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LaChaun Moore Examines Perceptions of Farming in the African American Community

*By LaChaun Moore*One might argue that as a society, we have collectively become more conscious of the environment, but more importantly the ways in which social and economic factors affect the environment. My initial research

proposal for The Tishman Environment and Design Center was to intervene in the cycle of urban renewal, which usually displaces those in need of investment in their communities, by consciously revisiting American history and using the tools from the past to create a future of economic empowerment. I wanted to create an agricultural center that grew, harvested, and manufactured cotton for textiles. For me, this represented a reimagining of the dreams of our ancestors who wanted their independence in the form of 40 acres and a mule. While most will agree that economic independence and sustainability are essential to ending social and economic oppression, I found that correlating the history of cotton in America with this project rose many eyebrows. I understood why, and decided to redirect the scope of my research by focusing on what caused that reaction. My question then became, "What are the major factors that form perceptions of farming in the African-American community, and why?" With the help of the Tishman Center I was able to attend the National Black Farmers Conference in Pearl, Mississippi as well host a round table discussion with New School students and faculty to begin to unravel this question.The start of my research was at the National Black Farmers

Conference. This was my first time visiting Mississippi. So, in route to the conference I couldn't help but notice that there were cotton plants in full bloom growing decoratively on sidewalk plots often not too far from an American flag planted in the ground. Thinking about the American South and those two cultural signifiers near one another speaks to a very specific social climate that I was interested in learning more about during the conference.

A cotton plant growing outside the Mississippi Agriculture and forestry museum. Photo by LaChaun Moore

The National Black Farmers Conference was hosted by Founder and Resident, John Wesley Boyd, Jr. and his wife Kara Brewer Boyd, Program and Event Coordinator. At the conference, there was a plethora of African American farmers and agricultural advocates who pioneered the fight for justice for black farmers. This was reflected in the first section of the seminar in which Dr. Boyd stressed how important it is for black farmers to be counted in the 2017 USDA census. Much of Dr. Boyd's efforts are to mend the relationship between black farmers and the USDA. Dr. Boyd was a leader in the "class action discrimination suit against the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)," in the late 1990's. With an attorney calling it "one of "the most

organized, largest civil rights case[s] in the history of the country." (NBFA, 2014) In Pigford v. Glickman, U.S. Federal District Court Judge Paul L. Friedman approved the settlement agreement and consent decree in the case on April 14, 1999. This settlement recognized discrimination against 22,363 black farmers, however this was incomplete due to more than 70,000 black farmers being excluded. As estimated by lawyers this settlement was valued at over $2 billion. (NBFA, 2014)Given these staggering numbers for exclusion, there should be no question as to why timely and accurate census data is crucial. While observing my surroundings at the conference, I noticed that the 3 scholarship winners and myself, made up if not all, the majority of the 25 years and under age group in attendance. According to the USDA census of 2012, the smallest age group of farm operators at 0.3% was the 25 and under age group. This countered the highest populated farm operator group at 19.0% which is the 65 and over age group. The ratio of farm operators rises consistently between age and percentage. With this drastic age gap in mind, generational changes may be a key factor in understanding perceptions of agriculture in the African-American community.A farmer by the name of Kwame gave

insight into the generational differences in the farming community. Kwame a third-generation farm operator of African American descent refers to himself as an African farmer as well as a dirt farmer. He operates on land in Oklahoma that was allotted to his grandparents in 1902 from their former slaveholders who were Chickasaw Native Americans. Although this land was passed down to his parents, they chose to take up work in the city and Kwame followed. Later in life he felt that the land was calling him and was eventually able to obtain his family's land again. What I found most inspiring about speaking with Kwame was how his cultural identity as well as his ancestral relationship to the land he operated on was reflected in his farming techniques. As an ode to his roots in Africa Kwame grows greens, okra or "gumbo" as he calls it, and black eyed peas. He grows organically but not with certification as his ancestors in Africa always grew without chemicals. Kwame lives in a predominantly black area in Oklahoma and other than his farm there's is one other major food establishment. In response he has recently begun organizing a farmer's market in his area. Kwame is in the 65 and older age category.Identity and Spirituality were present in every conversation I had with farmers at

the conference. In another interview, I spoke with Ellen Reddy and Ed Savan who were at the conference doing research as well. Ellen described herself as a lover of dirt and the outdoors. She described her garden as a place to be free and heal through the grieving process. She believes that being close to nature is a beauty that can be shared in the form of peace gardens, she stated "we have to do something with the pain." This was a beautiful reflection on agriculture in relation to the African American community. However when I asked her if cotton could be included in the healing garden she expressed that she felt that cotton carried a mental weight that was a reminder of US history and that the crop itself carried the pain. Ellen reflected on her childhood when she picked cotton and remembered the ways in which is pricked her fingers and the physical aches and pains to her body. An interesting comment that she made was that perhaps if she was working for herself she might have felt different. But not if all of the work and pain was for someone else's benefit.In comparing the two conversations, I gathered that independence is a defining factor in the nature of the relationships between farmer, farm worker, land, and crop. Another farmer whom I had the pleasure of interviewing was

Bonita Clemons from South Carolina. She belongs to an all-black farming co-op of about 18 individuals. Just like Kwame, Bonita does not have organic certification however she does grow organically and sustainably as she feels that is what farming was always meant to be. Bonita has her own business selling delicious ginger hibiscus tea that is made from the hibiscus plants that she grows. Bonita picked cotton once as a child and chose never to do so again because she felt that the amount of work for the small amount of money was not worth it. However, to her, growing cotton today didn't bring up any particularly negative emotions, although she noted that sometimes in the summer heat when she passes a cotton field she thinks of how hard it must've been for her ancestors.Three agriculturally centered individuals all from different states and different walks of life had different takes but still shared one underlying thread of ancestral consciousness in farming. The history of agriculture in America is a dark one but the reality is that as African-Americans our roots lead back to agriculture whether it be as slaves or as an emancipated people with no formal education who went to farming as a means of gaining economic stability. Often when we think of farming in America as it pertains to the African-American

community. We see slavery and harsh conditions which are very real and important, but it is rare that we think of the various farming communities that rose because of agricultural efforts.With this new perspective on agriculture and farming, I was equipped with information and questions for The New School and its surrounding sustainable community. I hosted a roundtable discussion about cotton and agriculture in the African-American community. At the event *Breaking Bread*, we had delicious, homemade food and an in-depth conversation with people from various identities about family ancestry and how that informed their relationship with agriculture. It was apparent across-the-board that regardless of ethnic background the ways communities view success is tied to comfort. Comfort in the sense of a commodity chain. Specifically, in America we are a consumer society so to be successful is to buy things. Therefore, to be a maker of things places you on the commodity chain as a laborer. Labor is not comfort, therefore as a laborer you are not deemed successful.Farmers are essential to life because food is our sustenance, especially responsibly grown foods. In comparison between the farmers and the discussion group, farmers were more physically and environmentally centric whereas

the *Breaking Bread* discussion group focused on the social issues that formed and molded the way we look at agriculture. Success, consumerism, and media were all things that never came up in conversation with the farmers I spoke with during the conference. It is interesting in contrast, because 75 percent of the discussion group was under 25, myself included. This group showed a genuine interest in farming and had some experience but didn't have the same spiritual and ancestral motivations as the farmers did. It is interesting to think of the ways in which a difference of generation effects the conversation on agriculture in the African-American community. One may argue that younger generations are desensitized to the pain, yet another may argue that this generation's perspective is just different. In the end it is all understood that the history and the pain are real, but what do we do with it? I think the real question is *how do we heal?*My research journey with The Tishman Center has been enlightening thus far. This research has not only brought me closer to actualizing my agricultural goals but it has in many ways positively affected my relationship with myself and my ancestry as an African-American woman. This research has taught me that as a designer my job is to

advocate for healthy materials, which requires a healthy environment for agricultural workers. My next steps are to build working relationships with farmers and product makers in order to create an exchange that is beneficial to both parties. While also producing healthy products for consumers that are not only environmentally responsible but socially responsible as well. As for my farm, I would like to build a healing garden with a making space occupying part of the land. My farm will grow plants that encourage healing like lavender, ginger, passion flower, and eucalyptus as well as plants for textile dyes like coleus, indigo, and purple cabbage. The making space will act as a processing center for various projects using materials from the land and farmers to create products based off farmer and designer needs. This will be a farm-to-table design house that may act as a peaceful creative outlet for members of the agricultural and surrounding community. My hope is to create a community garden setting that will eventually create jobs for members of the surrounding community to work hand-in-hand with sustainable designers.Sources: https://www.agcensus.usda.gov/Publications/20162/Full_Report/Volume_1,_Chapter_1_US/usv1.pdf(National Black Farmer's Association (NBFA), 2014)

http://www.nationalblackfarmersassociation.org/about_us

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