



**FREEDOM’S SEEDS:
 REFLECTIONS OF FOOD, RACE, AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT
 MONICA M. WHITE**

**Collective agency and community resilience:
 A theoretical framework to understand agricultural resistance**

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In 1962, Ms. Fannie Lou Hamer traveled to the county seat in Indianola, Mississippi, in order to register to vote. This wasn’t her first time and it wouldn’t be the last. Although she had been warned with threats of violence and threats of death, she was determined to continue until she was able to exercise her right to participate in electoral politics.

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Upon her return to the Marlow Plantation, the plantation owner, W.D., confronted her. She had been a dedicated employee for 18 years as a sharecropper, time- and recordkeeper, cook, and domestic. He told her to withdraw her application for voter registration or leave. Her home, as paltry as it was, was a condition of her employment and that of her husband, Pap. Like many African Americans, she faced homelessness and joblessness as the price of political participation. She must have feared with good reason that she would be lynched.

Rather than withdraw her application for voter registration, the Hamers left. Fannie Lou said later, “They kicked me off the plantation; they set me free. It’s the best thing that could happen. Now I can work for my people.” It was a pivotal moment for her. She was able to turn her attention toward fighting for social justice and civil rights for others, especially sharecroppers, tenant farmers, and domestic workers who, like her, found themselves shackled to economically

oppressive conditions that held them hostage and demanded their silence and acquiescence. Seeking to address the conditions of absolute poverty, political disenfranchisement, the denial of medical care and access to education that plagued generations of Black residents of Mississippi, Hamer turned her efforts to pooling the community's agricultural skills as a strategy of resistance and survival. Freedom Farms Cooperative (FFC) would ultimately own over 680 acres (275 hectares) collectively, with a pig bank,¹ community gardens, sewing cooperative, catfish cooperative, Head Start program, commercial kitchen, garment factory, sewing cooperative, tool bank, and low-income, affordable housing. It offered health care and disaster relief and educational and re-training opportunities. African Americans who were fired and evicted for seeking full access to their rights as citizens, as Hamer had been, had a place to go. Freedom Farms offered options to sharecroppers and tenant farmers who wanted to stay in the Mississippi Delta.

It is difficult to overestimate the impact that Freedom Farms must have had in its brief

existence. The people it served had been sharecroppers, tenant farmers, domestic workers—completely beholden to those who had exploited their family's labor for generations. Their bosses actively sought to recreate the conditions of slavery, and the dominant economic and political systems catered to their desires. What must it have been like to be able to live, work, and build with others as equals at FFC? The agricultural knowledge that had been so long exploited was turned into resistance and power.

FFC and other agricultural cooperatives were founded on the notion that growing food would be a strategy toward self-determination and self-reliance. They offer today's urban farmers an idea and a strategy. Based upon my own analysis of over 40 Black agricultural cooperatives, the approach that FFC and other cooperatives enacted demonstrate the theoretical framework of Collective Action and Community Resilience (CACR), with the strategies of commons as praxis, economic autonomy, and prefigurative politics.² These overlapping strategies encompass the ideological/social, political, and economic aspects of community



The Pig Bank at Freedom Farms.

(Photo by Franklynn Peterson and used with permission)

¹ FFC was the first Heifer International project that initiated the pig bank as a way to support impoverished families. Known as a community micro-lending strategy where a family would receive a pregnant sow, care through its pregnancy and then remit two shoats. Piglets reach full maturity in two years and could either be mated or slaughtered for meat and/or sold

for supplemental income.

² This theoretical perspective is based upon data analysis of Black agricultural cooperatives and appears in my forthcoming book, *Freedom Farmers: Agricultural Resistance and the Black Freedom Movement*, to be published by the University of North Carolina Press in 2018.

reliance and community determination as strategies for freedom and liberation. For example, a single institution, such as community school—created to educate Black children in the context of Jim Crow laws depriving them of public education, may have been economically autonomous as well as demonstrating prefigurative politics and commons as praxis.

Commons as Praxis

The members of FFC believed that it was critical to both share resources and discuss how such resources should be used. Agricultural implements such as seeds, fertilizer, tools, and labor were shared. They also discussed how land should be used, how to choose the value-added products that would yield the highest profit, and the ways to market these products to African Americans in Mississippi and beyond, demonstrating the principle of commons as praxis.

For many agricultural cooperatives that Black people created between Reconstruction and the 1960s, including FFC, the development of commons as praxis is a critical transition in the ways that members of oppressed communities think and organize. Commons as praxis engages and contests dominant practices of ownership, consumerism, and individualism and replaces them with shared social status and shared identities of race and class. It functions as an organizing strategy that emphasizes community well-being and wellness for the benefit of all. It is based on the premise that pooling resources can transcend the limitations of individual strength in oppressed communities. It emphasizes the shared ideology and the cooperative and collective behaviors that arise in response to the conditions of oppression. Community decisions made around shared spaces and resources such as access to land, water, and seeds are an example of commons as praxis.

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Prefigurative Politics

Ms. Hamer's most notable recognition was her televised testimony before the Credentials Committee of the Democratic National Convention to demand that the multiracial Mississippi Democratic Freedom Society, created to increase African American voter registration, also challenge the legitimacy of the all-White Mississippi delegation. Her inability to participate in electoral politics in the land of her birth because of her race was an injustice that she was not willing to accept. Surely her testimony and the rising civil rights struggles throughout the country contributed to passage of the Voter Rights Act of 1965. But widespread voting for African Americans would take time to implement. While participation in national electoral politics may have elided many African Americans, the agricultural cooperatives they created emphasized democratic decision-making and full participation as a way to teach democracy, thereby demonstrating the strategy of prefigurative politics.

Prefigurative politics refers to the construction of alternative political systems that are democratic and include processes of self-reflection. Also referred to as “everyday utopias” (Cooper, 2009), place-based alternative practices (Escobar & Harcourt, 2005), and alternative experiments in everyday living (Futrell & Simi, 2004; Polletta, 1999), these political systems involve several progressive components, including free spaces and democratic representation.

Prefigurative politics begins with the awareness that members of a group have been excluded from the political process of the society in which they live. The group responds by developing free spaces to meet without fear of repression to share their grievances and foster and discuss innovative ideas that will help them move toward freedom and liberation (Evan & Boyte, 1986; Gooch, 2001; Rao & Dutta, 2012). Free spaces are critical for understanding, interrogating, and engaging democratic

and revolutionizing principles that stand in stark contrast to the structures identified as oppressive. Through political education, community members engage in consciousness-raising and information exchange, which allows them to think creatively about the current political situation and how they would re-conceptualize those arrangements. It allows them to consider alternative ways of engagement with power that include principles of community self-determination and community self-reliance.

At the individual level, prefigurative politics introduce community members to new ideas that encourage new ways of being, along with a greater sense of freedom and independence, and thus create the opportunity to move from conditions of oppression to conditions of self-sufficiency and self-determination. At the community level, in the spaces prefigurative politics create, members of oppressed groups are able to speak freely and to strategize and offer political education and politicization to members of the group; they can move from describing and discussing the conditions of oppression to strategizing and conceptualizing a movement toward freedom and liberation. Within these spaces members engage in democratic practices. Community members create the opportunity to practice democracy when they have been excluded from it in the rest of the world. Once a community creates new ways of decision-making and acting with political autonomy, the importance of an economically independent and autonomous community becomes apparent and necessary.

Economic Autonomy

Given the nature of the economic and racial exploitation inherent in the history of Southern agriculture, including structures of sharecropping, tenant farming, and Jim Crow legislation, economic autonomy was a critical dimension of community resilience and collective agency. In response to

economic exploitation, and in opposition to a resource-extraction model where all forms of economic participation support the status quo, efforts to establish economic autonomy created an alternative system of resource exchange within the community. These funds and resources had direct benefits for the members of farming cooperatives such as FFC.

The pursuit of economic autonomy allows a community to provide for its members financially and help them move from dependence to independence, and from powerlessness toward a position of power.

Economic autonomy often involves creating an alternative economic system, such as replacing the exchange of federal currency with a barter system that rewards labor or produce. Building economic autonomy thus creates a platform for working to end social, political, and economic oppression. By developing an independent system, a community

could begin to extract its members from an oppressive system at the same time that it built capacity through fostering new forms of collective self-governance.

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Collective Agency and Community Resilience

Collective agency and community resilience describe the strategies that members of agricultural cooperatives implemented in an effort to stay on the land using their agricultural knowledge base. In doing so, these organizations taught ways to participate fully through prefigurative politics, to work toward economic independence through value-added products. They shared the collective resources as described by commons as praxis. Many of these agricultural cooperatives had a short life span, not at all as a result of their courage and bravery, but because their courage and bravery demonstrated that a community that is able to work collectively, grow its own food, and create a community based on shared goals was threatening to the White political establishment that had long

withheld civil and human rights from those who worked their lands.

A Strategy for the Future

The food justice movement is actively engaged in questions about using resources and unearthing missing voices in agriculture. I propose that in this endeavor it is helpful to look back at the strategies agricultural cooperatives such as FFC employed in the past. Social justice was deeply woven into their DNA. The strategies they used and the objectives they embraced should serve as a model for the movement in the future. Ms. Fannie Lou Hamer described the strategy of the White power structure in Indianola as a

starvation plan (White, 2017). Her understanding that owning the means to grow healthy food was the key to empowerment should guide the food justice movement in the future. 

...Down where we are, food is used as a political weapon. But if you have a pig in your backyard, if you have some vegetables in your garden, you can feed yourself and your family, and nobody can push you around. If we have something like some pigs and some gardens and a few things like that, even if we have no jobs, we can eat and we can look after our families.

—Fannie Lou Hamer
(quoted in Height, 2005, p. 188)

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