

Secure Land Tenure: First Step toward Racial Justice & Agricultural Parity

Interview with Cornelius Blanding (by Garrett Graddy-Lovelace,
edited by Elizabeth Henderson, Kathryn Anderson, and Jim Goodman)

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DISPARITY to PARITY

A call to mandate fair pricing and update supply management to build a racially just, economically empowered, and climate resilient food system.

This essay is just one of many that are part of the Disparity to Parity project. Learn more at:

<https://disparitytoparity.org>

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We welcome your input, ideas, and collaboration.

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I'm not from a farm like most Black folks, because I came from a family that lost their land. My perspective on land tenure comes from the standpoint of land loss in the Black community. I grew up in an all-Black community, where we didn't own the infrastructure. We didn't own the businesses. We rented the housing. The only thing that was owned historically – in most of the communities, and especially the community I come from – was the church.

On my mother's side, her family had owned land in Lowens County, Alabama. That land was passed down to my grandfather, my mother's father. He passed it down to his children, my mother being one of eighteen kids. It was Heirs Property. Like most folks, you have this land that has been passed down from generations. But as my mother grew up, her family ended up losing the land before I even learned about it. All the conversations I heard on my grandmother's side – from my grandfather and grandmother – were about working the fields of some of the plantations. At that time, there were a lot of cotton plantations and industry around Montgomery. The conversations I had with her weren't from the farmers' side; they were from the farmworkers'. There is such a disconnect when you resort to just working somebody else's land. Those conversations were never around 'parity'. They were about mistreatment on the farm, how little they got paid being labor on various farms and in that system. The tenure of land is so insecure.

On my father's side, the family came from a place called Hatchechubbee and they have been fortunate enough to keep the

“So they always felt there was discrimination even within the quota system.”

So they always felt there was discrimination even within the quota system. The Federation addressed this with the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), hosting meetings with the USDA present. We arranged for the farmers to testify before Congress. We would bring busloads of farmers – Black farmers – from Kentucky, Georgia, and Tennessee, to voice their concerns about low prices and unfair treatment from the USDA. I particularly remember when Ms. Mattie Mack, from Kentucky, testified about how the tobacco quota system was supposed to raise prices, but the big tobacco buyers would force small farmers, and especially Black farmers, out of business. There were constant conversations about this in the 1990s and 2000s.

In a 1996 [interview](#), long-time FSC/LAF (Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund) president Ralph Paige decried the ‘Freedom to Farm’ (alternatively: ‘Freedom to Fail’) Farm Bill as “devastating.” Turning the racist mid-90s discourse on its head, Paige lambasted it as “nothing more than a welfare program that would pay large corporate farmers to grow fence-row to fence-row.” Paige astutely predicted its dangerous impacts: “It does not have a safety-net in this bill that would protect family farmers for the long-run. It has decreasing payments that will fade out in seven years. The small farmers who have small acreage and small allotments will be the ones who are hurt most because their payments will be very small and would fade out quickly. For instance, the Peanut Program (loans for peanut producers) should not be tampered with because it does keep farmers on the land. And many poor people in rural communities, especially in Georgia, Alabama, and South Carolina, derive a living from the Peanut Program. Either they are working in plants or they are farm laborers, or they grow peanuts.”

When I came on to the Federation in 1997, these conversations were very powerful. The Federation was a strong participant in the farm justice movements, and instrumental in the creation of FarmAid, with



Bayou Bourbeaux Plantation operated by Bayou Bourbeaux farmstead association, a cooperative established through the cooperation of the FSA (Farm Security Administration). Wolcott, Marion Post, 1910-1990, photographer via [The Library of Congress](#).

land in the family. We have family reunions on my father's side every year, so we grew up understanding that there was land. There weren't many conversations related to it in reference to farming the land and the elders dealt with the work on it. We have business meetings at the family reunion each year, but mostly about how to keep the land in the family, not about farming it. So much has happened over the years, and the farming side eventually disappeared.

Coalition Building with the Federation of Southern Cooperatives

I started understanding the insecurity of land ownership once I became part of the Federation of Southern Cooperatives, a cooperative association of Black farmers, landowners, and cooperatives, over 20 years ago. I came to this organization with a lot of questions more than anything, wondering what had happened to our land, and the land of Black farmers, people, and communities. I come to this work from the disconnect from land – from not knowing why we lost it.

It was once I spent time with farmers, my co-workers, and our board members that I first started understanding the issues – the why. I began hearing about these issues of parity and price support floors. We had a farmer from Kentucky where at that time, tobacco was king. We were always hearing that losing their quotas and losing the price support was the downfall of farms in Kentucky, and Black farmers eventually lost land and their farms. I heard the conversations with peanut growers in Georgia, talking about how they relied on price support and quotas around peanuts, while farmers in Mississippi had a whole different conversation around farming fresh fruits and vegetables and not having any kind of support around those crops.

Across the board, however, there was a perception that Black farmers were getting less from their quotas than their white counterparts.

“Having a conversation about fair prices can happen once we get to the level playing field, to the base line.”

The Discrimination Black Farmers in America Experience

From the 1990s onward, we have been distracted from the issue of fair prices by discrimination and lack of access to credit. Farmers have been losing their land at such high rates. Even today, there is so much pain in the Black farming community, starting with land – land loss – that people almost can’t hear you if you don’t start with that. After you get past land and land loss and how to address it, then it’s this issue of credit – having access to credit and being treated fairly. And if you get past that, then there is the issue of debt. We are always fighting from behind.

That’s a much-needed conversation, but we have to start by maintaining the land base first, and then credit and debt. Until then, talking about fair prices is almost like a luxury.

And that is the shame in all of this. This gets in the way of even how we collaborate. It’s like bringing a football team together, and wanting to talk about what plays the team has, but some of the players don’t even have the proper gear to be out there – they don’t even have a helmet on. They are worried about how to play the game safely, before they can worry about the right way to run a play. And that prevents you from operating as a team because you have so many players out there at different levels. You can’t operate effectively until everyone is on the same level. Just as we can’t show up in coalitions the way we need to because Black farmers are dealing with issues that are so fundamental that they get taken for granted.

Black farmer disenfranchisement has to be put in the same context of what is happening today, right now, with all the unrest and protests in our country. At the heart of it, the unrest is about police brutality and about discrimination. It is about unfair treatment, inequities, inequalities, about how the police treat Black people specifically and people of color in general. We watched a Black man die on television,



Learn more about the importance of land tenure for Black, Indigenous and immigrant communities by watching [“From Disparity to Parity: Equity and Land Access for All!”](#) from ActionAid USA

“There has to be equity in policing, education, but also in the food system.”

Carolyn Mugar and others. The Federation has worked to center Black farmer struggles in the farm justice movement.

For half a century, the Federation’s advocacy attests to the urgency of fair prices for Black farmers. Yet, we do not use the term “parity” – why? The word does not speak to the needs and lived experiences of its members. For a select, elder few who recall the cotton, peanut, or tobacco quota programs from a generation or two ago, like Mr. Ben Burkett, President of National Family Farm Coalition, the concept of price-floors and supply management make sense. But for middle-age or younger farmers, the concept is historic and improbable. Moreover, for those struggling to hold on to land, or who have suffered the trauma of racist dispossession, ‘parity’ seems too abstract and removed from the urgency at hand. They are ready, however, to resume prior activism around fair prices – alongside the struggle against broader racisms in agriculture and land policies.

Why and how did the issue of prices become peripheral to Federation advocacy? I think people were worn down. There have been a multitude of issues, a lot of focus and resources diverted to the farm crisis in general and the plight of Black farmers, because of the urgency of the situation. Facing rampant discrimination and lack of access to credit, our minds were pulled off the parity issue. Lawsuits, different fights, all required resources, even more than the Federation had at that time. There is a lack of common knowledge, and major disconnects, within these movements. We understand things differently; we talk about things differently. Many in the Black farming community don’t speak in terms of parity, but rather talk about a fair price. Someone like Ben Burkett, who sits on the board at the National Family Farm Coalition, hears the term and uses it. But for others, once you talk about parity, you’ve lost people. While parity is considered a dirty word with too much baggage, the concept of fair prices resonates, and very much. Equity resonates even more.

Now, I say that because our friends – and I underscore that because that’s exactly how they behave and how they have shown themselves to be: friends – have said, “I didn’t realize this [racist police brutality] was still going on today. I thought this was something we got through in the ‘60s and ‘70s.” And my response is: Black people have been living this every day since then, just in different ways.

One of the things on a personal level I have come to grips with is watching my son, who is 27-years-old and graduated from college a few years ago, struggle with systemic racism. His college project was a video on this exact discrimination. You would think he did it today as a response to what is going on. It was an awakening for me because I had to realize that, wow, my son was away in college, in a place where I thought he was sheltered. And he was dealing with the same reality that every kid on the street, every Black kid, deals with every day, that we all deal with, without shelter – even in protected environments. And this is not always seen or understood, even by our friends. And that’s why this moment is so important. People are beginning to see this for what it is and see things they have missed over the years. And we’re starting to have real conversations.

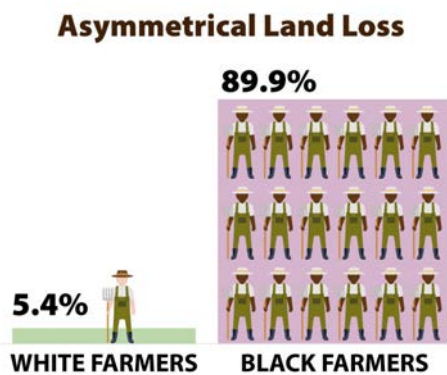
When friends come together, it is extremely important that they understand where each stand at that moment, and what each is dealing with. They need to understand the players on the team who are not ready to talk about the plays because they are still trying to get the proper equipment to go out there and play the game. Parity is sometimes not understood and not the language used. Equality, equity, and fair prices are better words. Even when it is understood, it is a luxury. I don’t say this to minimize the concept of parity, because it is extremely important. We just have to understand that in order to get to the play, that some other players on the team, some other members of the coalition, have other big pressing issues that they have to get past before they are able to join us.



Messaging Parity in a Language People Can Relate To: Equity

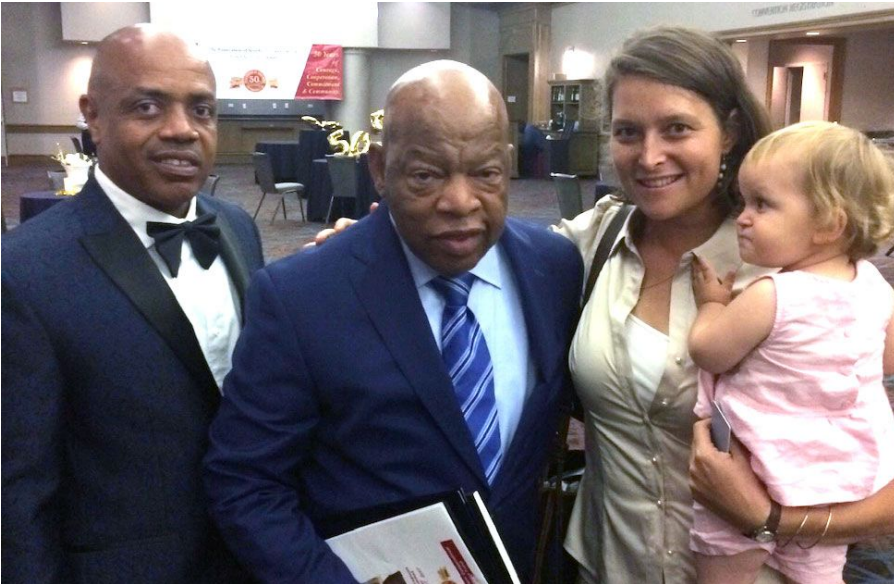
How do we wrap this up into the context of what is going on right now? We have to treat everybody, every farmer, fairly, within the contexts of policing, healthcare, education. But even when it gets down to pricing and land access, we have to wrap these issues up in the blanket of racial equity at large – and deal with them that way. People understand that first you have to secure land for Black farmers and Black landowners – this is key. Even when that land tenure is secured, they have to maintain it. And the only way to maintain it is with fair prices, which are extremely important. Because if you get to the point, to have land and good tenure of it, you still have to make it productive. And there's no way to make it productive unless you are getting a fair price, unless you are getting a floor at the very start. We have to make sure we are framing these issues the right way and that we are paying attention to all the needs of everybody, so that everybody around the table is expected to fight for the same issue.

Cooperatives are extremely important to this issue of parity when you are looking at the cost of production as the basis. At the end of the day we are talking about how to make sure farmers get a fair price. And in order for the price to be fair, it has to first take into consideration the cost of production, and then from there, add on enough profit to make a living. Getting at that cost of production is important because when you start talking about a small farmer – well, most farmers, especially Black farmers – they're buying in a retail market but selling in a wholesale market. When it should be just the opposite. Usually, large farmers, corporations, and others buy wholesale and they sell retail. But small farms are the inverse situation, buying inputs at a retail store, and then selling product at low wholesale prices. They're already behind the eight ball.



Farming as a Civil Service

Until we start looking at farming as a civil service, we will always be chasing our tails. If we as a country, as a collective body of people, start to understand agriculture as a civil service, then we will understand the need for the government to be engaged. What makes us unique as a country is that we operate under the common good. And the challenge is finding out what are the themes that we all have in common, and food is surely one of them. If we are dealing with the standpoint of the common good of food, and supporting those who are growing food, then it becomes obvious that there has to be a quota. The question of quotas and what it takes to provide a fair price floor has to begin with the recognition of farming as a civil service to this country, and only then will parity programs and quotas be seen as worth revisiting. Coming from a Black family who has had and lost land, I understand the insecurity of land tenure. Racial justice and agricultural parity – equity, access, fairness – go hand in hand. **BP**



Cornelius Blanding, Representative John Lewis and Garrett Graddy-Lovelace (from left to right) at the 50th anniversary of FSC/LAF

About the Author:



Cornelius Blanding

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Cornelius Blanding has served as a leader in the esteemed Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund for nearly two decades. A non-profit cooperative association, the Federation encompasses 20,000 rural families from low-income communities across 13 states in the southern Black Belt Region. Born of the Civil Rights movement, the Federation joined with the Land Assistance Fund in the 1980s and now administers more than 75 cooperatives, credit unions and community-based economic development groups and initiatives.

Read more about Cornelius Blanding [here](#).



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