipped over a step in their willingness to address this issue. In order to broaden participation in the alternative food movement to include more people of color, it is crucially important to acknowledge and explore diverse histories in relation to land and agriculture and to explore ethnically and racially distinct land ethics that derive from these histories. It is necessary but not sufficient to acknowledge that African Americans have a complicated relationship with the land that is in part shaped by their forbearers' experience of slavery and perhaps their own experience of sharecropping. Contemporary attitudes of African Americans toward land and agriculture are not solely based on tragedy; over time, some African Americans developed a Romantic relationship with the land, reminiscent of Aldo Leopold's advocated land ethic. The African American land ethic that I began to portray in this paper emphasizes resilience, and an intimate relationship with the land, shaped partially by spirituality.

Throughout this article, I utilize the works of scholars rarely, if ever mentioned in "dominant" discourse on the alternative food movement literature. The lack of recognition of these scholars indicates that much like the AALE, they are operating in a different sphere that renders them invisible to some in the AFM. With the exception of Smith (2007), these scholars are African American (or of African descent), and many are employed at Historically Black Colleges and Universities. They have been wrestling with the task of defining the

relationship(s) between African Americans and the land for years. Engaging with this body of scholarship may be another way for scholars and activists to deepen their engagement with communities of color.

The PAOCC is only one example of an organization that utilizes an AALE. I purposefully use an organization with a rich theology to illuminate the spiritual dimensions of the African American land ethic I seek to portray. The PAOCC illustrates the tangibility of spiritual perspectives in their understanding of the Promised Land, which informs their work at Beulah Land Farms. I briefly highlight other components of an AALE at Beulah Land Farms, components of which I hope to carefully interrogate in future research.

Future investigation will not only include Beulah Land Farms, but also how other organizations exemplify the concepts of an African American land ethic. For example, the Nation of Islam, a black nationalist organization, has approximately sixteen hundred acres of land in the southern portion of Georgia, U.S. They also represent the various components of an AALE in similar, but sometimes strikingly different ways from the PAOCC. Not only do they believe that their land can be used to form a geographically separate nation, their interpretation of Islam guides what they do. I also hope to expand the focus of an AALE to include urban land.

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CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

So today more than ever, opposing racism requires that we notice race, not ignore it, that we afford it the recognition it deserves and the subtlety it embodies. By noticing race we can challenge the state, the institutions of civil society, and ourselves as individuals to combat the legacy of inequality and injustice inherited from the past. By noticing race we can develop the political insight and mobilization necessary to make the U.S. a more racially just and egalitarian society

(Omi and Winant 1994: 159)

Broader Significance

Oftentimes, the most obvious statements or assertions are in fact the most profound. Writing at the end of their seminal work, *Racial Formation in the United States*, Omi and Winant (1994) again state the importance of recognizing race as a fruitful and important site of analysis. Only through noticing race can we “begin to combat the legacy of inequality and injustice” (Omi and Winant 1994: 159) that continue to plague our society. However, their work extends beyond noticing race. They interrogate the ways through which micro- and macro-level racial projects work to transform the U.S. social order.

In this dissertation, I interrogate race through the lens of black religious food programs, aiming to reveal the complexities inherent in studying a racialized group of people who have often been homogenized and robbed of agency in public and academic discourse. The food programs at the heart of this dissertation are agents of change in their neighborhoods and among black people more broadly. Food program volunteers and farm workers experience race in similar and distinct ways. Many of their distinctions are dialectically tied to place.

How we come to understand race has changed throughout history and reflects the process of racial formation that Omi and Winant (1994) describe. Through this dissertation, I privilege place alongside history in contextualizing the process of racial formation. Each food program in this dissertation is not only affected by place, but they also work to define place in both urban and rural contexts. All three of these programs have rich and fascinating histories that are all intimately connected to place. Tyner (2006) notes in his analysis of Malcolm X that geographers have overlooked spatial discourse in their understanding of Malcolm X's impact. In his speeches, Malcolm X often made broad and general spatial claims, tying the experiences of blacks to place in ways that scholars have often been unable to do. I found in this dissertation that all three food programs make explicit references to place; how they understand themselves as black people is revealed through these everyday food programs.

Racial Projects

Through this dissertation, I offer three levels of racial projects: macro-level, meso-level, and micro-level. My purpose in adding meso-level racial projects is to reflect the sustained efforts of black people to change the U.S. racial order in ways that have yet to be formalized or generalized about. As the process of racial formation goes, it is possible that these meso-level racial projects will change to become macro or micro-level projects. I do not conceive of racial projects within stringent categories, but instead use these categories to tease out the complexities of racial formation, specifically among black people. It would be a mistake, in my opinion, not to take each food program as a distinct racial project, unto itself, that overtly and covertly works to change the U.S. social order. The significance of conceptualizing each food program as a micro-level racial project is to highlight the everyday experiences of black people and the unlikely spaces where everyday talk occurs (Harris-Lacewell 2004). Everyday talk is reflected in the unique vision of each food program but also through the ways in which words and phrases are employed differently in various settings. For example, community uplift is used by both the Nation of Islam (NOI) and the Action Mission Ministry (AMM), but its meaning varies, sometimes reflecting the tension within individual black people and between groups on how to define the experiences of black people as a whole.

Meso-level racial projects reflect the changing nature of the times and the changing ways through which race is conceptualized and discussed. Each food program has very practical reasons for feeding black people, e.g. hunger, but

also has emotional and spiritual reasons for providing food. While emergency food or food for spiritual fulfillment may not be a meso-level racial project in ten years, it will most certainly be replaced by another sustained effort among black people to define group goals and progress. However, I suspect that changes will not be as obvious and will more closely reflect the trajectory of the AMM's emergency food program; the way in which they feed has changed, but their commitment to feeding people has remained the same.

Macro-level racial projects, in my conceptualization, are perhaps the most lasting level of racial projects. The four black political ideologies that I utilize are presented and analyzed by Harris-Lacewell (2004) who uses them to explain how black people come to know themselves in relation to the U.S. political system. Harris-Lacewell's (2004) list of black political ideologies excludes two that Dawson (2001) explores in his seminal work *Black Visions*. Harris-Lacewell (2004) notes in her present day configuration that these political ideologies do not operate in modern times, an indication of the importance of history in racial formation. Though not the explicit focus of my study, these broader macro-level racial projects are also place-dependent, and future research is needed to explore this important connection.

My exposure to these three food programs occurred prior to the beginning of my official scholarly inquiry through institutions in the black counterpublic. All, in varying ways, had a tangible presence in my life, particularly during college. I remember visiting Auburn Avenue during college and marveling at the amazing religious structures on the street, including Wheat Street Baptist Church, which

had a presence throughout the city of Atlanta. I recall walking down the street from Spelman College and sometimes encountering Nation of Islam members selling *Final Call* newspapers and bean pies on the street. And finally, I recall walking to the Krispy Kremes in the West End of Atlanta, and sometimes stopping by the African American bookstore owned by the Pan African Orthodox Christian Church (PAOCC). As I sometimes hear my elders say, I knew these organizations, “back when.” Because of this, I knew from the outset that who I am would also be a site of analysis.

Reflections on Methodology and Positionality

I know that what is alive for me. I have a place that is mine. That’s my work when I write. That’s mine. It is free. Nobody tells me what to do and I wouldn’t listen if they did. It’s all mine. It’s my world. I have invented it. These are my people. This is my language. And now I have come to believe that everybody needs one of those places... It’s your sacred place. And you own it.

Toni Morrison (May 2011)

My mother gave me one of the best pieces of advice before entering a PhD program. She said that when you choose what you study, make sure that it is something that you are passionate about. I knew from the start that the focus of my research would be other black people. The above excerpt by acclaimed author Toni Morrison (2011) reflects my position clearly: “It’s my world. I have invented it. These are my people. This is my language.” Now while only a part

of what Morrison says is really possible in academic writing, the people that I study, in my mind, literally are my people and as an academic I have a responsibility not only to analyze the qualitative data that I collect, but to never ignore the voice of the people that I am researching. I do not claim to give voice to a group of people who already have one and are perfectly equipped to use it. However, their voice is rarely evident in geographic literature where studies on black religious organizations are almost nonexistent. In my perfect academic world, I would be able to both tell their story and provide my analysis to these stories. As a black woman, I am connected in both professional and personal ways to the group of people that I study.

Some may assume that because I am black like my research participants and have emotional, race-based, and cultural ties to the community that I am in some ways, a “native anthropologist.” Native anthropologists, according to Narayan (1993) “are perceived as insiders regardless of their complex backgrounds.” This perception, whether true or untrue, carries with it a certain amount of baggage that pertains to my own research experience. Through working with research participants that identify racially with me, I had a range of experiences that I will briefly recount. Following these reflections, I express my own anxieties that accompany my perceived insider status and possible backlash by geographers and other scholars who may feel offended by the words of research participants and attribute views deemed offensive, to me as a black person. Moreover, I also run the risk of being judged by my own black peers. Finally, through openly acknowledging my own positionality and experiences in

the field, my research may be “ghettoized within the discipline,” in a way that is distinct from my white colleagues (Chow 1993). While qualitative researchers acknowledge subjectivities, many still carry the positivist badge of assuming a certain amount of distance from their research participants. As someone who openly admits an emotional tie to other black people, this might in effect lessen the “validity” of my research.

During my research experience considerations of my positionality, as is the case with qualitative research (Rose 1996), were front and center in my mind. While I, like all of my research participants, am black, there are many other layers to who I am as a person and I took these considerations into the field. At the AMM, located at Wheat Street Baptist Church, I, for a lack of better words, fit in. Though somewhat hesitant at first, volunteers came to accept me as a part of their family. Because many volunteers were considerably older than I am, they treated me as one of their children and expected respect in return. For me, this was perhaps the easiest research site to navigate because I am most familiar with it from my childhood upbringing. Volunteers were also proud of me for pursuing my PhD. While this increased my access in the field, it in some ways silenced me. As a member of the family, many volunteers expected me to agree with them on certain issues, and some were visibly surprised when my opinion differed.

My experience working on the farms of the PAOCC was considerably different. While I knew of the PAOCC and had frequented their bookstore in Atlanta, there is still an air of mystery around the fairly tight knit and closed

community of members. This organization, of the three, is the one that I prepared the most for when going into the field. Jacobs-Huey (2002), a black female scholar had this to say about entry into the field:

To negotiate my access into highly intimate cultural spaces, for example, I have relied on an assortment of verbal and nonverbal strategies. In face-to-face conversations...I have strategically employed African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and cultural discourse styles during intimate conversations in which such styles were already in use or would be appropriate.

While I initially found myself somewhat put off by this obvious change in vernacular, I realize that Jacobs-Huey (2002) is admitting a degree of performativity that many of us engage in during field studies. As a black person, I myself made assumptions about what it means to be black in the PAOCC. As a reminder, the PAOCC promotes black liberation and a connection to one's African roots. Because of this, I subconsciously analyzed some attributes of my physical appearance, mainly my hair. Prior to my first day working on the farm, I made what at the time seemed to be a subconscious decision to wrap my straightened hair. While I could attribute this to the cold weather or the farm, I now realize that I feared that my straightened hair would indicate acceptance of European values. When the temperature got a little warmer, as my hair story normally goes, I wore my hair in an afro and two members commented that 1) they did not know that I had natural hair and 2) my natural hair was my crowning glory. Something as seemingly meaningless as hair was a part of my

consideration going into the field.²⁸ Despite this, I generally found that their agreeing to work with me was based on my willingness to work hard on the farm.

Because I never gained access to interview members of the Nation of Islam, I can only speculate that this is in part due to my positionality. I am a woman who is not only affiliated with the NOI, but whose institutional affiliation is with a large white university. However, Manning Marable, in a speech given at UGA, noted that it took him almost a decade to gain access to the NOI. NOI members did correspond briefly with me via email and never completely shut the door to future interviews.

From my years attending professional meetings, I often hear positionality statements such as this: “I recognize that as a white male studying black people, I am in a position of power and am in some ways an outsider in a tight knit community.” The statement often continues for two or three more sentences and includes reflections on power, patriarchy, and the historic role of white ethnographers studying people of color. I do not diminish the necessity of these statements for the researchers themselves and as a learning tool for other scholars in similar positions. However, both personally and professionally, I have come to believe that the very act of discussing at length your recognition of whiteness or white privilege, is in fact a privilege that I as a black scholar do not have. Perhaps my reaction is childish and based on my increasing frustration as a black researcher who researches black groups in a field where very few black scholars are. To put it frankly, I desire a script that I can insert into all of my

²⁸ In *Hair Story* (2001), Byrd and Tharps give an insightful analysis of the politics of black hair in America. Simply, what is deemed beautiful and acceptable is tied to the history of race in this country, and has very real material outcomes.

academic articles and presentations that describe my experiences as an insider/outsider in the field, and the care that I chose to take in how I present my scholarship to a largely white audience.

There is an increasing amount of scholarship on supposed “insiders” in research. Carolyn Finney (2011), a noted black geographer who studies the intersection between race and the environment has this to say:

Often, when people ask me about issues of race, and in particular the African American community, they forget that I’m also the thing itself. It’s emotional for me. So if I’m going to be authentic in talking about race-and I’m most interested in being authentic, that really messes with people’s heads, because they sometimes forget that I’m both the voice and the thing itself.

Being both the “voice” and the “thing” itself is sometimes a trying task. While being black does, in some instances, permit entry into the field, it also creates a separate set of concerns about remaining true to myself, my people, and my research, which is quite a daunting task.

I also consider how my work will be received by other scholars. I am reminded of a presentation that I gave on the Nation of Islam and the Pan African Orthodox Christian Church at the 2009 Association of American Geographer’s Meeting in Las Vegas, Nevada. In relaying the Nation of Islam’s history, I recounted their historic stance on integration with whites in which they explicitly call white people the devil. Since I pride myself on making eye-contact with my audience, I was able to scan the expressions of the forty or so white people in

the room. As is the case at many geography meetings, I appeared to be the only black person in the room. Some in the audience seemed shocked while others, as is typical of any academic meetings, were paying me little attention. My eyes zeroed in on a past department chair, an approximately seventy year old white man, who was directly in my line of vision and who perked up a little when I said that statement. Interestingly enough, the department chair that night approached me, and to my surprise spoke at length about how fascinating my work was and how interested he has always been in the Nation of Islam.

Through this experience, I found that I have two major concerns as a black scholar who has started down what at this point seems to be a career-long research path. First, I am in some ways concerned that my views will be associated with the views of those that I research in the context of two very different audiences. In a few months, I will fulfill my dream by being associated with both a geography and African American studies department. I, as a black scholar, have the potential to be demonized because of some of the statements that I make. Darden and Tera (2002) reported that there were only forty-six black geographers as faculty members at institutions of higher education. While I cannot say for certain how many of them directly engage with “black issues” in their research, it is fair to say that there are more white geographers “studying” black people than there are black geographers. I can only speculate that a source of my anxiety comes from these statistics. Geographers are conducting exciting and cutting edge research about issues that some may view as radical.

However, the majority of these geographers are white and will rarely be accused of being hateful towards other white people.

I am increasingly concerned with the response that my work will receive from other black scholars studying race in the academy. My work, for example, highlights strains of black conservatism in one black religious food program. There are statements made by research participants that can easily be taken out of context and co-opted as a part of racist propaganda. As a black researcher who is deeply engaged in the community that I study, I do take the challenge upon myself to not only do good research, but take the extra step to predict and address negative backlash as best and as appropriately as possible. To me, this can best be done by taking a little more time to tell the story of my research participants and explain the nuance of their voices.

In an ideal world, many of my concerns would be unfounded. Throughout my short career as a geography graduate student, scholars, regardless of race, have been accepting of my work. Whether or not these scholars agreed with my assessment, they chose to critically engage in a way that has only strengthened my work. It is possible that I am being paranoid, but it is also possible that my career is in its honeymoon stage. As time progresses, I am sure that critiques will come, and I welcome them. My grandmother always repeated the popular phrase that “you know you’re doing something right if people are talking about you.” In academia, if they are not talking and reflecting on your work, it literally is a career-ending scenario. However, I will never believe through my experiences in a racialized society that some of these critiques cannot be served with a side

of racism. Luckily, I am well-positioned to take the good, the bad and the offensive all in stride. I also realize through my choice of research topics that I am at somewhat of an advantage. In this dissertation, I chose multiple cases that reflect the diversity of black political opinion and its connection to place and space. Through this choice, I realize that I am perfectly poised to offend everyone.

Future Research

In future research, I hope to delve deeper into the food outreach of each organization. Wheat Street, for example, recently leased land to establish the first urban garden in Atlanta's Fourth Ward. I hope to gain insight into why they chose to lease this land, how this connects to past engagement with food, and whether or not this conflicts with AMM members' concern that vacant land be used for more affordable housing. I also intend to interview NOI farm workers to understand their individual motivations for farming. Moreover, I am interested in analyzing how their rhetoric lines up with what they are actually doing on the farm. I will also interview more farm workers at Beulah Land Farms and intend to conduct participant observation there in the upcoming summers. The PAOCC also owns urban gardens in Detroit. I am intrigued to understand the connection between rural and urban food production and how this relates to their goals of black liberation.

I hope to add other black religious food programs to my research portfolio. For example, the Black Hebrew Israelites own Soul Vegetarian, a vegan restaurant located in major cities. I intend to explore how veganism, blackness,

and religion are interconnected within this organization and how this counters dominant narratives about black food patterns.

I am excited about continuing to develop the concept of an African American land ethic (AALE). Both the AMM and the NOI offer even more insight into the different principles and practices of an AALE. Moreover, all three food programs reveal an intriguing rural/urban connection that is a part of the land ethic. Simply, how might an AALE manifest itself in urban gardening? Do PAOCC members understand the land of their urban gardens to carry the same spiritual significance? Is this land also a manifestation of the Promised Land in an urban context? Moreover, how do Wheat Street's urban gardens contribute to our conceptualization of an AALE.

This dissertation is the beginning of a career in which I hope to continue engaging with the connection between race, religion, and place. My commitment to this connection is scholarly, but also reveals a deep personal commitment to each of these components separately, and a piqued curiosity to continue understanding how they all work together.

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