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# Roots of resilience: A case study on the strength and survival of small-scale Black farmers in the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta region

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## Abstract

How are Black farmers experiencing agriculture today? The shadow of an egregious history for Black farmers over the last century has sought to submerge into the story behind the experiences of Black farmers today. Yet, contemporary Black farmers are reshaping the narrative beyond their demise, revitalizing their significance and what they bring to rural areas such as the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta region. This article takes a qualitative exploratory approach to examine how small-scale Black farmers in the region experience agriculture through strategies of self-reliance and autonomy. We draw on the theory of Black agrarianism to illuminate how such experiences are shaped by (1) Farm Profitability and Farm Expenses, (2) Resource Scarcity and U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Farm Service Agency (FSA) Relationships, and (3) Resiliency Strategies. Our findings offer new perspectives on Black agrarianism by exploring coping strategies that uphold self-empowerment and self-sufficiency, interconnecting both tangible and intangible responses by Black farmers to agricultural, political, social, and economic inequities. While evidence shows that Black farmers in the Delta are subject to unequal treat-

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ment in the agricultural system, the legacy of Black agrarianism persists among Mississippi's Black farmers as a testament to their resilience in the face of agricultural barriers.

**Keywords**
Black farmers, Mississippi Delta, Black agrarianism, racial inequality, resilience, USDA, community engagement

## Introduction

The shadow of an egregious history for Black farmers over the last century has sought to submerge into the story behind the experiences of Black farmers today. Historically, Black people have been engaged in U.S. agriculture for over three centuries and were once the backbone of a plantation economy (Myers, 2002). The plantation economy, and the agriculture it was built on, has systematically subjugated Black farmers in the South, causing a stark division between the growth of Black and white farmers (Quisumbing King et al., 2018). There has been a painful history of oppressive powers in place, both governmental and institutional, that have reproduced regulations and policies which undermined and constrained Black farmers. Even though American agriculture was built on the backs of the Black race, it has often been impossible for Black people to own the land on which they worked (Hinson & Robinson, 2008). Besides evident discriminatory practices in government and private sector, confiscation of land, biased loans, terrorization by racist groups, and a lack of educational resources, Black farmers have faced a series of setbacks in agriculture (Asare-Baahet al., 2018; Furman et al., 2014; Gilbert et al., 2001; Herron, 2016; Owens, 2016; Tyler, 2013; Tyler & Moore, 2013). Since the abolition of slavery, Black farmers have been mistreated through many regimes and tactics that prohibit their economic independence and progress in the agricultural sector (Hinson & Robinson, 2008).

Black farmers' struggles are outsized compared to the struggles of white farmers (Horst & Marion, 2019; Tyler & Moore, 2013). There has been a recorded history of bias through numerical and qualitative data reports of Black farmers sharing their experiences during the 20th and 21st centuries (Daniel, 2013; U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1965, 1982 ; USDA National Commission on Small Farms, 1998). Such examples of Black farmers' experiences include but are not limited to USDA agencies authorizing marginalization through tax sales, partition sales, foreclosures, voluntary sales, and access to farm credit and noncredit benefits (Hinson & Robinson, 2008; Kromm, 2010; Newkirk, 2020).

Despite some welcomed changes from government agencies, cases of discrimination in both public and private sectors are still widespread, and Black farmers are still feeling disadvantaged in the necessary processes for managing a farm, partially due to the hostility of local agents (Russell et al., 2021; Tyler, 2013). Enduring a long history of agricultural inequities, Black small-scale farmers in the South have taken the initiative to resist the dreadful narrative surrounding the history of Black farming and the ongoing challenges they face today. Their resiliency to remain relevant in a plantation-economic region raises the question: "How are

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**Ethics Approval**
The Human Research Protection Program (HRPP) of Mississippi State University made an Exemption Determination as defined by 45 CFR 46.101(b)2. The IRB for this study is identified as IORG0000467.

**Consent to Participate**
Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

**Data, Materials and/or Code Availability**
Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

**Research involving Human Participants and/or Animals**
The semi-structured interview guide and methodology for this study was approved by the Human Research Protection Program committee of Mississippi State University (IRB approval number: IORG0000467).

Black farmers experiencing agriculture today?"

In this paper, we take up this question by examining the lives of Black small-scale farmers in the Yazoo–Mississippi Delta region (known as the "Delta") of Mississippi. Specifically, we take a qualitative exploratory approach to examine how small-scale Black farmers in the region experience agriculture through strategies of resistance, self-reliance, and autonomy. We draw on theories of Black agrarianism to illuminate how these farmers' experiences in the Delta are shaped by: (1) Farm Profitability and Farm Expenses, (2) Resource Scarcity and USDA FSA Relationships, and (3) Resiliency Strategies.

In many respects, the Delta can largely serve as a depiction of the agricultural landscape from the historical and modern-day context of southern agriculture. It showcases an important site of the shift in farming, especially for Black farmers. The rural Mississippi Delta is a historically agricultural-rich region that serves as a reminder of the strength and resilience of Black farmers. Building on the work of Touzeau (2019), this exploratory research amplifies the nature of Mississippi Black farmers' perceptions of farming in agriculture today. While Black farmers in the Mississippi Delta are still reckoning with historical racial discrimination practices in the agriculture sector, they are adopting methods to build resilience to resist the deep-rooted racial hierarchy and define success on their own terms with their own resources through the lens of Black agrarianism.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, we conceptualize Black agrarianism from a standpoint that situates resistance and resilience at the forefront of oppression and local politics. We then examine the contemporary experiences of Black small-scale farmers deeply entangled with systemic, oppressive systems. We shift to transpose how Black farmers are combating these challenges through the concept of Black agrarianism by repositioning themselves to pursue self-liberation through legacy, attachment, and community engagement. We conclude by demonstrating how resistance and resilience provide a force of empowerment to self-determination, sustainability, and economic autonomy to maintain the Black farming legacy.

## Theoretical Framework: Black Agrarianism

This paper uses Black agrarianism (Quisumbing King et al., 2018) as a theoretical framework to analyze the contemporary experiences of Black small-scale farmers in the Delta. While much literature identifies and explores the struggles and complicated relationship between Black communities and their connection to the land, Black agrarianism challenges this narrative by highlighting subtle, everyday ways of living and the valiant acts of resistance that Black people demonstrated during the era of the antebellum plantation economy, Jim Crow, and the present day (Quisumbing King et al., 2018; B. Smith, 2019; K. Smith, 2004; White, 2018). Black agrarianism conceptualizes a space to express how Black people in general, particularly Black farmers and landowners, resisted white supremacy through their attachment to land, mobilization for political power, and social and economic movements to become independent and self-sufficient. This framework amplifies the connection between land and emotional attachment and emphasizes how land and land ownership have been the premiere strategy of resilience against racial and economic exploitation (Quisumbing King et al., 2018). A focus on Black agrarianism demands attention to the ways that marginalized communities have built resilience and resistance in the face of oppressive systems to secure economic and political autonomy and survival. Drawing on an exploratory research approach, we focus on sharing the stories of several Black Mississippi Delta farmers who, situated at phases of resistance and oppression, adopt strategies of Black agrarianism in their everyday way of living.

Black agrarianism has deep roots, with tactics such as planting seeds in the braids of those abducted into the slave trade or gardening a small plot outside slave quarters on plantations (White, 2018). Black connections and attachment to land as good stewards have significantly expanded political, economic, and social movements (K. Smith, 2004). Black connections to land have served as a strategy not only to dismantle oppressive racial structures but also to practice alternative strategies of resilience for the right to self-determination and self-sufficiency among social, economic, and political

structures. For example, Black agrarian resistance to white hegemony was evident in Freedom Farms, a cooperative led by food and civil rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer. This agricultural cooperative laid the foundation of resiliency against racial power structures by building land ownership, community togetherness, and Black political power, aiming for economic and agricultural independence (McCutcheon, 2019; White, 2017). Black land activism laid the groundwork for the rise of political autonomy that stemmed from economic autonomy and food sovereignty. Historically, land ownership has been the focal point in gaining political and economic autonomy in multiple ways: political awareness through voting rights, health awareness through the construction of health centers in poverty-stricken areas, and most importantly, food sovereignty through supplying food to communities marginalized by racial hierarchies (B. Smith, 2020; White, 2018).

Black agrarianism provides a philosophy and strategy that orients toward independence from a dominant capitalist agricultural society designed to marginalize Black and Brown communities. Black farmers have created agricultural cooperatives to strategize resistance against these systems; thus, they have given life to the notion that cultivating food and resources can lead to self-sufficiency and collectively enhance community well-being. This article draws upon the framework of Black agrarianism to illustrate how contemporary Black connections to the land create a free social space for economic and political autonomy, self-sufficiency, and food sovereignty. Black agrarianism provides the impetus and framework that Black small-scale farmers in the Delta draw upon when they incorporate the legacy of ancestors such as Fannie Lou Hamer and W.E.B. Du Bois, resisting oppressive structures embedded in federal and local establishments and adopting new efforts toward independence. The themes identified in this study help support Black agrarianism theory for Black farmers who remain self-determined while attempting to resist historical systemic barriers, especially those in the Delta. Black agrarianism highlights the lived experiences of marginalized communities who continue to fight and dismantle these power structures while simultaneously attempting to establish a liberated system that does not require the necessity of racial and social boundaries.

## Applied Research Methods

This empirical study adopted a qualitative case study analysis using in-depth, semi-structured interviews to amplify and reflect underrepresented Black farmers' experiences and perspectives. This approach was characterized by exploring and uncovering knowledge about a specific phenomenon like Black farmers in Mississippi (B. Smith, 2019). Using a case study design allows researchers to gain insight into and examine lived experiences for a certain focus of inquiry rather than specific case descriptions. Yin (2003) describes case study designs as a suitable strategy when "how" and "why" questions emerge, and the focus holds a modern relevance within real-life scenarios and context. It serves as a "comprehensive research strategy" (Yin, 2003, p. 14) which accounts for the phenomenon, data collection resources, and data analysis techniques.

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Mississippi State University reviewed and approved all research details and activities. Research participants were selected by convenience and snowball sampling. Initially, farmers were selected in Greenwood, Mississippi, using a membership list provided by the Delta Cooperative of Minority Farmers (DCAMF), a farming co-op in Webb, Mississippi, located in Tallahatchie County. Given that the research was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, interviews were conducted by telephone and lasted between 30 minutes and one hour and 30 minutes. Data collected was then transcribed and coded in several phases for analysis using MAXQDA Analytics Pro (VERBI Software, 2020). a software program for qualitative research. Eight male farmers and one female Black farmer located in the Mississippi Delta region participated in this study. The internalization of the sexual division of labor has construed certain tasks to be "suitable" for a particular gender (Grim, 2021). Although this paper does not center on gender dynamics, it is noteworthy to mention the gendered nature of agriculture being generally consumed by the sexual division of labor and overshadowing the crucial role women, especially Black women and women

of color, have had on the notion of American farming (Effland et al., 1993; Grim, 2021; Layman & Civita, 2022). Specifically, Black women in rural areas have played an essential role by engaging in "gender duties" and untraditional farming roles to evade race, class, and gender oppression and become self-determined and economically autonomous in a segregated South (Grim, 2001, 2021; White, 2018). These farmers explained how they farm today, highlighting their struggles and resilience strategies in farming.

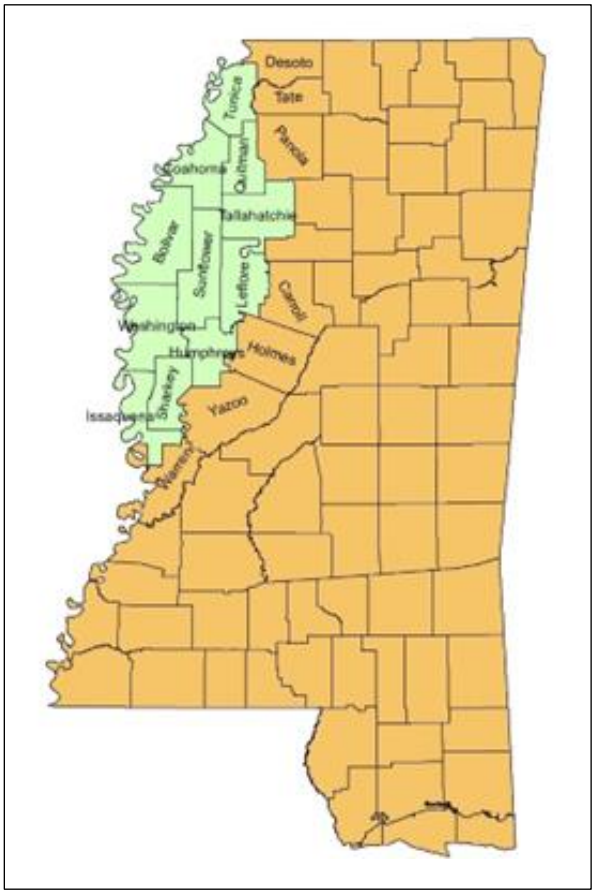
By utilizing a case study analysis in examining Mississippi Delta Black farmers, this study creates a climate that expounds on how to better understand the lens of Black farmers and their day-to-day experiences from a larger context pinpointed upon a small-scale area. While this case study analysis highlights, uplifts, and values the voices of Black farmers in the Delta, it does not serve as an overall broadened generalization of Mississippi Delta Black farmers. Rather, it explores the unique individual life stories of a historically marginalized group and the importance of local, community-based agri-food systems within this rural area. This case study analysis in this region also enlarges the understudied significance of Black small-scale farmers in obtaining food justice and power context in the present day.

The data from this case study reveals that discrimination still leaves an impact on the lives of Black farmers; however, their strong sense of self-determination empowers them to overcome these historical barriers. These findings reveal that Black farmers are conversant about how their ongoing experiences reflect persistent and historical barriers. Therefore, they establish a new path to transform into alternative ways that produce resiliency and self-autonomy within themselves. Our findings further illustrate the everyday struggles of Black farmers in the Delta region, and also amplify their resistance against oppressive structures to become self-sufficient. From the data collection, three central themes—(1) Farm Profitability and Farm Expenses, (2) Resource Scarcity and USDA FSA Relationships, and (3) Strategies of Resilience—were indicative of the contemporary experiences and ongoing issues faced by Mississippi's Black small-scale farmers.

The impacts of the ongoing agrarian discrimination and structural racism in agriculture are particularly stark in the Mississippi Delta, where agro-industry dominance exacerbates these inequalities. The Mississippi Delta, a fertile alluvial valley formed by the Yazoo and Mississippi Rivers, comprises approximately 4.5 million acres and 18 counties in Mississippi (Hossfeld et al., 2019; Wright Austin, 2006). While the Lower Mississippi Alluvial Valley geographically extends from southern Illinois to the southeastern portion of Louisiana, this paper focuses on the 11 distinct "core counties" of the Mississippi Delta (Figure 1) that lie within the floodplains of the Yazoo–Mississippi Rivers (Collins, 2015; Wright Austin, 2006).

Although early cotton plantations were established in the Delta in the antebellum period, most Delta farmland was cleared and devoted to cotton

**Figure 1. The Study Area: The Delta, which Comprises 11 Counties along the Mississippi–Yazoo River**



in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Williams, 2018). In this early period of plantation settlement, there were also significant opportunities for Black landownership, and many small-scale Black farmers were able to purchase land (Willis, 2000). However, economic coercion, violence, and pressures from the plantation system soon undermined extensive Black landownership in the Delta, and by the 1920s, the region represented the epicenter of cotton plantation agriculture in the U.S. (Willis, 2000; Woodruff, 2003). Despite the abolition of slavery, sharecropping and the crop lien system preserved a racialized imbalance of power that strategically prevented Black farmers from gaining independence and building wealth (Woods, 1998; Wright Austin, 2006).

By the 1930s, plantations in the Delta began to shift from labor-intensive to capital-intensive production. This process led to the almost-full mechanization of large-scale farms by the 1970s. Due to the national political dominance of what Woods (1998) terms the Delta's "plantation bloc," policies and programs encouraging technological intensification in agriculture overwhelmingly supported large-scale white landowners (Williams, 2018). In contrast, Black farmers were hindered by a lack of resources, a lack of land availability, and an inequitable system of allocation of finance and services (Daniel, 2013; Herron, 2016; Wise, 2012). These inequities led to a further extensive decline in Black landownership, a process that has continued to this day with little to no access to resources and financial profitability. The gamut of institutional barriers intensifies environmental challenges, such as climate change, irregular weather patterns, and natural hazards, thus creating a higher—and increasing—burden for Black farmers to sustain farming. In the context of a region marked by massive structural inequities in wealth and landownership, Black farming and landownership remain crucial.

Although there is extensive research (much of which is reviewed above) on the egregious history of discrimination against Black farmers, work is still necessary to explain how Black farmers are currently developing alternative solutions to structural challenges and blocked opportunities (Green et al., 2011). It is crucial to not only understand the obstacles born of discrimination and structural inequality, but also to highlight and support the work of Black farmers in challenging oppressive systems and building alternatives. For this reason, it is fundamental to examine and to understand the lived experiences of Black farmers who have endured racial mistreatment and recognize the resilient alternatives Black farmers are adopting to become self-sufficient. Through a variety of strategies, Black farmers seek independence while simultaneously attempting to significantly dismantle racially hostile structures for future generations of Black farmers. Centering Black farmers' experiences reveals their challenges and motivations, which can provide insight into how agrarian governance structures must change to meet the specific needs of marginalized communities rather than creating general "one-size-fits-all" initiatives and approaches. Such approaches demonstrate how (1) Farm Profitability and Farm Expenses, (2) Resource Scarcity and USDA FSA Relationships, and (3) Resiliency Strategies shape the contemporary experiences of small-scale Black farmers in the Delta. We further expound on these three characteristics in the following section.

**Farm Profitability and Farm Expenses**

Several farmers in this study mentioned that they were "struggling to make money" from farming. As with previous studies (Banks, 1986; M. M. Brown & Larson, 1979; Gilbert et al., 2002), farmers in this study had off-farm income, whether continuously employed or retired. Almost all farmers admitted that farming alone was not self-sufficient for their livelihood or way of living. Derek, a soybean farmer, explained that he had used parts of his 401(k) to purchase farm supplies albeit yet to make a profit. Initially desiring to retire from his day-to-day work occupation, Derek reluctantly decided to continue working due to the investments in the farm and apprehension of not having enough income to support his livelihood and farm. He said:

> Yeah. Like, I'm interested in making a profit, ya know. But, but, I enjoy the work, but still, [it] is not something that I would continue to do unless I can make a profit out of it, ya know. … So, if I don't make a profit, it's going

> to be [inaudible]. Ima have to sell. A fire sale. That's the reality. I ain't going to keep doing it if I [can't] make some money.

Other farmers also had similar viewpoints, explaining the differentiation and hardship for farm profitability as a Black farmer in the Delta. One young returning farmer, Clifton, discussed how he grew up on a family farm up until a teenager after his father's passing. In Clifton's words, "Back then it was kinda hard for—to make it, so we just went on and got out of farming." During the late 20th century, deep explicit and implicit biases within government institutions created financial hardships and limited Black farmers. As a result, in many cases like Clifton's family, Black farms became abandoned. Upon returning to farming, Clifton ran his former employer's farm for a few years before becoming an independent farmer. As a Black independent farmer, Clifton explained that the major hardships for earning profitability included constrained time from working at a local factory and constrained resources. In Clifton's words, "I got a full-time job, and I farm on the side and really, you know, you not gone, *we* can't just live off it … really can't get enough money."

While farmers like Clifton and Derek rely entirely on their own labor, a farm's income may not be enough to offset expenses or generate personal financial gain. In other words, the revenue from their farm sales is reinvested back into the farm, whether for paying a farm equipment bill, purchasing farm products, or financing mortgage for land. A few farmers who earned a profit from farming expressed that it goes "back into farming." The profit is invested solely into the farming operation. For farmers with limited assets, the imperative of paying expenses and reinvesting in the operation means that farmers experience significant pressure every growing season, since their very ability to operate is tied to the success of each crop. Dennis, a newly beginning farmer, explains it in this way:

> You gotta actually, you gotta be out there to, you can put [US]$10,000 worth of things in the ground. And if it rained, You like, "Oh my God, I hope they come up." If they come up, you hope they [don't] come up skippy because the money you spend in them, the insurance that you pay on them, don't equal out … and you know how it go in farming you know, there wasn't no sleep because you hoping all, every pea every bean in the park come up and make good because you can't afford to take a loss. … Especially when you farming out your pocket. You know, if a bank was funding you and you was able to pay the bank back their money and make a little money, and they going to fund you again then you'll be okay, but when you farm without your [own] property, you got to pay your renters, got to pay yourself … and then you got to figure out, can I pay my renters and pay myself again twice in one year? You know what I'm sayin'?

Black farmers in the Delta explain that inequities within the process of being a small-scale farmer in Mississippi influence their on-farm decision-making and the potential of expanding their scale to serve other local neighboring communities. Historical racial exclusion from farm expansion and opportunities is compounded by the obstacles that Black farmers face as small-scale farmers in a region dominated by large-scale operations. Consequently, these unjust practices mean that small-scale Black farmers cannot solely rely on farming as a primary source of income. For small-scale Black farmers, the scale of farm, type of farm product, access to financial resources, and access to land are just a few factors that limit their financial development.

As with many farmers, farm profitability and other hardships rely on resources. Cheryl, for example, explained that while there are many factors that determine the variation of hardships for Black farmers, a commonality lies in the lack of resources undermining Black farmers' profitability. When asked about the most difficult part of farming, Cheryl described this situation by saying:

> I'm gonna say hard is relative to the person or level of difficulty, it changes from person to person. I don't think it's hard to farm, I think it's one of the easiest jobs, but I think a lot of the things that, or resources you need to farm,

> to farm successfully um that sort of, that sort of makes it more difficult or more of a challenge. So anybody could probably farm, but farm successfully to the point where you're at the end, end of it all, profit a dollar. that's the uhh, that's become more and more difficult, but again, I relate that … being able to go back access the right information and resources.

From Cheryl's perspective, the difficulty in farming does not stem from the farmers themselves but rather from reliance on external provisions. Having an innovative and sustainable frame of mind has been painless for farmers like Cheryl but encountering a complex bureaucratic system to gain accessibility to resources that inevitably earn farmers profit has been the ultimate setback. Access to financial resources allows farmers like Cheryl to produce their products without the strain of deciphering what is deferred or limited. Farm profitability, however, for particularly older small-scale Black farmers in the Delta, remains a struggle since many do not analyze and operate the managerial aspects of their farms as a business enterprise. Notwithstanding, the root foundation of farm profit issues with Black farmers in the Yazoo–Mississippi Delta embodies the Black farming atrocity of systemic oppression within U.S. southern agriculture.

Although farmers continue to be resilient despite the lack of profitability, agricultural input costs have become a huge burden. Farm expenses, especially without earning profitable income, appear to be the primary struggle for farmers. Agriculture today relies heavily on machinery, pesticides, fertilizers, and genetically modified (GM) seeds. Regarding the burden of expensive supplies needed to maintain the farm, most farmers expressed similar sentiments. Derek expressed how he was "pretty much empty" by investing in his farm operation out of pocket. Sylvester, a soybean, cotton, and wheat farmer, defined the cost factors to implement farming as "outrageous." Sylvester further expounded his frustrations on farm expenses and how they discourage Black farmers, stating:

> The equipment. It's too high. We can't get loans to buy the equipment. New equipment, yes, that's part of the problem with Black farmers and farmers of color. Uh, you know it's just, it's just so expensive. If we don't buy no used equipment, get some good used equipment, we are in trouble. We gon' be, I think nie, if I'm looking at this, we gon' be … it's gon' be [not] that many black farmers in the near future. A farmer of color. It's not gon' be neither one of us.

Sylvester's perspective expressed the difficulty of Black farmers participating in a capitalist society: the persisting shadow of racial discrimination in the agricultural system. Due to ingrained prejudice in the system, Black farmers do not have the resources or access to purchase farm necessities, which Sylvester felt could lead to a strong likelihood of the demise of the very existence of Black farming. However, through self-determination and the resilience to become self-autonomous, Black farmers purchase what they can afford, which is primarily preowned machinery, as Sylvester stated, if any is available. While there is a pressing need for better equipment, most small-scale Black farmers cannot afford the cost of new, modern tools. Although utilizing preowned machinery lies as an act of self-determination to farm, Black farmers in the Delta oftentimes endure a continuation of barriers that reinforce the historical demise of Black farming.

In the agricultural system today, the necessity of expensive farm equipment has undermined the affordability of small farming, forcing farmers to, as one described, "Get what you can get or with what your money allow you to." Dennis shared his most difficult challenge, which was maintaining preowned, obsolete equipment. The usage of obsolete equipment often prevented farmers from expanding their scale, farming full-time, and ultimately, increasing their farm profitability. He shares his frustration by expressing:

> That's been the hardest trying to keep my equipment up and using old equipment, using old equipment. I probably could get ahead if I had a new tractor and, uh, up to date planner or something like that, I probably could get ahead. But farming with that old stuff, you

> can't run that old stuff all day, all night, three, four hours, and get off and come back at it another day because it's old. My tractor is almost older than me, well it is older than me. I got a 1977 tractor. So you know how I mean, when you get older, you're older, you've figured out, you know, you can't, you can't jump off the porch and land flat feeted. When you get fifty, You gone have to, you gone have to walk down the steps. You know what I'm saying?

Here, Dennis contends how old, used equipment causes constant, minute dilemmas that significantly impact the day-to-day operations of Black farmers. By using old, outdated equipment, Black farmers must maneuver differently regarding their farm duties and be strategic in planning to maintain a robust farming operation. Both significant and minor hurdles Black farmers face are woven into the fabric of systemic suppression that has left their legacy scarce, fragile, and vulnerable in the Delta.

Farm expenses vary among the differentiation of farmers, but for Mississippi Delta farmers, the cost of chemicals and seeds is a major concern. Herron (2016) describes GM seeds as a nuisance to small-scale farming because corporations patent seed varieties, which could lead to an increase in seed price and the need for chemicals. Many study participants planted soybeans, a popular crop among Black farmers, mainly for its low maintenance requirements (Dismukes et al., 1997). Curtis, a soybean farmer, explained how the low maintenance of soybeans helped him remain in the farming business by saying:

> Well, that was the only thang that was feasible, couldn't afford anything else at the time. … See cotton 'n stuff, all that got to be too expensive. And ya know, when you doin' soybeans, you only [using] one gathering machine, see enough combine, but ya know it just wasn't feasible to uh ya know to split it up in different crops cause it just too expensive.

Curtis's explanation relates to how large corporations strategize with supply customers who can afford multiple crops. This includes large-scale farmers or farmers who can afford expensive equipment that suits only one crop. He explained that cotton and other crop production endured a cost-squeeze effect where farm supplies and numerous equipment requirements became so expensive that they outpaced revenue, especially for small-scale farmers. When asked why they chose soybeans as the main crop, one farmer, Dennis, explained clearly, stating, "Well, the thang is, that's about the only thing that a young, newly Black farmer can afford to farm, you know?" Dennis further explained in this way:

> The equipment and stuff so high, and you know, trying to buy a cotton picker, or if you farming corn, trying to buy equipment to actually attach to your, your equipment, to actually harvest the corn, it just … and then it's the idea of being a Black farmer or whatever. Uh, we behind the, the loop on everything you know.

Here, Dennis's stance further indicated and confirmed how the high cost of farm supplies, such as equipment and seeds, affects their ability to purchase the crops initially desired. In the 20th century, corporations became highly involved in agriculture, which greatly impacted small-scale farmers and left them with a "get large or get out" ultimatum. As a result, small-scale farmers were dealt with a major increase in the cost of farm supplies and struggled to finance their farms, especially Black farmers. Soybeans as a crop require little fertilizer and low maintenance, making them more affordable for small-scale Black farmers to harvest with one machine and still obtain a profit. However, newly established Black small-scale farmers have limited access to financial resources that offer adequate support to fully manage a multi-crop operation or high-demand crops like cotton, as well as maintain equipment. Small farmers' dissatisfaction with USDA agencies, particularly FSA, has been the consolidation of resources among all-size farmers. This initiative has sidelined the salience small-scale farmers bring to communities while simultaneously reinforcing the historical marginalization of

small-scale farmers, particularly Black farmers. Sylvester explains in this way:

> The only negative has been I have both agencies, USDA [FSA] and NRCS, not enough money for Blacks and farmers of color. It don't seem like. It's not enough money. It's not enough to keep us in business, but umm whatever it is, you know I'm thankful for it. They shouldn't use the same formula for a small farmer they use for large farming and they do. When it come down to program money to be a farmer. I think they should be another formula that they use for small farmer.

We contend here that these farmers express that large-scale farming, both in the past and today, was structurally orchestrated to obliterate small-scale farming. Furthermore, unjust practices among financial institutions/agencies benefit large, elite farmers by allocating larger portions of funding to them, while capped amounts hinder small-scale Black farmers from expanding to their full potential.

**Resource Scarcity and USDA FSA Relationships**

Most farmers also expressed a lack of resources available to Black farmers. Black farmers have historically had less access to resources than white farmers (Schor, 1996; Tyler & Moore, 2013). A few government initiatives have been established, and some impactful changes have been made with other institutions, including The Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund, Alcorn State University's Small Farm and Agribusiness Center, Mississippi Center for Justice, and National Center for Appropriate Technology. Yet, some Black farmers are unaware of these resources. Farmers in this study focused on the hardship of obtaining funds to run their farm operations. A feeling of hostility and discouragement emerged due to the strong distrust and skepticism of USDA agencies and other institutions. In Dennis's experience, he felt "it seemed like the Black guys don't 'pose to be farming," indicating the demise of Black farming was strategically executed through multifaceted acts of suppression. He elaborated further on his sentiments about the overlapping intricacies with lack of profitability and lack of resources, describing his experience with the USDA FSA by saying:

> It just like, like I said, you can't get no assistance. I mean, I have seen white farmers start out like me or my uncle and in two years they got the best equipment ever, in two years and we like, man. What the world is they doing I mean … what they doing we not doing.

The "lack of assistance" described here can be interpreted as the frustration Black farmers feel regarding the unequal dissemination of information and opportunities provided by federal agencies and financial institutions. The development of farms diverges when racial inequities in funding support or financial opportunities occur, which consequently marginalize and limit Black farmers. FSA, often known as the "lender of the last resort," denied Dennis a farm loan due to his credit score. While Dennis decided not to investigate further and "just leave it alone," these instances illustrate how Black farmers may experience a lack of opportunities and guidance from structural factors that constrain their potential to grow, expand, or be sustainable in farming. Derek, with a similar experience of FSA loan denial, shared that it initially prompted him to leave the farming business and later return independently as an act of resilience. While progression varies for every farm and cannot be generally justified as unjust racial practices, existing studies support that white farmers utilize government financial resources at an exponentially higher rate than Black farmers, calling into question the equity within local government offices regarding the approval process (Gilbert et al., 2002; Jones, 1994). Despite initiatives created to reverse the decline of farming in places like the Delta, Black farmers still experience challenges in proactively growing their farm operations due to the unequal distribution of financial resources associated with USDA.

It is not just access to finance that is challenging. Some farmers explained the difficulty of gaining access to high-quality land without financial resources to rely on. After much Black farmland

loss during the 20th century due to many circumstances, such as foreclosure, fear of retaliation, or property being divided among heirs, there has been enormous difficulty regenerating land prior to these times (Bailey et al., 2019). Today, access to land is a significant struggle, as Black farmers rarely can afford to compete with land buyers willing to make high bids. Lance expressed that the need for land is essential since it allows small-scale farmers to enlarge their yield and generate a higher income:

> I would say, uh, LAND, unable to … it's just like everything else. If yeen got the money to pay for the quality of land or have that high produced land, You gone, I mean, you got to get out there and pay big dollars for it, and that's one of the issues. Uh, we don't have too many avenues to get money for what we need.

Lance recognized the importance of land ownership, how it impacts people's liberation, and how the political system is organized, where the most productive quality of land easily lies in the hands of the elite, and Black farmers struggle with obtaining access to purchase land.

There was some variation in the relationship between Black farmers and local FSA agencies. While a couple of farmers were pleased with their relationship and overall experience with the FSA, most farmers maintained a strong distrust of their local FSA agents or decided to have no affiliation with the FSA. Some farmers explained their desire to avoid debt as the primary reason for remaining independent of government affiliation. The primary issues with FSA affiliation were lack of transparency and lack of communication. Many said that the FSA did not offer to explain or help them understand the process for using programs. Instead, they expected customers to know the requirements without initial communication. Cheryl's feelings about the Delta's local FSA agents were simplified like this:

> They expect you to walk in the office and know what programs are there and what they qualify for. There's little to no explanation; if you don't know what questions to ask and they are not going to volunteer much information, and then the information they do give you not going to be [in] full detail. They give you half of the information. I mean, and there's no transparency, and that I think has been a problem for a long time … because I've heard it from others, and they just don't go FSA for assistance anymore.

Many employees, especially older employees who have been in office since the 20th century, often depict racial bias against minority farmers. Black farmers, whose average age is 60 according to agriculture census data (USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service, 2022), are not familiar with online accessibility to learn about government programs; therefore, many visit their local county USDA offices for information. Cheryl further positions this stance by saying:

> I think information is there, don't get me wrong. I think that everybody's communication and understanding is different from person to person. So, me being able to jump on the internet, find what I need or know who to call and ask questions is different from the average 60-year-old farmer, or even black farmer knows very little about the internet. Don't even know anything about the program and there's very little … actually very internet access in our region because it's so rural. So they're going to, if not get less information, they're going to, they're not going to get the same, they're not going to get information quickly, if they get any information at all.. so being able to communicate with them and disseminate information with them is going to be different than trying to disseminate information through webpages, websites and different things. So I think that's an issue for them and learning about anything.

Despite the programs established to assist minority farmers in governmental agencies, we bring to light the notion that the level of assistance is dependent upon the approval of their local FSA agency employees. Black farmers will continue to remain reluctant to engage with government programs without a robust system distributing funds in

place that closes the gaps left by racial implications such as withholding information. These discrepancies that have been discovered all interconnect and hinder Black small-scale Delta farmers from expanding their farms using their rightful access to government programs. Derek also talked about the struggles of having the FSA acknowledge Black farmers and give details about the programs. He said:

> So a lot of the things that they offer, programs and funding or grants or anything like that, it's kind of a challenge getting that information. It's like pulling teeth. You see, that's the big thing about that; they don't, they don't, they're not, they're not forthcoming, and you gotta go up there and try to ask and figure out, try to find out about stuff, you know, where they should, you know, I'm sure they, they let the white farmers know, and they don't, they don't tell us.

According to Derek, Black farmers have to take a deeper initiative to gain knowledge about government assistance. This statement reveals the resistance and resilience among Black farmers, who push to learn about the farming assistance that's available within USDA. Although some may receive pushback from their local offices, Black farmers describe their resistance to receiving little information as "pulling teeth." They often turn to other sources, networking, partnering, and collaborating to gather any available information in the hope of eventually obtaining additional details about funding opportunities from USDA. Government-sponsored programs could be easily obtainable through USDA offices if they provided fully detailed information.

Other farmers also expressed frustration with the lengthy process of receiving finances from the FSA. In the past, the USDA purposely prolonged the waiting period for minority farmers, resulting in low production yields. In retrospect, several farmers mentioned displeasure with their experiences with slow bureaucracy, along with their forefathers who were involved with the FSA, which for some prompted them not to affiliate with USDA. Sylvester mentioned this process, voicing the need for more support from the USDA by saying:

> Uh, more support from the government, USDA. Uh, Farm Service, more finance support. And you don't have to fill out all those paperwork. Uh, lotta minority farmer, black farmer, farmers of color, umm, don't like to fill out all that paperwork. I know I don't, but I can fill it out. I don't, but I can fill it out, and I know, umm, other black farmers uh get discouraged when they go in there and have to fill out all that paperwork. And it takes so long to process. That's what get me. It takes so long to process; it shouldn't take that long to process a loan or a grant, and uh, it shouldn't take that long.

Based on this statement, Sylvester expressed how cumbersome the bureaucracy involved in filling out forms. This is especially true for older Black farmers, who often lack education on properly recording farm data that may be necessary for certain farm programs. Lack of transparency, lack of communication in the FSA, and lack of understanding of the application process have all contributed to Black farmers' reluctance to affiliate with the FSA.

**Strategies of Resilience**

Despite these ongoing barriers, Black farmers continue to farm. All the farmers interviewed were raised in rural Mississippi and had farming backgrounds. Why do Black farmers continue to farm despite all the obstacles? Farmers responded with feelings of nostalgia, liberation, and optimism that the present barriers will be lightened. The findings demonstrate that resistance to the current agricultural system helps to keep the Black farming legacy, knowledge, and pedagogy alive. These findings are similar to other research on Black farmers' emotional traditions (Holmes et al., 2022; Jett, 2020; Touzeau, 2019).

Emotional attachment to farming played a significant role in encouraging Black farmers to continue farming. Despite differences in answers, most farmers said they viewed the land through a spiritual lens, which, to them, is the most satisfying

part of farming. Derek expressed:

> I enjoy seeing uh. … You plant, and you see it growing, and in the harvest. I like all of that. And you, um, farming, put you in touch with nature of God, cause you can feel His presence when you're out there in that field, out there in that open space and you, uh, just … it's a source of freedom out there too.

Black farming pedagogy from past generations has left many Black farmers with the mindset that hard work or manual labor equates to success. Derek had moments of nostalgia describing himself as a generational farmer and talked about the appreciation of being raised in a rural farm area because it greatly influenced his outlook and development, where he adopted "good values" and "a different kind of mindset." Reflecting on his experiences of working tirelessly on a farm as a child, Derek remarked that it "made every other job easy." These statements also supported the findings of past studies, such as A. Brown et al. (1994) and Quisumbing King et al. (2018), where farmers revealed that Black land ownership gives a sense of independence, freedom, and self-worth. In fact, as an act of resistance after loan denial, Derek decided to independently operate his farm. These attributes are connected to their resilience in fighting against racially oppressive structures and their move toward independent well-being. Lance described the most satisfying part of farming as driving the machinery and having the opportunity to relax, stating:

> Um, well, I was, I always was a tractor driver. I've mostly drove tractor disking and, uh, looked like, uh, doing farming. It just a relaxation. It relaxed you, uh, by you being out' dea, you get, feel relaxed, like a person that go to fishing normal for life. Um, you just feel relaxed once you, outcross that field, not dealing with the public, you sorta out on your own. Doing what you like to do.

A personal connection between farmers and the land embodies a sense of identity and personal fulfillment that impels Black farmers to resist obstacles and to build resiliency to sustain their emotional connection to the land, which is the essence of Black agrarianism. Considering past events where Black people experienced adverse land loss, farmers explained why land independence was important to them (Gilbert et al., 2002). One of the main motives for these farmers to continue farming was a sense of their family's legacy and a strong farming background. Most farmers were considerably older, and some of their immediate family members were sharecroppers. They remembered picking and chopping cotton on the farm and doing other duties to survive. Cheryl, who was deeded generational family land, described her struggle to obtain all her 250-acre family's land because of inaccurate surveying and tax document loss. She explained the feeling of overcoming the barriers and obtaining full ownership of her family's land in this way:

> Um. Like I said, this land has been in our family for at least 3 generations, 4 generations. … And to still own it and be able to go back to us, to me working our own family land, I think that's one of my biggest prizes and achievements.

From this statement, Cheryl possessed great honor in upholding her family's farming legacy. It demonstrates the distinction between how Black farmers perceive farming—with a sense of independence, freedom, and self-worth—and how the planter elite perceive land—as a source of pure profit. Black farmers and their connection to the land are highlighted by pride and accomplishment. This perspective supports Black agrarianism, and pride influences resistance against companies or large-scale farmers who might attempt to buy out or diminish the property claim. The desire is to keep the land within the family to continue its legacy and defy the false narrative that Black farmers are not equipped to farm. In that context, land retention among Black farmers has become increasingly critical since it helps sustain Black farming's future. Cheryl explained how her family's prior decision to lease the land affected its retention, as leasing to farmers who lacked care for soil health and environmental stewardship ultimately

contributed to soil degradation. Similarly, Derek shared his belief in preventing land loss by avoiding leasing land to large-scale farmers, even if they offered to pay taxes on it. Owning generational land and preserving it, despite personal challenges, inspired the farmers to continue farming for future generations and to serve as role models for Black youth.

Black farmers' success has been greatly aided by community togetherness, including local growers and farming cooperatives. Farmers in this study explained how local cooperatives helped them find government opportunities and bulk pricing with local seed and grain companies, improved their planting techniques, and organized a food market to provide fresh produce to rural food hotspots. These farmers also situated themselves at the forefront of providing locally grown fruits and vegetables to support and enhance food system resilience for themselves and nearby communities. Although some farmers mainly planted commercial crops, they also set aside a small portion of land for fruits and vegetables to feed themselves and neighbors. Lance, primarily a soybean farmer, exemplifies the strength of community togetherness and food system resilience in this manner: "One of the things throughout the farm, at the end of the year, when we get our crops out, we go up and disk up a spot and we plant greens and stuff for the community and let people go out and get green[s] for themselves. … We sort of give it to them." Here, Lance addresses the foundation of strengthening self-liberation and food security by not only reconnecting Black rural communities to the symbiotic relationship between the land and themselves through community harvesting but also understanding the local agroecological knowledge that can only be shared through residents who know the ground.

A part of Black farmers' survival and success is dependent upon satisfying unmet needs for each other. There is a sense of closeness and connection within the Black farming community because of Black farmers' collective work. From labor exchange to informing each other of upcoming or present funding opportunities, these farmers collectively bridge the gap that can hinder the sustainability of small-scale farms. Black cooperatives like DCAMF lie at the cornerstone of resilience by providing insight and assistance to rural Black farmers when other avenues are often unhelpful, like training programs on financial and farm management and food marketing. For Mississippi Delta's Black farmers, DCAMF collaboratively works together with farm co-ops to group purchase and confront farm expenses as an act of resistance to produce sustainably and successfully as small-scale Black farmers. This exemplifies resistance to structured discriminatory practices and the initiative to overcome them. DCAMF teaches marginalized communities how to take control of their finances and food through self-determination and self-autonomy. This strategy enhances agricultural knowledge and resiliency within marginalized communities to effectively elevate the economic status of Black farmers when other avenues are often unhelpful. It recalls Fannie Lou Hamer's past work and the Freedom Farm (McCutcheon, 2019; B. Smith, 2019; White, 2018). These resilience strategies highlighted how minor changes could significantly impact small-scale Black farmers. Ultimately, farming is more than just an occupation for these individuals. It represents the renewal of an unwavering faith in independence.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Capturing the contemporary experiences of Black small-scale farmers in the Delta provides further insight into the strong relations between food systems and political structures that may result in barriers for Black farmers. These experiences also reveal their efforts to refashion resiliency and build self-sufficiency in the face of structural obstacles. Black farmers today share a system of local and community-based knowledge and methods which serve to establish economic autonomy and sovereignty. In the Delta, these Black farmers are structurally repositioning themselves for a reimagined way of farming that will rejuvenate the spirit of farming despite deep ongoing farming challenges. Here, we gain a central understanding of the essential strategies and resistance Black farmers must adopt to succeed in farming.

In this study, we capture the stories of how Mississippi Delta small-scale Black farmers are resisting prejudicial structures and remaining resili-

ent. Understanding the contemporary experiences of small-scale farmers in the Delta is distinctively important, given that the region's orientation towards plantations and large-scale operations presents a stark illustration of the obstacles Black and small-scale farmers face nationally. This study challenges the general conceptualization of the demise of Black farmers and builds upon the emphasis of Black agrarianism and its notion of resiliency. Similar, yet different, to historical resistance during the Civil Rights Era, Black farmers today are engaged in a new lens of thinking on Black agrarianism. They are strategically organizing and integrating together as a collective in transition to a condition where they can govern and supply themselves. The Black farmers in this study, some descendants of sharecroppers, comprehend the necessity of land. They have adopted an approach that relies less upon biased systems designed to disadvantage Black small-scale farmers and their efforts to survive in a capitalist system.

This case study reveals that Black farming remains critical, especially within majority-Black regions such as in the Delta, since independent farming provides a potential pathway to liberation from racial and political inequities. By paying close attention to the perspectives of Delta's small-scale Black farmers, one can understand why Black farmers are responding by becoming self-sufficient and separated from an overarching system of inequities underpinned by capitalism and white hegemony. Our themes reveal the circumstances on a day-to-day basis that suppress the flourishment of Black farmers, and, they reveal the acts of resistance from issues like implicit bias. By working together, these Black farmers adopt strategies for resilience, collectively and individually, used by their forefathers in response to a racial pattern of discrimination from governmental and nongovernmental institutions.

While there is literature on the institutional hierarchy of these structures from an economic and political standpoint, highlighting and uplifting the voices of Black farmers in the Delta gives a clearer understanding of how these relationships and power dynamics suppress the day-to-day experiences of Black farmers in the region. The data from our study bridges the gap between the discourse of Black farmers in the Delta during the historical southern plantation system and Black farmers operating in the region today. It provides insight into the everyday experience of a modern-day Mississippi Delta Black small-scale farmer on how they navigate through barriers and their resistance to barriers, whether it be racial, political, or economic. In line with Black agrarianism theory, the goal is to work collectively, enhancing knowledge and awareness and creating economic and political autonomy both together and individually. This is to emancipate from a racist capitalist system. While the barriers to Black small-scale farming are identified and expressed with frustration, Black farmers have adopted various methods that encourage them to continue farming and strive to become independent from racial structures. Acts of resilience taken through both tangible and intangible measures, such as the preservation of legacy, the creation of an emotional attachment to the land, and the establishment of a safe haven for Black farmers in agricultural cooperatives, resonate with historical acts of resistance and illuminate how exploitative the agricultural system remains today. These lived experiences bring forward a newfound discovery on today's Black small-scale farmers that teaches us, for a larger concept, the vulnerability and determination Black farmers possess in the field of agriculture.

Nine Black farmers from several core counties in the Yazoo–Mississippi Delta exhibited a style of farming business under their own terms and conditions to provide for their families and communities. While few farmers were studied in this research, and it does not entirely represent Mississippi's small-scale Black farmers, the findings indicate that Black farmers' struggles persist. However, Black farmers continue to work together to implement resilience strategies and carry on the legacy of Black agriculture. While navigating structural obstacles, Black farmers are redefining the meaning of success by prioritizing independence over agrarian capitalism. In this way, they follow in the footsteps of their forebears, demonstrating and solidifying the imaginative narrative that Black farmers are resisting hardships by adopting culture-based methods to maintain autonomy and resilience for themselves and their communities.

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