

REVIEWS AND REFLECTIONS

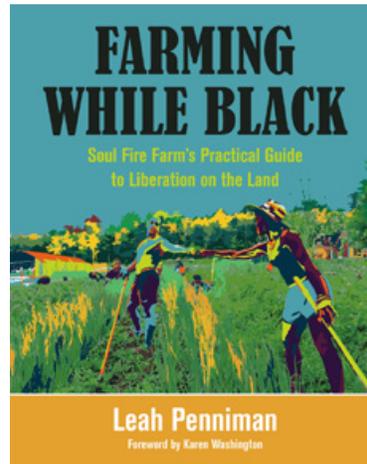
WALKING A PATH FOR HEALING

Orrin Williams

A Review of Leah Penniman, Farming While Black: Soul Fire Farm's Practical Guide to Liberation on the Land (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2018)

I was eight years old the first time I saw a farmer. I was traveling with my aunt to visit family in Kankakee County, Illinois, when I saw an older black man plowing his field. He had a steady-moving horse, and I remember watching him stride alongside as this rich black dirt rose around them while they moved together over the land. I was fascinated. It was the first time I saw somebody in the field. Growing up in Englewood, on the South Side of Chicago, I experienced growing food in a different way; my family had a little garden in our backyard. My grandparents were excellent victory gardeners during the Second World War, so I was tuned into the legacy of working with the land in our family. When I would visit my great-grandmother, who lived in Pensacola, Florida, I saw her raising chickens and using the eggs. She was cooking fresh food all the time. As Englewood started declining and land became vacant, I thought about growing. There was all this land no one was caring for. It felt like the most healing connection to make. I knew nothing about urban agriculture, but it made sense from the perspective of the land and community. Growing is just part of the work I do today. It's great if you can grow for yourself, but it's a system that we have to deal with, and this system is broken.

That's why I do the work I do in Chicago on food systems: to try to heal the system and our communities. And that's why I value the book *Farming While Black* and its author, Leah



Penniman's, leadership in transforming, reconnecting, and healing our relationships to each other and the land.

My first inclination as I pondered what I would write about this book was to offer superlatives. The book does indeed deserve many superlatives, but I do not want the inclination to offer them to take away from the book's content.

Farming While Black is a comprehensive survey of farming and the food system, and it will be on my bookshelf alongside other books that have had a profound influence on my worldview. *Farming While Black* reflects virtually everything I have learned and contemplated during my forty-plus years of work in food systems regarding farming, food, eating, and indigenous/African culture.

The book focuses on how the growing and eating of food is essential for people of African descent in the United States and indeed throughout the African diaspora in order to design and develop a future rooted deeply in recovery, renewal, reconstruction, and regeneration. These are necessary and important processes required after the rigors and trauma of the Atlantic slave trade. They can also help us to recover from other traumas that Africa has suffered—traumas that great African

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American scholars such as Chancellor Williams and Joseph E. Harris remind us of in their important but little-known works, Williams's *The Destruction of Black Civilization: Great Issues of a Race from 4,500 B.C. to 2,000 A.D.* and Harris's *The African Presence in Asia and Africans and Their History*. Both scholars tell us that the African continent has been under assault for several thousand years, impacted by events that include the settlement of North Africa by Arabs, incursions by the Persians, the Indian Ocean slave trade that predated the Atlantic one, and of course, the colonial and neocolonial periods.

These disruptions have wreaked havoc on the peoples of Africa and the diaspora. While this history of African peoples is a monumental tragedy, there is indeed that proverbial silver lining. As a scholar of African history and culture, what has always resonated with me is the fact that African peoples have, like any other culture, always been concerned with how their communities would be fed, sheltered, and defended. This process is the foundation of cultural development, and *Farming While Black* successfully transmits that cultural reality in the book. In the spirit of our ancestors, it is time to come together as a people to once again organize the institutions by which we feed, clothe, and house ourselves while developing a biopsychosocial culture that is health- and life-affirming for all beings.

With that in mind, *Farming While Black* should be widely read and will be a primer for anyone interested in farming, especially on a small scale that integrates the principles of precautionary and regenerative actions and practices. While the book focuses on sharing the tools and knowledge necessary for healing the land and community through farming, its themes also open the question of global land reform and peasant movements—and, to me, peasants are people that should be held in the highest esteem; the term is not a pejorative. They feed us.

Penniman's book is a portal to transcendence and transformation. For example, chapter one, "Finding Land and Resources," not only lays out the value of land but also deals with the rigors

of land acquisition. This is certainly a black issue, but in my experience, it is also an issue for anyone who has limited resources. The chapter provides a concise guide to understanding the legal, regulatory, and skills training that is fundamental to successful farming. The overview is relevant to land acquisition for farming, whether the farm will be in an urban or a rural community. One salient point is that in the context of black folks, most land that is potentially available for farming is located in black communities—a legacy of segregation and public and private policies such as redlining, abandoned properties, and the overall urban decline in Chicago, Detroit, and other cities.

As I said, *Farming While Black* is a book for anyone—regardless of their race, ethnicity, or gender—who is interested in farming and feels the need to connect to land. However, I would be remiss if I did not mention the particular importance of this book for black farmers, given the notable and tragic loss of black land—something one can uncover with a simple Internet search. In terms of sheer volume, people of African descent assembled ownership of about fifteen million acres used principally for farming between 1865 and 1920, primarily in the southern United States. This accounted for about 14 percent of the farmland in the country and represented the holdings of about 925,000 farms. Now there are only an estimated 45,000 black farms remaining, which accounts for only about two percent of American farms. Of the approximately one billion acres of arable land in America, blacks own only about one million acres. The black land loss phenomenon is due to a mix of circumstances too complex to go into here, so I encourage you to investigate the processes involved in the tragedy yourself.¹

That said, I would like to recommend that there be a national commission formed with the requisite financing necessary to develop a farm-to-table infrastructure that would use those one million acres to fuel a system that would provide *real* food for consumers. This program should include the design and development of tools and equipment that are ecologically sound and protect the lives of all beings. For example, it could catalyze the development of a fleet of electric transportation vehicles and

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eco-friendly warehouses. It would provide employment and food for those communities—like the black community—that have limited access to food. Finally, it would greatly enhance food security and shorten the food chain substantially, since geographically most of the population of the United States resides east of the Mississippi River, and this would be the region served by it. This process is critical to making chapter two of *Farming While Black*, “Planning Your Farm Business,” feasible. Farmers need a food system and infrastructure, including consumers, to make their farms successful.

Another portal to transformation is opened in chapter three, “Honoring the Spirits of the Land.” From an ancestral perspective I can certainly appreciate the ceremonial and ritual aspects that must be met in terms of farming and the sacred nature of the land. In fact, for me, this entire planet is sacred ground. The use of African-based spiritual systems is important and a constant in my life. Yet the deeper manifestation to be gleaned from *Farming While Black* is the recognition that anywhere in the Americas, we must pay homage to the predominant group of indigenous people embodied in tribal identifications—the Hopi, Pottawatomi, Mayan, Blackfeet, and many others who have occupied lands from the Arctic Circle to the southern tip of South America. My indigenous brothers and sisters of the Americas have endured much while being pushed off the lands they stewarded for thousands of years. In the case of the sovereign nations, they have also endured devastating population losses; I have seen estimates of a 90 percent population decline, from in excess of ten million down to approximately one million people. The total experience of the indigenous populations is another tragedy in the history of humankind.

The tragedies of the human experience—from slavery to genocide to colonialism and oppression—should influence the formation of a new paradigm for interaction at every level of human activity: economic, environmental, social, cultural, and legal. In other words, what happens at Standing Rock or in the Amazon rainforest is just as important to me as what happens on the South or West Sides of Chicago, and I stand with the people of Appalachia and those in poor working-class white communities as well.

These collective communities form the basis of the human community, and, with their unique cultures and food ways, they form the customer base for farmers. There is a lot of *real* food that can be grown.

That leads me to a final portal in this exquisite book, food heritage and culture, which is addressed in chapter twelve, “Cooking and Preserving.” This is the final leg, if you will, in the

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development of a vibrant farming economy that would form the foundation of a regenerative farming system. My research into dietary guidelines indicates that few Americans eat the recommended amount of fruits and vegetables. One source at Live Science states that 87 percent of the U.S. population do not eat the recommended amount of fruit, and 91 percent do not eat the recommended amount of vegetables. This does not bode well for the population's health overall and may provide a reason for its high rates of chronic and degenerative diseases like diabetes and cardiovascular disease. By any measure, the social determinants of health in the black community are woeful. This is not to say that any community or racial or ethnic group fares well; in fact, the United States ranks thirty-seventh in overall health globally, despite spending more on health care than any country. African Americans were 30 percent more likely than whites to die prematurely from heart disease in 2010, and African American men are twice as likely as whites to die prematurely from stroke. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that nearly 44 percent of African American men and 48 percent of African American women have some form of cardiovascular disease. These trends are consistent across an array of diseases. A component in many of these health disparities is diet and nutrition. Therefore, solutions must be found, and culture is a critical component to reversing the trends by propelling a reconnection to whole food and cooking.

The corporate food system has radically changed the food environment and thus the food culture not just for African Americans but also for all Americans and in cultures globally. I have heard it said that people should not eat anything that our great grandmothers would not recognize. Let us stick to that maxim and use *Farming While Black* as a guide.

Finally, I see *Farming While Black* in the same vein as I view that band of people that walked out of Africa thousands of years ago, eventually populating the planet and becoming ancestors of us all. By some accounts, that band of Africans may have saved humanity.² *Farming While Black* provides a

blueprint for African descendants to metaphorically send out a band of people to follow a path that leads to healing and health, through the field to the fork.

Farming While Black is for everyone; extrapolate the information and cultural references to your personal and familial history, and let's transcend and transform the current unsustainable food system. Thank you, Leah, for following in the tradition of those ancestral mothers and grandmothers that braided seeds into their hair, survived the Middle Passage, and lay cultural roots for a food system and culture, then and now.

Photo credit: Kate Cummings

Orrin Williams is Food Systems Coordinator, UIC Chicago Partnership for Health Promotion, University of Illinois Hospital and Health Science Systems in Chicago.

NOTES

1. P. Daniel, *Dispossession: Discrimination against African American Farmers in the Age of Civil Rights* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), https://books.google.com/books/about/Dispossession.html?id=SxHXYRMEhcMC&printsec=frontcover&source=kp_read_button#v=onepage&q&f=false.
2. S. Wells, *The Journey of Man: A Genetic Odyssey* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002). See also the National Geographic Society, "The Geographic Project," <https://genographic.nationalgeographic.com/about/>, accessed May 5, 2019.