Race, gender, and inheritance: The experience of Black farmers in Mississippi

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Race, gender, and inheritance: The experience of black farmers in Mississippi

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The population of Black farmers in the U.S. has declined to 2% of farmers in the U.S. because of institutional racism, land dispossession, heir’s property, and youth’s disinterest in farming. Most works on Black farmers have focused on racism, and heirs’ property, but little is known about the influence of race, gender, and inheritance on Black farmers’ experience. To understand this, I asked: what are the contemporary challenges associated with farming among Black farmers in Mississippi? How do race, gender, and inheritance influence the experiences of Black farmers? And how do Black farmers cope with their farming challenges? Twenty farmers in Mississippi were interviewed using semi-structured questions, and data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Findings shows that farming is a ‘retirement haven.’ Interviewees experience “closed door” to resources. Farming is gendered, and heirs’ property limits Black farmers to small acreages. Cooperative provides support for Black farmers.
DEDICATION

With a grateful and thankful heart to God my enabler, I dedicate this work to my mother, Mrs. Omolade C. Elufisan who had no formal education at all because of girlchild discrimination but supported my academic dream even when it appeared realistic.
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION ............................................................................................................................... ii

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ........................................................................................................ iii

CHAPTER

I. INTRODUCTION .................................................................................................................... 1

II. LITERATURE REVIEW ......................................................................................................... 6

Black Farmers and Agriculture in the U.S. ........................................................................ 6
Contemporary Experiences of Black Farmers in the U.S. ................................................ 9
Race and Farming in the United States ............................................................................. 11
Gender and Agriculture in the U.S. .................................................................................. 14
Inheritance ......................................................................................................................... 16
Black Farmers’ Coping Strategies ..................................................................................... 19

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY .......................................................................................... 22

Introduction ......................................................................................................................... 22
Inductive Reasoning ........................................................................................................... 23
Study Location .................................................................................................................... 23
Method of Data Collection ............................................................................................... 24
Recruitment ......................................................................................................................... 25
Data Collection Instrument ............................................................................................... 27
Data Analysis Procedure ................................................................................................. 28
Ethical Consideration ......................................................................................................... 29
Researcher’s Positionality ................................................................................................... 30
Limitations ........................................................................................................................... 30

IV. CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES ASSOCIATED WITH FARMING ......................... 32

Farming and “Closed Doors” Experiences among Black Farmers ...................................... 32
“Closed Door” to Funding and Loans ............................................................................... 33
“Closed Door” to Farming Equipment .............................................................................. 34
“Closed Door” to Information ......................................................................................... 35
“Eligibility Requirement” as a “Closed Door” Experience .............................................. 38
Access to Land ..................................................................................................................... 41
Farming as Retirement Haven ............................................................................................ 42
Youth Farming “It’s Almost Nonexistent” ........................................................................ 45

V. INFLUENCE OF RACE, GENDER, AND INHERITANCE ON THE FARMING EXPERIENCE OF BLACK FARMERS ........................................................................ 48

Race and the Experience of Black Farmers ........................................................................ 48
  Racial Discrimination: An “Abstract Barrier” to Black Farmers ...................................... 49
  Race and Lack of Access to Information ........................................................................... 51
  Race and Price Discrimination ......................................................................................... 54
  Black Farmers and Land Possession ................................................................................. 55
Black Farmers and Gender: “Outside Work” and “Inside Work” ...................................... 58
  Farming and Masculinity: “That wasn’t something that was ladylike” ......................... 58
  Farming and Femininity ..................................................................................................... 60
  Gender and Support in Farming ......................................................................................... 63
The Influence of Inheritance on Black Farmers’ Experience ............................................. 65
  Heirs’ Property: “Property Thrown in the Air” ................................................................. 66
  Heirs’ Property as Unproductive Property ........................................................................ 67
Race, Gender, and Inheritance ............................................................................................ 69
  Race and Inheritance ......................................................................................................... 69
  Race and Gender: Double Discrimination ........................................................................ 70

VI. FARMERS’ COPING STRATEGIES ............................................................................. 72

Cooperative Membership: The ‘Savior Step’ ................................................................... 72
  Information Bridge ............................................................................................................ 73
  Networking Opportunity .................................................................................................... 74
  Access to Resources .......................................................................................................... 76
  Youth-Farming Initiatives .................................................................................................. 78
Family Support .................................................................................................................... 79
  Children Support ............................................................................................................... 80
  Spousal Support ................................................................................................................. 80
Spiritual Support .................................................................................................................. 81
Community Support/Technology ......................................................................................... 84
The Use of Information Technology ..................................................................................... 85

VII. CONCLUSION ............................................................................................................. 88

REFERENCES ....................................................................................................................... 91

APPENDIX

A. DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION TABLE AND SUMMARY ........................................... 97

  Demographic Information Table ....................................................................................... 98
  Demographic Summary ...................................................................................................... 99
CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

The rate at which the population of Black farmers in the United States has consistently declined is alarming. Although this is a problem for both White and Black farmers, the reduction in the Black farming population has drawn not only scholarly attention, but also the attention of policymakers in the U.S. (Grant, Wood, and Wright 2012; Quisumbing King, Wood, Gilbert, and Sinkewicz 2018; Russell, Hossfeld, and Rico Mendez 2021). The population decline is significantly higher among Black farmers than among their White counterparts, (Wood and Gilbert 2000). It is evident that the sustainability of agriculture among Black farmers is being threatened. “Black agrarianism,” the idea that Black farmers value agriculture not only for economic reasons, but also as part of their collective identity and political power, is completely nearing its demise if the present reality is not reversed (Quisumbing King et al. 2018:2). Some reasons attributed to the reduction of Black farmers include but are not limited to lack of/restricted access to land, institutional racism, land dispossession, heirs’ property, and youth’s lack of interest in agriculture (Cairns, Mcphail, Chevrier, and Bucklaschuk 2015; Gilbert, Sharp, and Felin 2001; Newkirk 2019; Quisumbing King et al. 2018; Reid and Bennett 2012; Wood and Gilbert 2000; Woods 2001).

The agriculture sector in the United States has historically been male-dominated, with only 29% of farmers identifying as female, and women are often marginalized and considered not farmers enough because the conceptual image of a farmer is male (Carter and Lopez 2019;
Graddy-Lovelace 2017; Trauger 2001). This marginalization is also evident in access to farming resources, especially equipment whereby women are discriminated against in favor of male farmers. Despite their crucial role in agriculture, women tend to operate in economically less viable areas of agriculture, such as small-scale operations and are often considered mere supporters of family farms (Cairns et al. 2015; Carter and Lopez 2019). The dominant view of a farmer is still rooted in misconceptions and expectations associated with masculinity, which further perpetuates gender discrimination within the farming space (Thompson and Carter 2022). U.S. agricultural policies have favored industrial/mechanized farming, which has hindered the development and practice of small-scale farming, an area where women tend to operate (Carter and Lopez 2019; Trauger 2001). Although women often own farmland and farm as men farmers in the U.S., the actual control of farming operations remains male-dominated (Cairns et al. 2015).

A growing body of literature addressing the experiences of Black farmers in the United State has highlighted racially-induced restricted access to economic/material resources and land ownership, as well as the youth’s lack of interest in farming as critical factors influencing the population decline (Gilbert et al. 2001; Jones and Alston 2009; Russell et al. 2021; Thompson, Johnson, Cistrunk, Vancil-Leap, Nyatta, Hossfeld, Rico Méndez, and Jones 2020; Zabawa, Siaway, and Baharanyi 1990). Several studies (Brown, Christy, and Gebremedhin 1994; Hossfeld, Mendez, and Russell 2018; Quisumbing King et al. 2018; Russell et al. 2021; Thompson et al. 2020) have stressed racism as a force driving the population reduction of Black farmers, which has become a significant problem in the U.S. food system. Other works have examined the role of gender among Black farmers and found that gender matters, especially because farming is usually associated with masculinity and male activities (Kleiner and Green
A few studies have looked into the sustainability of farming from the lens of inheritance (Bailey, Zabawa, Barlow, and Baharanyi 2019; Bailey and Thomson 2022; Wood and Gilbert 2000). The transfer of agricultural knowledge and experience and farm estate as inheritance is essential to the continuity of farming. However, Black youth is shying away from farming, and problems associated with heirs’ property also deter others from farming.

To address some of their challenges, Black farmers have created and/or engaged in farmers’ cooperative groups as a means of self-reliance and coping strategy (White 2019). In Mississippi, cooperatives of Black farmers have historically tried to overcome farming challenges, developing examples of resistance and resilience (e.g., Fannie Lou Hamer’s Freedom Farmers’ Cooperative) that have been used in other states, and by social movements (White 2019). Despite these collaborative efforts and recent academic works trying to understand the challenges that Black farmers face in the U.S., little is still known about how race, gender, and inheritance shape the experience of Black farmers, especially in the rural South. In addition, this study is significant because studies on Black farmers have been overwhelmingly focused on race.

This study aims to understand the experience of Black farmers who are members of two cooperatives: Winston County Self-Help Cooperative (WCSHC), Unlimited Community Agricultural Cooperative (UCAC), and Mississippi Minority Farmers’ Alliance (MMFA) all in Winston, Oktibbeha, and Chickasaw Counties Mississippi, respectively. This study aims to answer the following research questions: (1) What are the contemporary challenges associated with farming among Black farmers in East-Central Mississippi? (2) How do race, gender, and inheritance influence the experiences of Black farmers? and (3) How do limited resource (Black) farmers cope with their farming challenges?
This study is a case study of Black farmers in Mississippi. Using qualitative methods, I generated primary data from selected Black farmers in the North, Central, and East regions of Mississippi. Participants were drawn from three dominant cooperative groups: WCSHC and UCAC in East-Central Mississippi. Then, I conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews as the main tool for data collection. Interviews were analyzed using coding analysis to understand the nature and patterns of the experiences of Black farmers in this region of the U.S.

This study not only reveals Black farmers’ views on how race, gender, and inheritance shape their struggles and needs but also contributes to a better understanding of how Black farmers can overcome their challenges, enriching ongoing and future rural and food system studies in the United States.

This study found that farming is a ‘retirement haven’ for participants who worked out-of-farm jobs. Black farmers are hindered by institution-based discriminatory rules which serve as barriers to accessing farming resources. Furthermore, discrimination is evident in the racialized experience of Black farmers. In addition, gender is significant because participants still do gender in everyday farming operations whereby farming is conceptualized as masculine. Finally, participants demonstrate their membership in cooperative groups as a major coping strategy in dealing with challenges associated with farming.

Therefore, I argue that race and gender matter in the challenges that my study participants face in their daily farming experiences, and that while other means of coping exist, cooperative membership provides a significant support to deal with farmers’ challenges.

In conclusion, this study is important because the experience of Black farmers cannot be sufficiently explained through the lens of an individual variable or factor such as race, gender, or heirs’ property. Essentially, the need to examine gender along with race and inheritance is
needed because scholarly works on Black farmers’ experiences have mostly focused on race with very little attention to gender. There is an urgent need to examine how race, gender, and inheritance influence the experience of Black farmers in Mississippi.
CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

To examine how race, gender, and inheritance shape the experiences of Black farmers, I am using literature focusing on these aspects to gain a conceptual understanding of the subject matter. Peer-reviewed journal articles, books, reports, and other scholarly materials on the experience of Black farmers in the U.S. were strategically accessed and reviewed to build a theoretical framework and understanding for this study. The next sections discuss previous studies and gaps that guided this research and could help us to better understand how race, gender, and inheritance shape the experiences of Black farmers. I consider laying this background with the knowledge about Black farmers and agriculture in the United States of America.

Black Farmers and Agriculture in the U.S.

Farmers are “those who work the land; sharecroppers, tenants farmers, and landowners” as well as “subsistence farmers” (White 2019:4). Farming population in the U.S. is very diverse. It is composed of different racialized individuals and groups (i.e., Whites, Blacks, Natives, Latinxs, Asians, among others) and genders. There are significant inequalities between groups, especially if we compare White farmers with farmers of color. Most Black farmers in the U.S. are considered limited resource farmers, because of restricted, or lack of access to resources such as agricultural loans, agricultural extension information, and land for farming (Gilbert et al. 2001; Hossfeld et al. 2018; Jones 1994; Reid and Bennett 2012; Russell et al. 2021; Thompson et
The disadvantages experienced by Black farmers are materialized by their productive and economic capability. For example, a great proportion of Black farmers whose main job is farming, operate very small size farms (less than or about 50 acres), and their earnings from product sales do not exceed $20,000 annually, significantly less than their White counterparts (Brown et al. 1994).

To understand the contemporary experiences of Black farmers in the U.S., we need to historically contextualize the injustices they have experienced, as consequences of racist systems such as slavery (Daniel 2007; White 2019). African Americans had to endure the horror of slavery under profound subjugation (Reid and Bennett 2012). The enslavement of Africans in the U.S. was essential for the economic advantage of the enslavers with racist intentions and actions (Hinson and Robinson 2008) as racial constructions based on phenotypical characteristics have historically determined ‘who gets what.’ Power relations subjugated Black people as they were treated as property and prohibited them from owning property. Black people were denied both social and economic autonomy (Hinson and Robinson 2008; Horst and Marion 2018).

The economy of the U.S. depended on agriculture during slavery and after the abolition, while agricultural works were mostly, if not entirely, carried out by enslaved Black people (Graddy-Lovelace 2017; White 2019). After the Civil War, racialized economic exploitation continued through sharecropping and tenant farming as an extension of structural and institutionalized racism (Quisumbing King et al. 2018; Woods 2001). These farming systems reinforced the continuous oppression of Black people even after the abolition of slavery. Instructively, the “plantation system,” which Woods (2001:4) described as “dead but still romanticized,” grew out of the slavery system, and was instrumental for the demeaning socio-
economic status of the Black landless ‘new citizens’ (Quisumbing King et al. 2018; Reid and Bennett 2012).

The end of slavery left Blacks with almost no other choice than turning to agriculture or migrating northwards for industrial jobs (White 2019). The quest for economic freedom channeled toward farming led to a significant increase in both populations of Black farmers and land possession among Black people. Unfortunately, the population acreage possessed by Black farmers later declined (Grant, Wood, and Wright 2012; Quisumbing King et al. 2018; White 2019). Black farmers in Mississippi had a significant role in the U.S. agriculture in the early 20th century. A documentary from The Atlantic showed that in 1910, Mississippi had the largest black-owned farmland in the country which was estimated at 2.2 million acres (Newkirk 2019).

Nowadays, Black farmers represent less than two percent of the entire farming population in the U.S. Despite the enthusiasm that spurred Blacks into farming after emancipation, the numeric and economic growth of Black farmers have been historically limited by racial discrimination from government agencies set up to help farmers, as well as from other actors. Multiple studies have documented that Black farmers have been discriminated against in access to loans, agricultural information, and other farm-related resources (Daniel 2007; Gilbert et al. 2001; Grant et al. 2012; Russell et al. 2021; White 2019). Another factor attributed to Black farmers’ population decline is land dispossession. Black farmers’ numerical growth and economic viability have been restrained by institutional racism under the watch of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and its subsidiaries. Discriminatory experiences from governmental institutions were noticeable and sufficient to give Black farmers an undeniable victory over the popular class action lawsuit Pigford vs Glickman (1999), a court case filed by Black farmers against the USDA. As a result of this case, the court ordered the USDA to
compensate Black farmers who suffered losses because of institutional racism from the agency (Grant et al. 2012; Quisumbing King et al. 2018).

In summary, Black farmers’ experiences with racism can be likened to a ‘long walk’ with historical roots in slavery and sharecropping, and segregation, creating long-term consequences that are still prevalent in the U.S. agri-food system.

**Contemporary Experiences of Black Farmers in the U.S.**

One could have thought that after the *Pigford & Glickman (1999)* class action lawsuit it was a new dawn for Black farmers in the U.S. However, their dreams of equal access to government resources to improve their farming experiences became elusive. The persistence of discrimination from the USDA and its subsidiaries against the Black farmers made the victory achieved a vague or short-lived one (Grant et al. 2012). Although the USDA was found guilty of discriminating against Black farmers, and the judge stated that those victims who had proof be compensated and have their land returned to them, this did not deter some governmental institutions from racist practices in a subtle way (Grant et al. 2012). The USDA set a hard condition for getting the settlement from the class action lawsuit. To prove discrimination, victims (i.e., Black farmers) were requested to bring documents that could prove their experiences. Unfortunately, many farmers could not produce any documents because they were thrown out of their homes at foreclosure, some became sick or died during the court case that lasted more than thirty years, and farmers’ heirs in some cases were disoriented by their losses (Daniel 2007; Grant et al. 2012; Reid and Bennett 2012). Institutional racism from governmental institutions seems to be still critical for the well-being and success of Black farmers in this country.
During recent decades, Black farmers have continued to struggle. Wood and Gilbert (2000) revealed a significant reduction in Black-owned farms in the United States between 1982 and 1997, with Mississippi losing more than half of its Black-owned farms during this period. According to Johnson (2011), this development stemmed from the overlap of slavery and segregation as the foundation for racial order and inequality in the agricultural welfare system in the U.S. Nowadays, only 1.4% of all U.S. farmers identify as Black farmers (Marquardt and Schoenbaum 2022). It is estimated that there are approximately 18,000 Black farmers (Wood and Gilbert 2000). Stressing racism as the cause of the decreasing number of Black farmers, Wood and Gilbert (2000:49) argue that states less dominated by the “tradition of slavery and plantation agriculture (Florida, Oklahoma, and Texas) experienced the smallest recent declines.”

Nowadays, Black farmers are referred to as limited-resource farmers who often need the support of the government to survive farming challenges (Thompson et al. 2020). They often farm small acreage (less than 140 acres) and earn less than $10,000 annually from their sales (Marquardt and Schoenbaum 2022). Unfortunately, instead of getting more support, Black farmers experience institutional barriers to accessing credit and information, as well as product markets for goods and profitable sales (Brown et al. 1994). This problem is intertwined with high levels of poverty and food insecurity that many Black communities experience, especially in poor states like Mississippi.

Black farmers’ vulnerable and impoverished circumstance shaped by their racialized treatment, has had a significant impact on the sustainability of “black agrarianism.” It is important to acknowledge that most children of Black farmers avoid farming because of the lifestyle and struggle (economic and social exclusion) of their parents (Grant et al., 2012; Hargrove et al. 2014). The average age of the Black farming population is between 50 and 60
years, which serves as a great concern for many Black farmers in the present day (Brown et al. 1994). Today, some have land but have no one in the family to farm.

Grant et al. (2012) highlight that another critical factor today is the growing gap in access to information on agricultural practices between White and Black farmers. Although the Farm Service Agency (FSA) has been available to help, Black farmers’ lack of trust in the agency is rooted in the historical racism they have experienced. Usually, most of the meetings organized by governmental agencies are held at White dominated environments, and the facilitators are Whites (Grant et al. 2012). According to Grant et al. (2012:15), institutional racism has created a mental construct of “boy, stay in your place” for Black farmers. Hence, these environments dominated by whiteness have led Black farmers to avoid working with USDA officials or being involved in decision-making processes about agriculture.

**Race and Farming in the United States**

The concept of race is a social ‘creation.’ It is a product of interactions. It becomes significant when different groups of people contact or interact with one another. Humans’ beliefs are a creation of the social contexts around them. Historically, the creation and reproduction of racial categories and conceptualizations in the U.S. have been based on physical features and the assumption that such features inform the unmalleable behavior of people. Race has been a fabrication of the American ‘moral enterprise’ (White supremacists) to keep Americans of African descent and other racialized groups of color perpetually under subjugation (Massey 2001; Smedley 1998; Smedley and Smedley 2005).

Racism is a consequence of in-group and out-group categorizations and relations, which provides assimilation for a group but treats others with differentiation and discrimination (Smedley and Smedley 2005). Racism is evidence of racialization (“social creation of racial
categories”) of our society (Bonilla-Silva 1997), a categorization that has its basis in differential treatment and subjugation of presumably weaker or less represented individuals or groups (Smedley 1998). Racialization of the American society has been based not only on the assumption that races are naturally unequal but also that Black Americans deserve no better space than the lower hierarchy in racial categorization (Smedley 1998; Smedley and Smedley 2005).

Studies have pointed at racism as the force driving the experience of Black farmers in the U.S. (Hossfeld et al. 2018; Russell et al. 2021). It’s been a ‘long walk’ for African Americans (and Black farmers specifically) in the ‘wilderness’ of racial discrimination and racialized treatment (Russell et al. 2021) because race has always informed the relationship between Whites and Blacks in this country (Daniel 2007; Massey 2001; Quisumbing King et al. 2018; Smedley and Smedley 2005).

Institutional racism permeates governmental institutions such as the USDA and its subsidiaries; Farmers Home Administration (FmHA), now known as the (FSA), and the Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC) (Daniel 2007; Grant et al. 2012; Russell et al. 2021). Black farmers have consistently reported discriminatory practices in their experiences with these agencies (Grant et al. 2012). Some of the discriminatory practices highlighted are delays in the procurement procedures of operating loans, and insufficient (or lack of) information about programs available for farmers. Black farmers often refer to the USDA as the “lender of last resort” because of the usual strains they go through while accessing assistance from the agency (Grant et al. 2012).

The USDA was established by the Federal government in 1862. The main goal of the agency was to share useful information about agriculture (Grant et al. 2012). The USDA was
created as the “people’s department” to help farmers on improving productivity (Grant et al. 2012:7). Several studies established that USDA’s Resettlement Administration was laudable (Grant et al. 2012; Jordan, Pennick, Hill and Zabawa 2010). However, the agency has put Black farmers under serious restraints from accessing opportunities and resources provided under its care as a government agency (Daniel 2007; Jordan et al. 2010; Reid and Bennett 2012; Thompson et al. 2020). Some USDA workers have continuously engaged in discriminatory practices toward Black farmers. Some White elites have used their political positions and connections to perpetrate their racist intentions against Black farmers and to restrain them from economic and political freedom (Daniel 2007). The “untamed racism,” as Daniel (2007: 7) describes it, has been noticeable at all levels (federal, state, and county). Efforts to dismantle racism within the USDA failed, mainly, because White supremacist elites wanted to frustrate the economically rising power of Black people, to maintain their status quo and the subjugation of Black farmers (Daniel 2007).

Black farmers became independent under the aid of the Resettlement Administration, a USDA sub-agency that became prominent in the 1930s for creating Black farmer’s settlements across the United States. Resettlement Administration helped many Black farmers with land possession before it was metamorphosized into Farm Security Agency in 1937 (Grant et al. 2012; Jordan et al. 2010). However, White supremacists knew fully well that economic viability would give Blacks agency in social and political spaces. This and the plantation ideology of White supremacists influenced the racialized treatment of Black farmers to put them out of farming. This process aligned with the idea of colonialist intentions as argued by Goldstein (2014). Although the USDA is expanding and transforming its relationships with historically marginalized groups, this has not stopped the population of Black farmers from declining.
Racial discrimination has led to foreclosure and massive land loss among Black landowners (Daniel 2007; Reid and Bennett 2012), a phenomenon that has been described as a tool for colonial intentions (Goldstein 2014). Delayed loan tactics were used, whereby farming loan processes for Black farmers were unnecessarily delayed, which hindered them from cultivating the land at the appropriate time (Reid and Bennett 2012; Woods 2001). This has often led to poor harvest results and eventual indebtedness (Goldstein 2014). Black farmers who default on debt payments afterward have experienced foreclosure and many have lost their land. Notably, many Black farmers lost their land and the majority of them withdrew from agriculture because of lack of resources (Daniel 2007; Grant et al. 2012; Jones 1994; Jones and Alston 2009; Reid and Bennett 2012). Racial oppression of Black farmers has been unnoticed for a long time because the attention was shifted towards war, school integration, and other problems of segregation (Daniel 2007).

**Gender and Agriculture in the U.S.**

The concept of ‘gender’ is a social construction that categorizes society into arbitrary groups and assigns roles to those categories. This categorization intends to create hierarchical distinction and order based on the biological sex features of individuals. Gender roles are assigned based on sex both at home and in public spaces. There are dominant beliefs that on the framing of physicality and ability that the female gender is synonymous with frailty, while agility and physical toughness are attributed to maleness (Reger 2021). Gender tends to subjugate one category (female) and entreat the other (male) as the superior (Trauger 2001; West and Zimmerman 2016). Our patriarchal society often considers men to be superior to women. The struggle over gender equality/marginalization is cross-cultural, and countries that are respected for gender equality (e.g., Norway) still struggle to raise the bar to 40% gender
Agriculture has always been reflective of the society itself; male-dominant or patriarchal (Carter and Lopez 2019; Price and Evans 2006). Agriculture in the United States is not an exception to this, because its policies and interventions have been gendered. For instance, female claimants of the ‘pigford’ lawsuit reported that both their loan applications and their USDA settlement claims were rejected (Graddy-Lovelace 2017). Digging further into the population of farmers, only a staggering 29% of the U.S. farming population identify as female farmers, yet they are often marginalized and considered unfit or less worthy farmers (Carter and Lopez 2019; Trauger 2001). Furthermore, the marginalization of women is more evident in the primary production sector, and agricultural policies and interventions are often gender discriminatory, giving preference to male farmers (Graddy-Lovelace 2017; Trauger 2001). In addition, the valuable contribution of women to the family farm is often considered mere support (Trauger 2001).

According to Carter and Lopez (2019), society defines who practices farming, and how it can be practiced. Most people describe a farmer as a “he” because of the presumable hard nature of farming and social expectations associated with masculinity. There have been historical and dominant views rooted in misconceptions such as that in the U.S. all farmers are White men (Thompson and Carter 2022). Women, despite their crucial role in agriculture, operate in the economically less viable areas of agriculture such as in small-scale operations, while males in small-scale farming are considered effeminate, and with less respect among the mainstream.
farmers (Carter and Lopez 2019). Graddy-Lovelace (2017) argues that the U.S. agricultural policies have hampered the development and practice of small-scale farming because the system is driven towards industrial/mechanized farming (Bell, Hullinger, and Brislen 2015; Carter and Lopez 2019; Peter, Bell, Jarnagin, and Bauer 2000; Trauger 2001). This implies that women operate in deserted or poorly developed areas of farming. Although women own equal or almost the same mass of farmland as men farmers in the U.S., the control of the farming system and operations are male-dominated (Carter and Lopez 2019).

Farming as a ground for patriarchal advantage, considers women’s efforts, contribution, and ingenuity as mere help or support for the family (patriarchal) business. Family farming is propelled by patriarchy as farming practices are not only taught but also geared towards male children (Cairns et al. 2015). Only a small percentage of farmers are women in the U.S. Despite multiple works highlighting differences and inequities between men and women farmers in the U.S., little is still known about gender roles and constructions among Black farmers because most of the studies focus mostly on race. There is an important need to examine the influence of gender on Black farmers’ experiences.

**Inheritance**

The term ‘inheritance’ means the acquisition or transfer of possession from past generations to present or future generations. Transfer of property can create generational wealth. Land as a valuable heritage, stores value and constitutes an essential property that is usually passed down to other generations. In the U.S., land ownership often goes beyond just possession of wealth, it connotes the connection between ancestors and present or future generations (Cairns et al. 2015; Newkirk 2019). Black Americans hold onto land as evidence of freedom because of
the hurdles they crossed even before they could own land (Bailey and Thomson 2022; Copeland 2013).

The land has been passed from one generation to another to ensure property remains in the family line. Meanwhile, the inheritance process was codified by state laws, thereby entrusting the legality of inheritance to the “Will” (Copeland 2015). Nowadays, landowners are expected to prepare their will, stating who inherits their property, and sharing a portion after their death. However, the historical racialized violence against Black people and their communities across the U.S, and the inability of the law and judicial system to safeguard Blacks, led to Black people’s distrust in the legal system and the reluctance they often exhibit to let the White dominated judicial system handle their will (Bailey and Thomson 2022; Copeland 2015). This reluctance later became the cause of heirs’ property.

Nowadays, one of the major challenges faced by Black farmers is heirs’ property, a situation whereby a landowner dies without a will or any other legally recognized arrangement for sharing property left behind (Bailey and Thomson 2022; Copeland 2015). Death intestate (without a will) makes the ownership of an estate a “tenancy in common,” which means that the heirs of the deceased automatically become the joint owners of the property (Bailey and Thomson 2022; Copeland 2015; Copeland and Buchanan 2019) regardless of the landowner’s intent before passing.

Heirs’ property manifests the duality of wealth accumulation and hindrance to the economic development of a Black community. Passing down estate to heirs signifies redistribution of wealth to the upcoming generations if well utilized. On the other hand, the problem of multiple ownership and agreement among the owners are among the major issues with heirs’ property, which creates challenges for some heirs who intend to use the property for

Another major issue with heirs’ property is land loss (Bailey et al. 2019; Copeland 2015; Johnson Gaither 2016). The risk of losing a co-owned property is higher because while some heirs take the property seriously and ensure taxes are duly paid, some heirs are not interested or able to handle tax payments (Bailey et al. 2019). In addition, the longer an estate stays as heirs’ property, the higher the possibility of ownership multiplicity and dissonance among them. Incidentally, when property taxes are not paid, ownership could be lost (Bailey et al. 2019; Copeland 2013; 2015).

Black Americans possessed up to 1.6 million acres of land which were valued at $6.6 million in the U.S. South until 2018 (Bailey and Thomson 2022). However, many Black farmers were indifferent about clarifying who could take over the property after passing. Most Black farmers assumed that the estate remained in their family as long as the heirs pay taxes on the land and residence on the property (Bailey and Thomson 2022). Furthermore, Black landowners often believe all heirs alive are potential owners of a property’s part. Almost half of the Black-owned land is heirs’ property and is prone to partition sales of its tenancy in common status (Bailey and Thomson 2022; Copeland 2015).

The Uniform Partition of Heirs Property Act was enacted in 2010 to safeguard heirs against unfair practices in property partitioning (Mitchell 2016). This act helps heirs to escape dubious property partitioning, and it also ensures that the value of the property is preserved when partitioning becomes unavoidable (Batra 2017; Mitchell 2016). Since its enactment, only a small number of states have ratified the Act. The adoption of the Uniform Partition of Heirs Property Act by the State of Mississippi was not enforced until July 2020 (Panter 2020). This suggests that lands tied up in heirs’ property have been lost to predators and their nefarious deeds (Bailey
et al. 2019) in this state. However, little is still known about heirs’ property among Black farmers in the U.S.

**Black Farmers’ Coping Strategies**

The term ‘coping strategy’ implies expressions, behaviors, and actions exhibited in response to an “aversive situations (which) … induce stress” (Wechsler 1995:124). Coping strategies are developed as adaptations to challenges (Wechsler 1995). Coping strategies have been historically critical for the subsistence of Black farmers in the U.S. Hunte (1992) contends that Black Americans tend to cope with challenging situations, especially because of the struggles they have historically experienced in this country, such as slavery.

Black farmers have engaged in a range of activities to cope with the challenges associated with farming in this country. Black farmers often practice survival farming; non-mechanized/family labor-driven subsistence farming, and because of limited resources, they substitute farming with part-time farming or off-farm work, cushioning the effects of financial hardship (Zabawa et al. 1990). One major coping strategy that Black farmers have historically employed against the challenges faced by “Black agrarianism” is farmers’ cooperative (Reynolds 2002; White 2019).

International Co-operative Alliance (ICA) has defined cooperative as an “autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly owned and democratically controlled enterprise” (Zeuli and Cropp 2004:1). In addition, Pezzini (2006:4) identified seven characteristics of cooperative, namely; voluntary membership, democratic control, members economic participation, autonomy, education/information, cooperation, and concerned community. Drawing from these descriptions, I define cooperative as a voluntarily and democratically controlled organization that
is characterized by members’ economic participation and autonomy, to provide needed services for its community/members.

Black farmers used cooperatives as a coping mechanism before the Civil Right era, but it became a grounded and proficient strategy during, and after the civil rights struggles. Reynolds (2002) further reveals that what later metamorphized into a farmers’ cooperative began as a “funeral cooperative” (Reynolds 2002:12), an offshoot of the Alliance and Farmers’ Improvement Society of Texas (FIST). The goal of the Black farmer’s cooperatives was to ensure independent farming against the experience of tenancy and sharecropping that have negatively affected this population for years. Farmers’ cooperatives became stronger with the advent of the Civil Right Movement of the 1960s. Fannie Luo Hamer established Freedom Farmers’ Cooperative (FFC) in the late 1960s to resist discrimination against Black farmers who supported the political freedom of Black Americans (McCutcheon 2019; White 2019:65). FFC provided a stronghold for the civil rights movement, not just as a mobilization force, but also an anchor of sustenance to activists whose activism were outlawed by the state of Mississippi. In effect, FFC served as an alternative resistance to the racial discrimination that drove Black farmers into northward migration in search of industrial jobs (White 2019:75). The long-term effect of the FFC was the proliferation of farmers’ cooperatives that have historically aimed to alleviate Black farmers’ struggles in this country, especially in the South.

Cooperatives have historically provided Black farmers with commercial/market opportunities and served as leeway for Black farmers to acquire land and wealth, thereby improving the well-being of Black communities in the U.S. South (Reynolds 2002; White 2019). For instance, FFC owned 692 acres of land used for farming to provide food for Black communities (White 2019). Through their involvement in cooperatives, Black farmers have been
also able to access information, networking opportunities, and access to multiple resources (Reynolds 2002; Jones and Alston 2009).
CHAPTER III
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This section provides details about the methods and procedures this study used in generating and analyzing data, and the instruments, techniques, and processes used throughout the study. Research design is a description of the conceptual structure within which this research was carried out (Kothari 2004). It provides the blueprint for the methods and techniques employed in the collection, measurement, and analysis of data for the research.

I used a qualitative method to answer the research questions; (1) What are the contemporary challenges associated with farming among Black farmers in East-Central Mississippi? (2) How do race, gender, and inheritance influence the experiences of Black farmers? and (3) How do Black farmers cope with their farming challenges? I considered qualitative methods appropriate based on the research questions and their efficiency in studying the natural behavior of people (Schutt 2019). Qualitative methods enable us to understand “subjective meanings and everyday experience” (Flick 2009:12) and “patterns of relationship” (Babbie 2013:390) in social interaction and lived experiences. Interviews were considered appropriate methodological tools because they could provide Black farmers the opportunity to describe their realities and views. This methodological tool also gives room for researchers’ “reflexivity”; which means researchers’ understanding of their sensitivity and the ability to adapt to doing research (Schutt 2019:368). Using a case study approach to look at Black farmers who
were members of cooperatives in Central Mississippi, farmers’ meetings, field days, educational training, and ceremonial events such as conferences and anniversaries were carefully observed.

**Inductive Reasoning**

The theory-building approach that guided this study was “inductive reasoning” because of its capacity in identifying relevant themes and patterns of relationships from a qualitative dataset. I was required to engage in “insight and reflection” to discover patterns (Babbie 2013:80). The emergence of themes and patterns is dependent on the reflective and critical ability of a researcher. The inductive approach also implied the understanding and construction of ideas without streamlining the subject matter into preconceived categories or according to existing theories (Elo and Kyngäs 2008). The inductive approach leverages data to construct the social reality of the interviewees for theory building. In this case, the narratives from Black farmers in East-Central Mississippi were used in assessing and describing their challenges in practicing farming in the United States, and the strategies they engage in coping with those challenges. I considered inductive reasoning appropriate because it provides the ground to describe people’s experiences, feelings, and attitudes toward social phenomena, actions, or interactions based on their expressions (Elo and Kyngäs 2008; Kumar 2011).

**Study Location**

Mississippi is one of the major agrarian states in the United States and is one of the most forested states in the U.S. (Ratcliffe, Burd, Holder, and Fields 2016). Location and environmental conditions favor agriculture, so farming has been the major economic sector in this state. Mississippi had an important role in U.S. agriculture, especially with the production of cotton in the 20th century, an achievement that was directly linked to the exploitation of African
Americans as laborers (Pfeffer 1983). Historically, African Americans have had a critical role in agriculture in this state.

Although racial discrimination and the quest for economic stability have led to the migration of many Blacks to other parts of the country, some continued as farmers in Mississippi. Nowadays, Black farmers’ efforts to keep afloat their profession is evident in this state, which has the largest population of Black farmers in the U.S. (Norwood 2018; U.S. Census 2017).

The state of Mississippi comprises eight regions: the North-East, North-West, Delta, Capital, Southwest, Pine, Coast, and East-Central regions, all regions dominated by agriculture and forestry. This study took place in the East and North-Central regions of Mississippi, specifically in Winston, Chickasaw, and Oktibbeha counties, because of data availability, accessibility, as well as feasibility for generating data. This study had no intention of comparing members or the activities of the selected cooperatives, rather, the groups were considered as gateways for the recruitment of the study participants. As I previously argued, one of the main sources of resources for Black farmers’ cooperatives. Winston, Chickasaw, and Oktibbeha counties have vibrant farmers’ cooperatives composed of Black and limited resource farmers from which participants were recruited for the study. Furthermore, the researcher’s geographic proximity to members of these cooperatives was an important advantage considered for the development of this research.

**Method of Data Collection**

To examine the experience of Black farmers, I engaged in in-depth interviews as a method for data collection, whereby I generated primary data directly from the Black farmers. This method was not only useful in exploring the detailed and deep understanding of the subject
matter and social interactions, but also in giving the participants the agency and opportunity to construct the reality of their experiences through hermeneutic processes (Gubrium and Holstein 2001; Lareau 2021). Selected Black farmers were able to express their views based on their subjective experiences without being constrained by predetermined limited categorization of options.

In addition, I combined observation with the interview method to synergize the narrative of Black farmers about farming activities and participation in the cooperatives. Data from the observations of farms and farm operations, Black farmer’s cooperative meetings, training, and events were useful to compare and corroborate information from field notes with farmers’ narration during the interviews. Moreover, the observational data helped strengthen the knowledge of the study about the role of farmers’ cooperatives in farming practices and their sustainability. In effect, harnessing observational data with interviews helped to strengthen the analysis of data for this study. It helped to understand Black farmers’ oral attitudes not only from the verbal account, but also from their real-life activities both within the cooperatives and in their individual farming spaces (Jerolmack and Khan 2014).

**Recruitment**

Participants for this study were purposively selected through a combination of non-probability sampling techniques; purposive sampling, and snowball sampling techniques. Using purposive sampling, the interviewees were selected based on unique qualities (race and farming) and ability to provide relevant information to the research questions. In addition, participants were asked to recommend other farmers who could participate in the research (Schutt 2019). A total of 20 Black farmers who live and/or farm in Mississippi were recruited, to capture diversified views on the challenges faced by this population. Participants were recruited from
three farmers’ cooperatives in the North and East-Central region of Mississippi: Unlimited Community Agriculture Cooperative (UCAC) in Oktibbeha County, Mississippi Minority Farmers Alliance (MMFA) in Chickasaw County, and Winston County Self-Help Cooperative, located in Winston County. Working with these cooperatives enhanced the recruitment of a sufficient number of participants for the study. My major professor introduced me to the leader of the UCAC and told me about WCSHC. A smooth interaction with the UCAC leadership influenced the snowball effects on other cooperative groups from which participants were drawn for this study.

Leveraging on the quality of relationships and trust built with the leaders of the cooperatives for this study, I was able to gain access to members of the cooperatives. After thorough interrogation and scrutiny of the research intentions by the leaders of the groups, I was introduced to the coops’ members through both collective and individual interactions. The objectives and procedural explanation of the study were presented during cooperative meetings, trying to identify potential participants, and inviting them to participate in the research project. To be eligible for participation in this study, individuals must identify themselves as farmers who live and/or farm in Mississippi. Only adult farmers (18 years old and above) were qualified to be recruited as participants.

In addition, a conscious effort was given to the gender variations in the recruitment process because the study was keen on examining gender dynamics influencing the experience of Black farmers in Mississippi. Generally, women have been constantly described as marginalized, thereby obscuring their voices and opinions under the shadow of patriarchal views and actions (Carter and Lopez 2019; Price and Evans 2006). Although female farmers represent less than one-third of the U.S. farming population, the intention to have equal representation of male and
female farmers in this study was to enable them the opportunity to have a stronger voice in the exposition of gender dynamics in farming, which is traditionally considered a male space. Hence, I purposefully recruited 10 females and 10 males to make a total of 20 study participants.

To select the participants, I strategically prepared a pitch (very short speech) about the goal and procedure of the project. To request participation in this study, this script was presented to Black farmers either during cooperative meetings, events, or training sessions or on individual bases (in-person or by phone). The names and contact information of the interested farmers were taken, and I reached out to them within twenty-four hours with text messages and voice calls to make interview appointments.

**Data Collection Instrument**

This study involved open-ended semi-structured interviews as the main data collection instrument. To explore the experience and views of Black farmers, I used an interview guide with a total of sixty-one (61) questions; eleven (11) main questions, and fifty (50) probe questions. The interview questions focused on understanding some identified factors described in the literature review such as institutional racism, racial discrimination, gender inequality, heirs’ property and inheritance, land loss, and coping strategies.

The interview guide was useful in curating the direction of interviewees’ discourse towards the understanding of key concepts and ideas. It helped to channel the conversation towards the main objectives of the study and to ensure the research objectives were achieved. Key information related to the research questions was noted from the observation of cooperative meetings, field days, training, and farm tours (during interviews), and later made into short notes. These notes were useful for triangulating information with the analysis and insights from the interview data.
Data Analysis Procedure

To analyze data for this study, I turned to “thematic analysis;” a proficient method that is effective for “developing, analyzing, and interpreting patterns” from qualitative data to develop themes (Braun and Clarke 2022:4). In alignment with “reflexive thematic analysis,” an approach that is entrenched in the “critical reflection” of researchers (Braun and Clarke 2022:5), I utilized Braun and Clarke’s (2022:34-36) six-phase process of thematic analysis which flows from familiarization, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, and defining/naming themes to reporting.

The analysis of data began with familiarization, a process whereby I listened to the audio from interviews, transcribed the recorded interviews, read all the transcripts, and made notes for coding (e.g., possible code name or label). Systematic coding of data segments relevant to the research questions was the next step in the analysis. I imported the transcribed data into MAXQDA, and I duly open-coded the interview transcripts by assigning code names or labels to distinctive data segments based on microanalysis (Struass and Corbin 1998). Using open coding, I carefully examined data segments and assigned a detailed description that captured the meaning of the selected/highlighted data segments accordingly. I developed code memos to describe the meaning of each assigned code and to also explain some analytical insight I got while analyzing the data. This categorization and labeling task is referred to as “initial coding” (Saldana 2016:55). Further, I collated code labels into categories and compared them to identify patterns and shared meanings from the coded data. The identified themes were examined and reviewed to ensure that they represented the meaning of the coded segments. I then named the themes with proper descriptions, which opened the door for reporting as the final stage of the analysis.
I used MAXQDA, a proficient computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software, to keep the qualitative data organized and easily accessible for report writing. The recorded interviews with Black farmers were transcribed verbatim and imported into MAXQDA for analysis. I began sorting the data with open coding. Data segments that speak to each research question were categorized and each category was labeled with a code name that summarizes the meaning of the sorted segments. Code memos and comments were also attached appropriately to define the assigned codes and possible connections with other segments of the interview transcripts. In addition, I compared my observational data with the data from interviews to seek reliability of the results.

**Ethical Consideration**

A conscious social research ethic implies trust and confidentiality between the researcher and participants. This study was conducted under the appropriate ethical procedures for data collection, analysis, and management. The study required official ethical approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) to ensure the participants (human subjects) were free from any possible risk or harm. This project got an exempt determination from the MSU IRB office (Protocol number: IRB-22-298). Informed consent was duly requested (verbally) from each interviewee before the participant was scheduled for an interview. To further ensure proper consent was taken, I requested the participants to reaffirm their consent after the research objective was discussed on the interview day, with their signature as approval of consent.

I informed participants why they were considered appropriate for the study, and that their participation was voluntary, as they had the choice to withdraw from the study at any time without consequences. Further, I assured the participants that there was no risk of harm associated with their choice either to or not to participate in the study. I prioritized the anonymity
and confidentiality of participants’ identities in this study. To ensure the confidentiality of participants’ identities, the identity of each participant was concealed, and each participant was given a pseudonym.

**Researcher’s Positionality**

I am a scholar of international origin. I am from Nigeria, Africa, a continent that was not only colonized by Britain but whose people were also enslaved in America, especially in Mississippi. My background as a son of farmers, and my significant involvement in farming represent both positive and negative influences on this research. On one hand, the experiential knowledge of universal challenges/difficulties (e.g., the hardship of farming without funding and youth disinterest in farming, among others) associated with farming in my country of origin gave me a glimpse of such challenges in the selected study location. This is not to disregard the institutional and contextual differences between these two countries. On the other hand, the risk of bias or sympathy for farmers associated with my identity and background cannot be overruled.

From the foregoing, it was naturally difficult to engage with this study without some manageable level of prejudice. But I ensured that the research was sufficiently guided by critical ethics of research to drastically reduce any form of biases.

**Limitations**

The major limitation for this study is time and resources. Available time and resources impacted this research especially with the number of participants and observation time for the study. I believe that having more time and resources, especially financial resources would have enhanced how data was generated and the number of participants and observation time for the study.
Another challenge I faced while conducting this study was accent. I struggled with the “Southern accent” in some cases, and some of the participants also occasionally had trouble with some of my pronunciations. However, I handled such situations by telling the participants before we started the interviews that they could ask me to recap if they had any trouble with my pronunciation or wording.
CHAPTER IV

CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES ASSOCIATED WITH FARMING

This chapter shows the contemporary challenges associated with farming among the study participants. It focuses on the most important challenges that shape the farming experience of Black farmers. The data generated from interviews and observation was categorized majorly into farming and “closed door” experiences, access to land, retirement haven, and youth’s disinterest. The next sections show how farmers described these types of challenges while farming in Mississippi.

Farming and “Closed Doors” Experiences among Black Farmers

“There are just a few things that you can get in on. And, but I still think there [are] doors that are closed to you as being a Black person. And therefore, we can’t operate and go into a big farm, be a big farmer.” (Sandra, 59, female).

Farmers in this study described attempts to access resources as a “closed door.” “Closed door” experience describes the limitation, lack of access, and/or roadblocks that interviewees experienced in accessing resources to enhance their farming practices in Mississippi. Availability and accessibility to farming resources were highlighted as crucial to the success and achievement of farming, and the agricultural knowledge that a farmer has can be enhanced by the availability of the needed resources. Stressing the importance of resources to farming, an older female cattle farmer said lack of resources can be a “drawback” for farmers. Describing farming equipment as resources, she pointed out that “…resources [are] very important” and when farmers don’t have
the resources, they’re limited in their farming practices. Breana cited an example of this when she said, “let’s say, on a farm, you need a tractor…, if you don't have a tractor, there are so many things that you will not be able to do” to enhance your “production”, whereas having the right tractors help “to increase production.”

Interviewees stressed that “closed door” experiences were critical and were described as the different ways by which Black farmers met ‘brick walls’ in accessing resources. Funds, financial capital, loans, equipment, information, and land were described as the most critical resources Black farmers needed. Data from this study revealed a pattern of “closed door” experience among the study participants in accessing resources. For example, referring to financial capital and equipment, Sandra further explained “doors” that are “closed” against Black farmers as critical because many are unable to “pay for plastic and irrigation,” and “equipment.”

“Closed Door” to Funding and Loans

“Well, going back to what I said earlier, lack of access to capital funding, lack of marketing, lack of technical support. All these factors hindered the success of farmers of color.” (Abraham, 63, male).

Access to funding remains a huge challenge in farming, especially for Black farmers. Funding problem was always the first challenge mentioned when participants were asked about struggles associated with farming in Mississippi. A male participant highlighted the significance and problems associated with funding in the following statement:

“Well, you know, having access to capital, being able to have access to capital, to be able to purchase land. Or even if you have land and want to expand, having access to capital, to be able to do that. And oftentimes, we’ve had challenges of being able to have access to the capital, to do that. USDA offers, they offer, they have programs where they offer
capital to farmers. In many cases, it’s been a challenge for minority farmers to access that capital.” (Daniel, 63, male).

Daniel described that land possession though crucial, is not enough for farming, because even land possession depends on funding in most cases. In agreement with Daniel’s view, Melanie said “to sustain the farm, the number one thing is money.”

Another participant, King, provided a glimpse into the difficulty that Black farmers go through in accessing funding either from government agencies or financial institutions. King said the bank denied him access to financial help and “if you go to USDA, … they say you’re not eligible, that’s like the last resort for us.” This shows the connection between eligibility requirements and funding and emphasizes why the concept, of “door” appropriately fits eligibility requirements.

“Closed Door” to Farming Equipment

“The past few years. I know, it hadn’t been an encouragement, because I wanted a tractor, and some different equipment when I started back into farming. And so, as I go down and ask about it, they always refer me to the ‘not a grant, a loan, or anything’ to help me get it. They refer me to the person that sells it. And so, in other words, you … have to make a lot of debt to get what you really need.” (Sandra, 59, female).

Contextualizing resources from another point of view, a 50-year-old beginning male farmer described funding and farming equipment as critical. Arguing that access to such resources is not equally available to Blacks and Whites in surrounding communities, he told me:

“Resources. When I say resources are funding, funding. Funding … pretty much funding … And the availability of, what’s the word I’m looking for? Quality irrigation funding and quality irrigation. Because there are some lands that the Black farmer has that [have]
been deemed by the civil engineers, as we can’t put covered, or what we can’t change the flow of the water. So, it’s almost like not being landlocked, but locked into a land that doesn’t have adequate irrigation to sustain [it] was needed to grow a more robust crop, like they have on the other side of the street, at the White family, White farmers have. So, I think funding and proper irrigation.” (Jonathan, 50, male).

“Closed Door” to Information

“Closed door” experiences also extend to information that was considered by interviewees as an important resource. Access to information is key knowing know about other resources. When the “door” to information is “closed,” creates struggles to access other resources. Access to information plays a vital role in accessing available farming resources. Highlighting farmers’ struggles to get information about funding in rural areas, Jonathan highlighted:

“Oh, no funding, mostly no file, the small percentage [of farmers] got funding. But it was one reason why because there was no, the information was not readily available in the community. I want to emphasize that the information was not readily available in the community that those farmers lived in. Most resources are available in the cities, not the counties, in the cities. Whereas most of the older farmers in the past, very seldom knew. So, it’s not that they weren’t available. But there was no place in the community where you had access to resources, you had to go to the city. And a lot of times, that was a hardship to try to get to those places.” (Jonathan, 50, male).

Jonathan emphasized the “closed door” to information and its importance in the grand scheme of accessing funds for farming. Stressing further, he compared the hardship of seeking information with “pulling teeth,” because it requires that “you continuously go from person to person and
ask” for the needed information. He concluded that “some of the Black farmers” can only share the information they have, unfortunately, as far as information, they are actually “limited.”

Stressing struggles for Black farmers to get basic information about farming, Delano said:

“Yeah, you held my hand behind, here, I can’t really, I think access is available. But unless you know what you’re wanting and needing when you go in and try to access those resources. If you don’t know exactly what to ask for, they may not tell you. They might not tell you that everything is available to you…And sometimes you don’t know what to ask for. If you see a man in the coffee shop, and he said, go down there to this farm and sign up for a program. And they don’t tell you exactly what to go in and sign up for. And you go in there and say, well, I want to sign up for that program. You’re not getting, they’re not knowing what you want. So, you may not get the information that you need, just by doing that. So, you need to know exactly what to go in and ask for. And if you don’t, then you may miss it.” (Delano, 64, male).

Participants heavily discussed how they miss different opportunities and available programs and resources because they operate their farms behind the “closed door” of information, tying it to different reasons. For instance, Rebecca, a 50-year-old female farmer confirmed that the availability of resources, but “being knowledgeable of the resources that are available and how to secure the grants and, and the funding sources that are out there” is a challenge. Rosie boldly said that even going “to any agency” sometimes may not equip you with needed information because “if there’s a loophole or something you don’t know” probably in your application or the information you seek to know, “they [officials of the agency] are not going to tell you.” While the relatively younger farmers rely on information technology to access information and knowledge about farming programs and practices, Rebecca, a 50 year old female farmer, who is
fond of reading newsletters and surfing the internet to keep her informed about farming, further mentioned that older farmers are more vulnerable in experiencing “closed door” to information because “they’re not as tech savvy as some of the younger generations.”

Sarah, an older female farmer hoped to see more Black political/public office holders because: “somebody needs to be telling” Black farmers about the availability of resources so they “can apply for it.” Such hope came from the belief that race matters in accessing farming resources, and the more your race is represented in decision-making, the better your chances will be to get access. Referring to racial struggles in getting farming information, another female farmer said:

“Again, this is the same thing. They are there from the top down, the White guy. So, they know about it. They’re going to know everything, the ins and out way before we do. And until we get and put some Black farmers in there, I mean some black leaders in there that will get this information back out to us… that’ll never change. That won’t change. No, because they [Whites] are in there. And they [Whites] are getting it. They [Whites] are getting the money.” (Betsy, 75, female).

The use of specific terminology and terms hinder smooth understanding of communication between the agents of government institutions (who are predominantly White) and Black farmers. This can be connected to the complaints of some of the participants about misinformation they experience in present-day farming. Based on the information provided by the loan officer of the FSA during farmers’ events, I argue that the loan officer’s approach (presenting the fact sheets about the available loan programs to the farmers) may also lead to misinformation and application errors if farmers do not fully understand the terminologies and the eligibility requirements. The struggles of Black farmers to understand terminologies may
account for why King complained about the need for the employees of the USDA to guide the minority farmers through the process of application/paperwork.

“Eligibility Requirement” as a “Closed Door” Experience

One of the major challenges for Black farmers is getting loans. To be eligible for a loan, farmers are required to provide collateral (an asset that is considered worthy of surety for loans to be issued to recipients), which was usually considered outrageous by Black farmers no matter their financial status. This “eligibility requirement” was described by Daniel, a 63-year-old participant, as an “abstract barrier” which you can neither “see” nor “put [your] hand on.” Rachel, Daniel, Breana, and Joseph expressed their displeasure with the state of collateral that is expected. Coincidentally, loan collateral exists both in the government agency (FSA for instance) and commercial lenders (banks in most cases). My interaction with an FSA loan officer confirms that required collateral can be as much “100% for small loans application” and “150% for traditional loans application.” Any enthusiasm that farmers may have about access to funding and other farming resources gets dashed by this ‘back-breaker.’ For example, Clara, a new female farmer was “very excited” when she was “told that there [were] funds for Black farmers,” and she “was hopeful [to] be approved” but “it just didn’t work out that way.” I found that the “eligibility requirement” is a clog in the wheel for access to resources. Regarding this, Daniel highlighted:

“There’s always some type of rules or regulations or eligibility requirements. And somehow or another, it seems that there’s an eligibility requirement, that’s a part of those rules and regulations that somehow become the challenge and a barrier for minority farmers to be able to access those capitals. And it seems, on the surface, that these challenges, I mean, these eligibility requirements [are], you know, this is what the
requirements are and everybody can meet them. But everybody can’t meet them … if you didn’t start off at the same level. So those requirements become a challenge and a barrier for minority farmers to be able to access those capitals.” (Daniel, 63, male).

Daniel was not only energetic during his explanation, but the anger against such practice was also written all over his face as he tried to make me understand through demonstration of objects. Daniel believed strongly that this requirement is an “abstract barrier” for minority farmers because the of existing inequity in the society. Daniel concluded: “that’s discriminatory right there.” The excerpt below is another precise experience of an old female goat farmer.

“Well, I just had a recent experience. I was applying for a loan at 0% interest. And I was a little, I know that they said you need to receive two letters from a bank that denied you credit, or the ability to get a loan. Well, I have worked [for] 43 years trying to maintain a decent credit score. And because I had a decent credit score, I could not receive a refusal of getting a loan, you know, to get receiving the two letters. So, therefore, I was rejected. Because my credit score was decent.” (Rachel, 70, female).

Rachel wanted a zero-interest interest loan from the USDA but couldn’t get it because of eligibility requirements. Speaking with the loan officer, he said one of the requirements for such loans is that “you must have been denied by commercial lenders.” This explains Rachel’s experience. Rachel maintained a good credit score to the point that she cannot get a denial from commercial lenders. Similarly, Breana, an 81-year-old widow of a cattle farmer also shared her experience about eligibility requirements, she said; “… I never forget my husband and I went to a bank in town” to get a loan even though the couple “had funds, (about) $25,000 in the bank, but the banker wanted (them)… to sign over land … as collateral.” Breana argued that though they had the financial resources to ignore the bank, “everybody can’t do that, because everybody
Jonathan’s comment corroborates Breana’s concerns that “as a Black farmer, sometimes we didn’t have the required collateral.”

Similarly, Rachel and Joseph also shared the constraints they had about access to low-interest loans from their banks because they had “decent credit scores.” Joseph specifically claimed that it was “discriminatory” to give him an “8% interest rate” instead of a “3%” rate that believes he should have received, especially because he had his fully “paid for” house up as collateral for the loan.

One would have thought that experience with collateral was limited to commercial banks/lenders, but that is not exactly the case. I observed a field day of farmers, where members of two out of the three cooperatives were present. One of the key speakers was an FSA loan officer who shared the loan application processes with the attendees, and I had the opportunity to interrogate the loan officer. The information gathered from both encounters revealed that USDA loan programs also portray the “closed door” of “eligibility requirements.” The loan officer specifically told me that the expected “collateral” is usually “150%” for “traditional loan applications” and “100%” for “small loans.” Concerned about this struggle Sarah highlighted: “…we can’t get the equipment … without putting up everything that we have to get it, … it’s like a gamble for us.”

On the credit score complaints, however, the loan officer revealed that FSA “don’t pull farmer’s credit scores”, they only require it to know whether the applicant is eligible to get a loan with “commercial lenders.” He clarified that “FSA loans are set up for farmers who cannot access commercial bank loans.” On that account, one may argue that anyone who has a “decent credit score” might not be approved for FSA loans because their credit score will qualify them to get a loan with commercial lenders.
The eligibility requirement is so central to farming because it’s like a gateway or the “door” to other resources (funds, equipment, and information) needed for a successful farming operation. It is not surprising to find the strong connection between financial capital with other resources. So, these resources will be discussed accordingly.

**Access to Land**

Land is essential for farming. While all but one participant could boast of land possession either by inheritance or purchase, some of them, especially the beginning and relatively young farmers, are still looking for land for cultivation or expansion of their farming operations.

“…You really need a lot of land to do the commodity crops like corn, soybeans, and all that. And even now with peanuts, you could do it on a very small scale and sell it [at] farmer’s markets, or to individuals, but if you was gonna participate in the big market, you need large tracts of land. And we don’t have large tracts of land, most of the land here around in this area, it has grown up in tree, timberland. The people that had land before…they went to the city, they migrated to the city, and get the jobs in the city…”

(Daniel, 63, male).

Daniel laid bare the importance of land for agriculture, especially to when farming is considered for economic reasons. His exposition “large tract of land” referred to a large number of certain crops he wanted to commercialize in a large market which could have the potential to bring more income. In his further explanation, Daniel emphatically said “a lot of people can’t afford [to] buy [land] because it is expensive.” Describing challenges in access to land, a female farmer stressed:

“Yes, particularly being able to acquire land or you acquire or repossess the land that was taken. Black Farmers have met lots of opposition resistance and just sheer violence. So,
when it comes to farming land that, you know, belongs to us. And so my challenge now is to be able to hold on to that land, to be able to use it for farming, to use it, for my livelihood to use it for future of agriculture uses, and not let it slip away…Not be brought into some type of, you know, corrupted, you know, binding agreements or something like that, you know, that’s going to be a challenge, to make sure that I can keep the land.”

(Clara, 64, female).

Betsy asserts that ‘getting started’ is a “challenge for new beginners … because they’ve got to first get the property.” Clara is a beginning farmer who claimed to have been led into farming by “the Lord God … to prepare that land … for a safe haven.” Clara, who has recently bought a small piece of land (about 18 acres), did not only express her fear about land dispossession, but also the intention to hold onto the land to fulfil the ‘God’s ordained directive’ to her on farming. Another beginning farmer, King, a relatively young farmer (45 years old, the youngest age in the study) said he was “looking for land…” where he “can grow and, and pretty much feed [his] whole family and just live off the land.”

The demographic information of Black farmers in this study reveals that they farm on a small acreage of land. Apart from four participants who farm on 175-510 acres of land, others’ land size range between six and 60 acres, and one farmer cultivates one and a half acre, but he doesn’t have a title to the land because the land belongs to the community (60 section land). Farmers in this study could not engage in large market production which could be associated with racial disparities discussed in the next chapter.

**Farming as Retirement Haven**

One of the notable findings from this study is the demographic pattern of the participants which shows that farming is a ‘retirement haven’ where those who have worked out-of-farm jobs
return to farming either as an outlet for relaxation or as a mean for ‘extra retirement financial benefits.’ To understand their farming experiences, farmers in this study were asked to describe their journey into farming. This question generated unexpected responses to the point that farming was not just a secondary occupation, but what I would describe as a ‘retirement haven.’ Describing this, Lucas stated:

“Well, I actually, you know, I had [a] trucking business before I started farming. So, you know, I didn’t see the point of, I started farming, you know, because I’m a road trucker. And at some point, I feel like I’m growing, I am gonna retire from trucking and farming will be something I can continue to do after I retire from trucking. So that is trucking first and then the farm.” (Lucas; 72; Male)

Lucas explained that he “grew up … on a farm,” and he described farming as “something [he] knew a little bit about,” but he chose trucking as a primary occupation and decided that when he “retire(s) and got off-road truck[ing]… farming “will be something [he] could do … at retirement age.” Describing what farming means to him, Mark, a retired 66-year-old male, who is now a gardener said he “actually call [farming] a pleasure…, and it’s relaxing … because it’s something [he] like[s] doing.” Just like Lucas, another farmer gave an exposition of her well-planned journey into farming as a retirement plan. Rachel is a goat farmer who lives in a mixed-race community of retired people, and she farms on about eight acres of land. Here’s what Rachel told me about her farming journey farming:

“The first thing I considered I wanted to do when I retired was … fishing. So, I wanted a pond. And I wanted something to clean my pasture up because we had an extra five acres of land that were just growing up with no usage forward. So, and then I wanted to have
something after I retired to keep me mobile, and not to sit all day and have something to watch.” (Rachel, 70, female).

Farmer also described farming as a relaxation and pleasure outlet. The following excerpts from provide good examples:

“Well, I started farming, gardening as a way of relaxation, just peace and wanting to grow for a row, wanting to grow food for my own family.” (Fernando, male, 48).

“I knew I was retired and five years out and so I was researching and looking for something that would clear the land something recreational for me it’s such as fishing and having a pond.” (Rachel, 70, female).

In her description of the challenges of Black farmers, a 66-year-old female vegetable farmer said a larger share of farmers had out-of-farm jobs from which they retired to start farming.

“No, I wouldn’t say so. I think it’s due to funds available, land available, and then to a lot of our Black farmers who are retired, most of them had jobs before they retired that do not pay a good retirement. So, therefore, on that end, they don’t have the funds. I think they have the mindset to have a good farm, but the funds are just not there for them. And they’re at that age where they’re just too old to work because nobody to hire you when you get to a certain age because they know you going to have health problems and things like that. In the end, if you’re too old anyway, they won’t lend you money. They thought you’re gonna die as the money belong to them. So, it’s a lot of disadvantages for minority farmers.” (Kati, 66, female).

From Kati’s response, aging was also a key challenge associated with ‘retirement farming.’

Farming while retired poses the possibility of low zeal. Farming as a retired job can influence the productivity of farmers while they keep their retirement status. This was keenly supported by the
interviewees’ statements. For example, Rachel describes her community as subsistent, not as a productive farming community:

“I’m not sure if in my community here farming has a tremendous impact. I don’t, I think most of the farmers are doing it as a small, very, small business. They are retired, it’s clear [that] they couldn’t make money. They couldn’t live off the farm. So, they got jobs in factories, industries, school systems, and so forth, to earn money to provide for their families, because the farm, just the farming wasn’t doing it. And the farm is a big risk also, to take to support your family financially. So, I think most of them are like retired and they are older, and they aren’t looking to, you know, get rich out of farm[ing].”

(Rachel, 70, female)

Further, Rachel also described her strength and performance in connection with age. She said:

“I’m 70, and you have to have a tractor and you have to work on a tractor and … and then [my husband’s] health is not good. And I don’t I didn’t want anything to be extraneous.”

Another female farmer hit on the effect of old age on her productivity as a farmer and as a reason for her intention to withdraw from active farming:

“The only thing I have kind of slowed down with farming and kind of turned it over to my daughter. It is because of my age. Not because I’m a female because I don’t mind getting out there getting my hands dirty and doing it.” (Sarah, 73, female).

Youth Farming “It’s Almost Nonexistent”

There is a wise saying that the “youth are the leaders of tomorrow.” Although the participants of this study wish to pass down the farming tradition to their children, findings from this study show that most of them are not interested in farming.
“I find the community I see older people passed away. The younger people are not getting involved in farming and therefore we don’t have farming going on in the community.” (Breana, 81, female)

Breana, just like a couple of others raised concerns about the continuity of farming tradition in the Black community, but the youth’s indifference points to the fact that would be difficult to get replacement for the declining Black farmer population in the future. The youngest interviewee highlighted:

“In my community, in a Black community, I don’t see a lot of it. I don’t see a lot of Black youth. In this area, I say in this area, because down south it seemed like more people or more Black people are into farming than up in the north half of the state. But I haven’t seen too many Black youths wanting to get into farming.” (Fernando, 48, male).

While Fernando attributed youth disinterest in farming to the Black community, Abraham and Lucas point out that this happens “across the board [in] all generations [and] all ethnicities” and racial groups. Farmers’ children would support their parents whenever they are available, but they do not show interest in going into faring as a personal endeavor. Some farmers said their children are not going to farm, some are still very skeptical about their children’s standing with farming. For instance, Delano said:

“I inherited part of dad’s farm, and I want my farm to be available to my offspring. So that’s just something most farmers want for their offspring as they enter their farm and continue farming.”

To express the illusion of farmers when the hope that children will come back into farming, Delano further said his “kids are probably not going to be on the farm as such.” Contrary to Delano’s reality, Abraham said his daughter is presently into farming.
Some of the major reasons described as influencing youth’s low participation in farming include social media, other (out-of-farm) jobs, financial gain, and past experiences of their relatives. This problem was also blamed on the effect of socialization or exposure to farming since childhood. Sandra for example claimed that it’s because the youth believe farming is intense labor, which they don’t want to sign up for.
CHAPTER V

INFLUENCE OF RACE, GENDER, AND INHERITANCE ON THE FARMING EXPERIENCE OF BLACK FARMERS

This chapter unveils the findings on the specific ways that race, gender, and inheritance shape Black farmers’ experiences. First, I will present the findings about the influence of race on Black farmers’ experiences. After that, findings about the influence of gender on the experience of farmers will be explained. Then, I will show how Black farmers’ experience is shaped by inheritance, especially heirs’ property.

Race and the Experience of Black Farmers

This section specifically shows the involvement of race in the experience of farmers. The focus of this section is to examine the racial dynamics in the everyday farming experience of the participants and how this has significantly influenced how they practice farming. To enhance readability and better understanding, farmers’ experience will be discussed under four subheadings. I will start with racial discrimination as an “abstract barrier” to black farmers and move to the discussion on race and lack of access to information. Then, race and price discrimination will be presented before we finally examine this disparity in land possession among Black farmers.
Racial Discrimination: An “Abstract Barrier” to Black Farmers

Racism is a slippery slope because it is very hard to identify, especially institutional racism. However, in this study, farmers shared experiences that are considered racially induced conditions or circumstances.

One key indication of racial connotation in this study is how the participants use words to describe their situations and experiences. It is very typical to see words like “other farmers,” “we,” “us,” and “big farmers,” among other categories in farmers’ accounts of their experiences. Sometimes, you can tell that some participants were trying to avoid mentioning certain races in their discussion. For example, sitting across the table with Kati, a self-identified Black female farmer with mixed-race identity (White paternity), as she inaudibly talked about White farmers or whiteness. Kati had to point to the white paper on the table at a point just to tell me about Black land that was lost to White people in the past. In essence, some of the excerpts used to convey race discussions have some of those words listed above.

Data shows that farmers in this study demonstrate the experience of institution-based inequality induced by race in access to resources such as funding, equipment, and more importantly, information. Racial disparity in access to land constitutes one of the contemporary challenges for Black farmers but the discussion will come later in a following chapter.

Addressing racial disparities, Daniel stated:

“You know that the White farmers do not have those same challenges, those same barriers. They do not. So, because the evidence doesn’t show it. The evidence is they’re getting everything or most of the things they asked for because we can see it on their farms. I don’t see it on, I don't see it on our farms.” (Daniel, 63, male).
Like other participants, Daniel believed that their White counterparts enjoy access to resources when Black farmers struggle for similar opportunities. He added:

“Because, you know, that barrier exists. It exists, it has existed, even they have admitted that we discriminate. So, there’s something that’s going on now, you’ve admitted that you discriminate, and you got to try to rectify that, but now you’re discriminating again because somebody else said that they were discriminated against they, they’ve had all opportunities, all years all the time forever. But now you’re discriminating against us again. So, you double discriminate, you’re triple discriminate every time you look is. So, it’s another barrier. So, in my mind, nothing’s ever gonna happen. So, there’s this discrimination. That’s that abstract barrier again. Okay, we just played it, and if we just play this thing out, they’ll give up. They will give up, and we won’t have to be bothered with them again. So, it’s discrimination on top of discrimination.” (Daniel, 64, male).

Another male farmer highlighted similar racial disparities and discriminations:

“I have been discriminated against and I will be discriminated against in many aspects because of who you are, where you are. The behavior of the county committees from FSA Farm Service Agency operated by county committee, individuals who are from your county manage the FSA. And FSA is the money office. More money comes with FSA than any other agency. So those who had access to get their loan, operating loan, farm ownership loan, and so for African Americans, when they have access to capital, that has forced us into foreclosure sooner, because these people are from the local fabric of the community, and they make a decision...They’ll say Oh it’s [Abraham], we’re not going to fund him. So yes, I’ve been discriminated against.” (Abraham, 63, male).
By saying “these people from the local fabric of the community…,” Abraham meant to say ‘White people.’ Perception of discrimination among Black farmers focused mostly on the experiences that farmers had with institutions. However, while some farmers emphasized the existence of discrimination, others pointed to past experiences which Lucas described as an experience that “leaves bitter taste in the mouth.”

Breana said it seems very hard nowadays to establish discrimination in farming because “not many Black people are farming now.” In furtherance of this, even those who are farming tend to stay away from places that are considered ‘race-tensioned arenas’ (my coinage) such as USDA offices and banks. This pattern of avoidance was shaped by the negative past experiences of the farmers, their significant others, or people in their social network.

**Race and Lack of Access to Information**

Findings from this study show that information is an important part of the resources that farmers need. Access to information is the first step towards access to resources. This section discusses how interviewees described access to information based on race. Betsy told me:

“But to get into the programs that the government has. That’s great, but you got to know about it. And a lot of folks just don’t know, don’t know about it. And that’s what we were out doing now trying to get them did let them know what’s there. That’s why a lot of the farmer who lost a lot of our lands and stuff was lost too because they just didn’t know the program was there or they were there but they just wouldn’t give it to you, you know, they just keep it given to the White man. That’s what they would do. They got it and we didn’t get it. The fence and the equipment, you name it. The fund was there when we weren’t getting it.” (Betsy, 75, female).
The excerpt above explains how beneficial access to information can be in accessing the available government “programs.” The word “they” in Betsy’s comment is a depiction of some agents in charge of agricultural programs in government institutions, and by “folks” she was talking about Black farmers. To shed more light on this, Betsy further stressed her assurance that “White man is gonna get way more than we do” because “…they’re in the higher office. So, they know what’s coming down the pipe before we get there.” It is noticeable from the way she concluded that even when it is said that Black farmers have access to resources, what they get is less than their White counterparts. This is because Black farmers “always get [the information] late.” In a similar account, Delano said:

“The challenges are still the same. Some of the ways of going about dealing with the challenges are somewhat different in that Black farmers, I don’t think are privy to a lot of the inputs that the White farmers have, they have a little bit more knowledge … Privy a little bit more about information than we may be because they control the programs, they handle the programs that are geared toward farming, where they’re meeting with them, and they go to church with them, and they see them every day where Black Farmers don’t.” (Delano, 64, male).

Delano can be taken for his word on this account because he retired from a similar institution and understands the institutional operations. Daniel referred to him as a “layman.”

Participants described how the information gap between White and Black farmers has its source in White dominance and the networking advantage that White farmers have with agricultural institutions. Access to an agent in government institutions may imply access to information that could be helpful in farming practices. For example, Sarah was able to access a government program because of her network from her former out-of-farm job. Other Black
farmers were left out because, according to Sarah, the program may not have been “publicized where people would know about it. She further emphasized this saying “if you didn’t know somebody from inside, then you won’t know” the program existed. This networking advantage is what King described as “buddy-buddy system” which he argued affects Black people from getting what they apply for.

Apart from the “buddy-buddy system,” participants highlighted that another way that Black farmers are denied information is through misinformation. Participating farmers experienced misinformation from government agencies they visited from time to time. As I previously mentioned, one of the major ways of perpetrating this included the use of terminologies and professional jargon in the paperwork. Daniel explained that “the way they explain things is not like every day talk,” rather they deploy terminology instead of “putting things in layman’s terms, to where just the uneducated or non-educated person can understand.” Daniel draws our attention to the systemic operations of institutional racism whereby education could serve as a disadvantage for Black farmers.

Placing this side-by-side with the information provided by the loan officer of the FSA during my observation of farmers’ events and my interaction with him, he said he chooses to “present the fact sheets” about the loan application to the farmers instead of using the word of mouth. This may lead to misinformation and application errors if the farmer does not fully understand the terminologies and the eligibility requirements. Although the agent said he would answer any question that farmers had afterward, according to King and Daniel, some Black farmers could be discouraged and decide “to walk out of the door” and never come back, to avoid similar experiences. More than half of the interviewees had bachelor’s degrees and above, but their educational background was not seen as an advantage for accessing to resources. King,
Rosie, and Clara highlighted their experiences of strains, misunderstanding, and errors resulting from applications. However, I want to add that the highest level of education of the trio was associate degree. This may have also contributed to their ordeal “closed door” to information because of racial discrimination can constraint access to equipment, funding, and other resources critical in agriculture.

**Race and Price Discrimination**

Another challenge that was highlighted by interviewees was how race influences the price of farmers’ produce during sales. This aspect stressed by some farmers could be illustrated by the following excerpt:

“I’ve been at the sale barn where we even took our cattle, I may get just $1.50 per pound for mine. But this other person that goes there, they might have more cattle to me a little bit more money, they may end up with $2 a pound for their cattle. And they can look just the same, and weigh the same, but they can get a little bit more than me. I can’t question or ask them, but I know that they’re still doing it.” (Rosie, 49, female).

Abraham, a 63-year-old tree farmer also shared the experience of other cattle farmers which corroborated Rosie’s claim. According to Abraham, farmers of color “who sell cows” … may be paid “10-15% less per pound” than “a White farmer.” Sarah also shared her experience selling her timber cheaper because there are not “many African American buyers.” Whereas her White counterparts sell theirs with “a good price.” Rosie also further attributed the reason for the discriminatory pricing to the fact that there is no Black American ban. However, Delano provided an antithesis to the discriminatory sale or pricing claims of other participants but highlights that the problem starts with a lack of information. He argues that the price difference
is based on product deficiency and not necessarily because of discrimination. The excerpt below conveys his thoughts.

“So, if I don’t get that information, I don’t know what to take my, my crop in at that point in time. If I take it in, I don't think there’s a problem with discrimination because it’s gonna get the same thing as, as anybody else. I think it may be different because when a lot of crops come in, when you’re a lot of cattle come in, they're gonna take it as, as your crop. The people who are bidding on it, who may be trying to buy it, they’re not gonna know what’s yours, not so they’re gonna buy based on what they see in there. So, if you grow a good product, they're gonna buy your product. So, and I don’t think discrimination comes into play same there.” (Delano, 64, male).

To connect this back to discrimination, the exception in Delano’s comment that “if I don’t get that information, I don't know what to take my, my crop in at that point in time” leads back to how the “closed door” to information managed mostly by White people can hinder Black farmers from getting a good price for their products.

**Black Farmers and Land Possession**

As discussed in the previous chapter, land is a crucial resource for farming, and access to land constitutes one of the biggest challenges for Black farmers in Mississippi. Most Black farmers in this study have small acreage ranging between six and sixty acres of personally purchased or inherited land because of access to funds and land availability. Interviewees described Black farmers don’t have the required land size needed for larger-scale farming that could enable them to get better markets. Excerpts below show the racial disparity in land possession.
“We won’t you, won't find, I doubt you find any Black farmers in the state of Mississippi that’s falling 1,000s of acres because we’re just not there yet. The land has already been bought up to, bought up and owned by White farmers that are farming the land. And if you don’t own land to farm, then it’s easy for me and I think it’s easy for another race to the hold you down because all they got to do is not sell you the land. They can just, if you need land and farm to grow, you can decide not to sell your land for whatever reason.” (Fernando, 48, male).

Fernando is not just a beginning farmer, he is the third youngest in the study, and he displays a strong interest in farming and hopes to go full-time farming soon. However, he farms six acres of land which he claimed he was buying from his dad. Fernando’s explanations of racial disparities and land possession in Mississippi was described by how ownership of large pieces of land was in the hand of White farmers, while Black farmers scrambled for the rest. He argued that one of the ways people of “another race hold[s] down [Black farmers] … is not sell you the land.” This assumption aligns with the claim made by Jack (45-year-old), one of the youngest farmers in this study, that his major challenge was that he experienced the “closed door” to information on access to land when he wanted to buy land. Confirming the volume of land needed for large-scale farming, Rachel also corroborated Fernando’s statement “about a thousand acres” of land. I asked a question about the importance of farming to Rachel’s community, and she expressly explained how those she referred to as “huge farmers” operate big farms with large acreages. According to Rachel, “we don’t have 1,000 acres of land yet. We don’t have 500 acres of land.” With discontent written all over her face about the experience of Black people on land dispossession in past years, she dejectedly said, “maybe one day they will give Black folks what
they deserve, and we can have 500,000 acres like the White guys.” Coincidentally, just like Fernando, Rachel raises her goats on just about eight acres of land.

Another dimension to the analysis of racial disparity in land is that even the small land that Black farmers scramble over is of poor quality with topography that is not suitable for agriculture.

“The racial makeup is such that you have a few acres, a few miles of Blacks on one side of the street. And then on the opposite side of the street, you have Whites, and you can tell the difference in the land immediately. The land on the side where the Blacks are, it’s kind of underdeveloped with as far as irrigation, and fencing, and what you call it, the way the land, the slope of the land, topographic is on the Black side. You can see the difference you got more hills and valleys because I told you it’s somewhat swampy, whereas on the opposite side of the street is more clear pasture and greenery. Where we may have more hardwood sparsely scattered, they’ll have a neat acreage of pines just pristine. It's just like night and day, you look from the left side to the right side. There’s a big difference.” (Jonathan, 50, male).

Furthering his argument about the poor condition of land in the possession of Black farmers, Jonathan said “those are the lands” left for Black farmers to “make something grow.” “One of the biggest disparities” Black farmers are experiencing now according to Jonathan is that “the best land was acquired by Whites” and the “undesirable land was left for the Blacks to not fight over.” To him, it’s more like a conspiracy to not “leave enough land” for Black farmers to work.

While the “closed door” experiences prevent farmers from accessing farming resources, access to land prevents some people from farming and other from expanding the existing farming operation. This pattern of institutional racism as a major condition that shapes the experience of
Black farmers agree with the literature on the challenges of other Black farmers (see Jordan et al. 2010; Reid and Bennett 2012; Thompson et al. 2020).

Black Farmers and Gender: “Outside Work” and “Inside Work”

This chapter presents interviewees’ views about gender in farming, especially how farmers do gender in this region of Mississippi. To answer the research question about gender dynamics in farming, both male and female farmers in the study shared their views on farming and gender. The next subsections examine farmers’ views.

Farming and Masculinity: “That wasn’t something that was ladylike”

Findings reveal that farmers hold a stereotypical belief on gender roles and ‘who fits better’ when it comes to farming, even when female farmers work as much, or more than male farmers. Describing gender roles in farming, a male farmer told me:

“I would think as a male, I’m better suited for the rigorous requirements because of the consistent rigorous requirements of taking care of the land, whereas if you’re talking if I compare myself to a female, being just by shared societal norms, she would be better off taking care of the kids while I’m out doing the work. It would be backward for her to be out in the field, and I stay at home and take care of the kids here in the Mississippi. As a male, we look at that as a “no,” The man should do the heavy lifting, whereas the wife should care for the children, the man helps care for the kids when we come home, but to put her under the weight of that burden of farming, no, she can help. She can help. But the strangest part, as a male, I feel personally responsible to take that on.” (Jonathan, 50, male).
Jonathan, a male beginning farmer, believes men are better suited for the “rigorous requirements” of farming due to societal norms that dictate women should take care of children while men do the “heavy lifting.” To Jonathan, this was a social order that should remain constant because changing the order is tantamount to “backwardness.” Some female farmers hold contrary views about gender norms and farming, claiming that they operated their farms just as male farmers, but the majority of the participants (both male and female) were keen on validating farming as a masculine occupational space. To support their claims, some argued that men possessed the physiological make-up needed for farming. Interviewees’ emphasis was on the physical strength needed in farming. For example, male farmers were credited with the ability to lift heavy things. Some participants’ perceptions about female farmers in respect of strength was as someone who required masculine help.

Some male farmers acknowledged that women could work like men, but highlighting that men “work outside,” and women “work inside.” King recalls his family traditions, where outside work was considered masculine and “inside work” of “clean up, … cooking and washing dishes” were feminine, and even though his sisters worked outside with him, the hard labor was primarily done by men. Participants stressed that in rural Mississippi farming is often associated with men, even though there are many women doing fieldwork at the farms. Speaking precisely, King said farming is “an advantage for man.” Using farming as fertile land for doing gender, male farmers expressed their masculinity when they highlighted their personal responsibility to take on the burden of farming as a man. Participants emphasized that gender roles in farming follow traditional binary gender scripts. A women farmer highlighted:

“Usually, male farmers can handle all the heavy work and hard work and female farmers can’t. I think female farmers, and that is reality because I can’t do it, I got arthritis in my
left arm and hand so I can’t do as much. I want to get a tractor, but I can’t repair tractors and know what I’m doing to tear them up. You know, I don’t know enough about them. And man, males just seem to have that knowledge that females do not have. But I think as far as managing and keeping records and knowing when those are gonna start. In breeding, and keeping, you know, that part of it, I think that women have more strength on that. But the physical part, I think the male has more so. But if you had two people working together, say a husband, wife team, it would be a perfect situation.” (Rachel, 70, female).

Female interviewees shared similar views that male farmers were better suited for the physical, heavy work of farming, and the traditional gender norm of “outside work,” while “inside work” and excelling in managing and keeping records was associated with female farmers. This narrative is similar to what other works on gender and agriculture have found that farming is considered masculine with the perception of the tasking manual labor, even when the modern agriculture is mechanized (Bell et al. 2015; Peter et al. 2000).

As multiple scholars have argued, gender is a social creation (Deutsch 2007; Reger 2021; Trauger 2001; West and Zimmerman 2016) and it is believed that stereotypical views have contributed to the lack of female farmers across all races, not just within the Black farming community. Some female farmers in this study suggested that a husband-wife team working together would be ideal for farming.

**Farming and Femininity**

Results from this study show that farming is not done without a reflection and reproduction of gender discrimination. Farming, which King, a male participant, described as a space for male “advantage” has not ceased from being a patriarchal endeavor or occupation.
Asked about the differences between male and female experiences in access to resources, a farmer told me:

“Limitations, I’m, basically what I was saying they, they’re not taken serious[ly] if they go in there. They’re not gonna be taken this serious[ly] if they go and say I want to do this. They’re gonna basically kind of like: “Are you sure this is what you gonna do?” You know, they basically got to prove this. They got to prove to somebody they really want to do this. You know, I’m saying they got to really go in there and really say “okay,” this is what I want to do. And prove themselves. Most time men they’re in there already in that field. They’re doing it already. And they go in and they got approved like “this is what I do.” But it’s still a challenge, gonna be a challenge for a woman to go in and especially if she’s by herself.” (King, 45, male).

King, a relatively young male farmer, claimed that female farmers are less likely to be taken seriously than their male counterparts when they claim they want to farm. Furthermore, his explanation reveals when farmers apply for resources, approvals from the institutions are more likely to favor male than female farmers. Specifically, when King said “…they got to prove to somebody they really can do this (i.e., farming), he was referring to female farmers. Breana is an old female farmer, whose argument also portrayed discrimination against women in accessing resources such as farming loans. Breana stated that men are more likely to get approved for loans than female farmers, based on the assumption that male farmers have more “quality time” for farm work than women who are often assumed to be “children involved” (taking care of children). Breana concluded that “certainly different decisions are going to be made” when women who are involved in farming try to access resources.
The discrimination also extends to perception of knowledge whereby women are looked down upon in terms of knowledge. For example, Rosie said, “…when it comes [to] female as far as limitation to that they’re dealing with for instance, when we take our stuff to the sale, they’re looking at us being a female” who doesn’t “know better.” She added that men think women farmers don’t “know the difference. So, they would treat us different than they would if it was a man coming to him. Because they’re looking at that the female is beneath them.”

Some participants attributed the ability to operate farming equipment to men, even though some female farmers did the same type of work as male farmers. The excerpt below reveals the perception of the ability to operate equipment.

“I also see that when we talk about funding, they’re quicker to talk to a man than they are a woman because they consider a woman in the kitchen, you know, and not on the farm making a decision. So, when it comes to decision-making, I’ve made a lot of decisions on the farm. And a lot of men that come in contact with they, you make decisions. Yes, I’m a part of the farm, I should have input… I do feel like there are some things that a man can ask for and he’ll get it, and if a woman asks for it, she won’t. I will talk about equipment, they would assume that a woman don’t know anything about a tractor, she just oh, well, what do you know about a tractor? So, they look for the man to be able to come in and talk about what type of tractor they want, versus woman.” (Sandra, 59, female).

Sandra is a female farmer who operates a family farm with her husband. When interrogated about the difference between male and female farmers, Sandra said “other than our sexuality I don’t think there’s any difference because I do the same thing as a man on the farm.” In a more specific term, she said: “I drive tractors, I lift things, I plant, I harvest, so does my husband.” I
remember vividly from her explanation of their roles on the farm, she seemed to use the farm equipment more than her husband, because she consistently mentioned how she drove the tractor and use equipment to help support her husband when he tried to lift stuff on the farm.

Both male and female participants acknowledged that women experience discrimination and is prevalent in farming and in rural Mississippi. Female farmers face discrimination while accessing farming loans, and they are treated differently from male farmers who are approved, sometimes even faster. Findings suggest that Black women struggle to be recognized as farmers and they are perceived as having less time to devote to farming. In selling their products or making decisions, women face bias and are not given equal treatment. Men were more likely to be heard and respected when making decisions or seeking funding, while women were undervalued and not given the same level of respect for their agricultural knowledge.

**Gender and Support in Farming**

Findings from this study indicate that there are differences by gender in participants’ perceptions of the support they receive from their spouses. On one hand, some female farmers acknowledged and highlighted their collaboration with their husbands in farming works. Sandra shared good examples of this aspect. The idea of farming originated from Sandra, she claimed the ownership of the farm, and she acknowledged the full support she received from her husband.

“My husband, we always brainstorm. We pray stuff all the time because we work together every day. So, we’re always talking about ways to make things better and more convenient.” (Sandra, 59, female).

In similar cases, such farms were described as “family farms.” Explaining her husband’s commitment to farming duties and their collaborative work at the farm, Sandra added:
“It’s whatever needs to be done. If he lifting something heavy, then I used tractor to assist him with the weight. If he lifting wood, again I have the tractor and I get the wood too so we can slide along to where, and carry to where we transition it to. It’s just we’ve worked together so long to we just know what to do. I know where to jump in. He knows where to jump in.”

For male farmers on the other hand, some reported that their wives supported them with some advice and with some ‘less energy sapping’ activities. Other male farmers claimed their wives did not help them or were not actively involved. However, it is possible that some male farmers failed to acknowledge their wives’ contributions to the farm, which could lead to women’s marginalization and disempowerment. Previous studies have shown similar patterns of marginalization of women by their male spouses in farming environments (Trauger 2001).

Illustrating these aspects, one of the male farmers highlighted:

“She supports me in some ways, you know, she's you know, she [doesn’t] take active part in it but yes, she supports me. Encouraging me, yeah, she goes to some of the meetings, you know, some of the trips and stuff. Yeah, so, you know! But of course, taking an active part like, you know, in your day-to-day operations, you know, she don’t do that.” (Lucas, 74, male).

One of the important reasons that may also explain this difference between male and female farmers is their farming background. The majority, if not all husbands of the female farmers I interviewed had childhood farming background, while some male interviewees’ wives were raised in cities with little or no farming experience. Furthermore, I found a similar pattern among participants’ recognition of their children’s involvement at the farm. Farmers reported more about the support from their male than female children. While talking about the support they
received from their children, they either mentioned “my sons” or “my kids.” The only participant that said “my daughter” was Kati. One could argue that “my kids” is gender neutral, but more participants used “my son.” This suggests the possibility that gender-based differences are present in farming practices since childhood. In line with this finding, extant studies have overwhelmingly discussed gendered socialization into farming which usually focuses more on male than female children (Cairns et al. 2015).

In summary, it is crucial to note that gender dynamics and roles had a significant influence on the experience of the Black farmers who participated in this study. The general perception of farmers’ identity calls up a masculine image to mind. This dominant perception of man as the traditional farmer may explain why female farmers do not only struggle to get external recognition as farmers, but also struggle to access farming resources, especially bank loans, and farming equipment. They are either perceived as someone who lack technical know-how or time for farm management. Multiple studies have provided detailed explanations of how people “do gender,” emphasizing the experience of women in agriculture, their discrimination, and the effects of masculinity in farming spaces (West and Zimmerman 2016; Carter and Lopez 2019; Price and Evans 2006; Trauger 2001) Findings from this study show that farmers “do gender,” because the perception of a typical farmer among participants was overwhelmingly gendered. Farmers also expressed practices that exhibit gender-based discrimination from the institutions they work with.

The Influence of Inheritance on Black Farmers’ Experience

This section of the chapter discusses how the experience of Black farmers is shaped by inheritance. Specifically, this section focuses on how heirs’ property influences the experiences of the study participants.
Heirs’ Property: “Property Thrown in the Air”

Issues relating to heirs’ property are captured under this section. Farmers described heirs’ property and shared the experiences, and how their farming yearning is affected by the availability of land even when they had property tied up in heir. As farmers discussed their challenges with heirs’ property in their lineages, I could perceive the problem of having something that you can neither claim nor utilize to your advantage as you wish.

“Heirs’ property? It’s a mess, it’s a mess. It’s something that shouldn’t, because you need to plan on how to want your property to split up. If you don’t, then the court is involved with it. And the courts may not do it the way you really wanted it done. So, as you say, I need to get a plan together on how I want my stuff done...If it ends up in heirs’ property, it gets to the point that it’s just hard to deal with. Because as people die, more people get involved. Some heir, like I got three kids, right now they don’t have any kids. So, but then when they started having kids, if something happened to me, and something happened to them, then their kids are in it. And that’s how heirs work. It’s called “heir,” but I call it “air.” So, if you die without a plan, then your property is basically just thrown in the air. And anybody can come in and say that you can claim it, if they can prove that they have some kind of lineage to you. As long as they fall within the guidelines of how the government sets down to follow. So, if you hit it off at the front and say and how you want your property to be distributed, that was eliminated getting in the air like that.”

(Delano, 64, male).

Delano’s description of heirs’ property shows how complicated it is to handle, and the challenges that could represent for the farm’s owners. Another farmer, King, described it as a “disaster.” Expanding these descriptions, the complication that arises as people come into heirs was further
contextualized by Lucas. He said “some people may have 50 acres, and you got 35, 40, 50 heirs in 50 acres… and after so many years… the land gets to that point where when it’s split up” because the land is no longer “enough for anybody to really” do farming anymore. This means that the longer it takes to split up heir’s property in a definite manner, the more “mess(ed)” up the ownership of the property becomes.

**Heirs’ Property as Unproductive Property**

“The challenge just has been…the heirs’ property thing, because as I look into my family pass, and I have on my father’s side and my mother’s side, family land is tied up into heirs’ property. And you can’t, nobody can clearly own it because of how it’s done. I know that they probably did the best they could, for the knowledge they had at the time. But not ever splitting up the land is a big problem in today. So, my father on his side, it was over 100 and some acres of land that was tied up in heirs’ property. And the family still lives on this land. But nobody can actually own the land clear because it’s heirs’ property, it’s under the family name. So, they, as a group, because it’s over, it’s probably over 50, well, more than that, it may be 100 people that’s living on this land. And they have to each year get together and pay the taxes on this land. And they’ve been doing it for decades now. And, but I know, sooner or later one generation is gonna decide not to pay the taxes, and they’re gonna lose the land because they can get it, they can’t get it divided on that land. On my mother’s side, it’s another 40 or 50 acres of land that only a three or four people are paying the taxes on that land. And whenever they decide they’re not going to pay the taxes anymore. That land will probably go away too and be sold as so for property taxes by the county, and my family will lose that land again.” (Fernando, 48, male).
Land/estate is a generational wealth/asset to the younger generations, but heirs’ property does not represent a farming asset to farmers because the land, even though is still in the family, in most cases, no one is able to use it. Lucas said “it’s difficult to farm” on heirs’ property.

Fernando, as a beginning farmer, intends to grow bigger in his vegetable farming, but he presently limited to six acres of land when, he has about 150 acres of land lay unproductively as heirs’ property from his paternal and maternal lineage. It was so much challenging to him, that he made it a top priority in his discussion. Even though King wanted “more land,” he expressed the discomfort of having his “inherited land” as “heirs’ property” with no one “doing anything with it.” These are perfect examples of the ‘evil of heirs’ property’ whereby the land is available but unproductive. Bailey and Thomson (2022) and Copeland (2015) found that heirs’ property hinders intending Black farmers from utilizing the land for agricultural production and means of wealth creation. I asked Fernando about the impact of having heirs’ property in his family. His response was, “yeah, yeah, definitely. That’s more land that I could have been able to farm one day. Yeah. My family would have access to that land. That is like assets…” Fernando had also talked about his strong passion for farming to the extent that he said he was going to quit his job at 55 years old, to go full time in agriculture.

Referring to heirs’ property as “property thrown in the air” implies that the property it is up for anybody’s grab. This implies that the possibility of losing the land/property is higher if it is heirs’ property. This was further buttressed by Fernando in the excerpt above when he said they could lose the land again. From the way he said “again,” it is possible that he was aware of land loss in either of his families, but I did not pay attention during the interview to ask him about that. The prevalent reason for loss of heirs’ property is inability to pay taxes, which leave the property vulnerable to free sales by the government. When that happens, then the property is
“thrown in the air.” This is consonance with the findings of existing literature highlighting that heirs’ property has contributed land loss among Black farmers (Bailey et al. 2019; Bailey and Thomson 2022; Copeland 2015)

**Race, Gender, and Inheritance**

**Race and Inheritance**

This section examines how the experience of Black farmers is shaped by racial dynamics and social circumstances created by inheritance. Highlighting racial disparities, a female farmer stated:

“I just see it every day that things are not the same for them as for us. They can do this, they can get this, we can’t do this, and we can't get that. ‘Cos they’re not gonna let you go and get a brand-new John Deere tractor not too quick. You see what I’m saying? When you look in their feeds, they have brand new big tractors. But I’m sure they have people that have left down plenty money and have worked our race to death, we went into slave for them. So, it’s a never-ending process.” (Kati, 66, female).

From the data segment above, Kati, comparing White to Black farmers in access to farming resources, claiming that inherited/generational wealth makes access to equipment possible for White farmers as against Black farmers who inherited the stings of slavery experiences. This not only show the importance of generational wealth in creating access to resources, but also reveals that inheritance circumstances vary by race. Kati used “they” and “we” to discuss the in-group and out-group dichotomous experience between the White and Black farming population. From the excerpt, it is evident that the participant viewed that White farmers were more likely to inherit wealth from their ancestral lineage. Financial capital was one of the main challenges stressed by interviewees. Some participants suggested that generational wealth could provide
security as far as access to resource to start up farming without having to wait for government programs.

Land was identified as an essential asset needed for a successful farming operation. Land can be transferred across generations as inheritance. Land possession and its passage from one generation to another in Black communities usually come with challenges. The excerpt below shows how land inheritance can represent a challenge for farmers.

“I think as an African American, I think that’s when our weakness links to where we don’t understand how important getting your land together…” (King, 45, male.).

King said that when your land is going to be heirs’ property, “have somebody that’s over the estate, have a key person if it’s two or three people” to “making decision over that property…” However, King pointed out the possibility losing such land if the “family is so big” and “they don’t pay the taxes.”

**Race and Gender: Double Discrimination**

“I always say the strongest person on earth is a Black woman because now, she got to experience being Black and being a woman, you see what I’m saying, so they’re the strongest thing on earth, man! You know, because I know what it feels like to be a Black man. But a woman, that’s another whole set of rules. You know, it’s like, bro! It’s like a woman, a woman sometimes is looked down on, you know. Now you’re a Black woman, bro!” (King, 45, male).

Black female farmers’ experiences go beyond gender discrimination because it’s often experienced with racial exclusion. They often experience double discrimination. King is a Black farmer who has experienced “closed doors” in accessing resources and services with government institutions and agencies. King described female farmers as people who have to constantly prove
themselves for social acceptance as farmers. The unimaginable experience of Black female farmers must have been the reason why King called Black women “strong women.” He stated: “I know what it feels like to be a Black man. But a woman, that’s another whole set of rules.” This describes the double-barreled challenge for Black female farmers.

“Yes, because the fact that I’m female, and you a male, you know, certainly different decisions are going to be made.” (Breana, 81, female).

In a further explanation of how women get denied farming loans at financial institutions, Breana attributed this to gender discrimination. She claimed that bankers will make “decisions” in favor of “male” farmers and marginalize “female” farmers.

Summarily, race, gender, and heirs’ property have a significant influence on Black farmers’ farming experiences. Discrimination and inequality based on gender and race is prevalent in agriculture, with women and Black farmers facing multiple challenges. Women farmers often struggle for recognition, while Black farmers generally face systemic discrimination in accessing resources and funding. In addition, heirs’ property can create legal and financial barriers that limit farmers’ ability to access resources and make long-term plans for their land.
CHAPTER VI
FARMERS’ COPING STRATEGIES

Black farmers have historically developed innovative ways of coping with the challenges they encounter. These strategies have enabled them to keep farming and continue this as tradition and ancestral legacy. Findings revealed different ways or sources from which farmers draw support to cope with their challenges in farming.

Cooperative Membership: The ‘Savior Step’

Becoming a member of a Black farmer’s cooperative was highlighted as the most prominent and productive step to tackle challenges associated with farming. Participants described their decision to join their respective cooperative groups as a ‘step in the right direction.’ This is why in this chapter I refer to such action as a ‘savior step.’ A step that I would describe as a positive step towards the solution to major contemporary challenges associated with farming among Black farmers.

“Well, it's been a long and shortest road to where we are. When we got involved in this (some years ago). It is very few outlets for African Americans. Although USDA did exist but existed for the majority farmer not for minority farmers. So, (for many years) that we’ve been involved, we as an organization have been able to help create a pathway for other Black farmers. Throughout the state of Mississippi and other locations by developing a relationship with these entities to make it palatable for others to have an opportunity to have a farm operation.” (Abraham, 63, male).
Speaking boldly, with his voice brandished with a tone of activism, and his words with wealth of experience as one of oldest members of the cooperative community, Abraham detailed how influential a farmers’ cooperative has helped Black farmer achieved their dreams of continuous practice of farming in Mississippi. To understand what Abraham means by “creat(ing) pathway for Black farmers,” it is important to look at the roles of cooperatives in helping Black farmers with the challenges associated with farming. These roles or the benefits that Black farmers enjoy from cooperatives have been categorized as information bridge, networking opportunity, support system, access to farming resources, and youth-farming initiatives.

**Information Bridge**

One of the major benefits that Black farmers derive from cooperatives is access to information. Participants praised cooperative bodies highlighting the quality of information they provide. The excerpts below depict this aspect.

“Well, I’ve gotten a lot of information from from them like, they got tax accountant or what have you, like, specifically like last year, or a couple a couple years ago started back with COVID, we had so much information that was shared about, about the different programs and about that help, that was available, you know, to help us get through the tough times. And so that’s, you know, information. You know, that’s, that’s one of the most important things that I’ve gotten gotten from, I’ve shared information that I’ve gotten information from them.” (Lucas, 74, male).

Lucas’ testimony about his cooperative agrees with the Delano’s description of the same group when he said what the group, he “work(s) with now is trying to do is bridge those (information) gaps” and ensure that Black farmers have access to “the same information that White farmers are getting.” When Delano talked about bridging the gap, this is similar to the experience of a new
beginning farmer, Clara, who said she became a member of the cooperative because she wanted the available opportunities for “disadvantaged farmers.” The goal of providing information is to enhance positive outcome for members, and for that reason and many more, Jonathan is quite pleased with his coop.

“… they seem to be a very good information source. Just from attending the one meeting, you know… They go above and beyond to try to provide those educational sources that are needed, like we were talking about, mom was talking about understanding where the financial support opportunities are and knowing how to navigate through. They put a lot of effort into making sure that the members are educated with the tools that they need to be able to tap into some of those resources that are available.” (Rebecca, 50, female).

Recounting her experience from the cooperative meeting where I first met her before the interview, Rebecca evaluated the information she got from the group. Her mother, also a member of the cooperative, told her about how efficient and resourceful the cooperative was. Comparing what she witnessed, Rebecca felt compelled to say the group was committed to providing information for its members.

**Networking Opportunity**

As I previously stated, interviewees said that White farmers have access to information because of the connections or networks within governmental institutions. This can be accurately situated in the context of Abraham’s argument that the existence of the “USDA” is advantageous for the “majority farmer, not for minority farmers.” Black farmers have been deprived of such advantage because of less or lack of representation in the offices that oversee agricultural resources. I found that cooperative groups serve as bridges between governmental agencies and individual farmers. For example, Abraham highlighted how cooperative groups are committed to
“developing a relationship with these entities [government agencies] to make it palatable for others [Black farmers] to have an opportunity to have a farm operation.”

“So, it’s about networking…That’s what it’s about! You're gonna meet people at some many places and they’re gonna, put you at it: “this is what you needed” … And then you do you paving forward. And when I meet somebody else, the same thing, the information they gave me, amma give it to you. You see what I’m saying. We all grow like that. We are a world like that.” (King, 45, male).

King explained what he said above further by citing his personal experience of networking opportunity where he was “introduced” to another cooperative where they “help[ed] me with my paperwork.” The excitement of how fast the process was, could not hidden as King explained the networking opportunity. He said, “they basically took me on a wing!”

Another benefit that Black farmers derive from the coop is the “camaraderie,” the coming together of farmers to relate and share.

“I'll say it’s the camaraderie of basically you have the same challenges as you like, you know. If you if you’ve been through something and me and you are talking, it kind of held them back. Right. You know, what I’m talking about I ain’t got is like, you know, you know, so it's like the camaraderie coming together like we have the same issue, or we have not all negative you know, you pull it from somebody.” (Delano, 64, male).

Black farmer’s cooperatives provide the ‘we’ feeling or a sense of community or belongness for members. Several participants attested to the power of coming together and sharing their individual challenges so that farmers can draw from the wealth of experience of others who have dealt with similar challenges they might be facing. Situating this in Delano’s account below, we
can say that cooperatives provided Black farmers with the opportunity to enjoy getting together and learning agricultural knowledge.

“Well, the resources, as far as personnel, information. That that was the most benefits and just the, the camaraderie, shift of the interaction with the other farmers. And we’ll go on trips and just enjoy ourselves and learn a lot, you know, so that that’s important.”

(Rachel, 70, female).

Going on trips is another good thing about camaraderie because farmers does not only learn from others, but they also get to see and have quality interaction with other farmers.

Some interviewees described communality as an experience that Black farmers have historically used to deal with challenges generated by lack of resources, especially equipment.

**Access to Resources**

The roles of cooperative from Abraham’s description adequately provides an insight into the benefits of access to resources that Black farmers enjoy as members of the organization. According to him, cooperatives “provide leadership training, access to equipment, access to animal, access to knowledge… and this institution that make huge difference for socially disadvantaged farmers… in helping them retain ownership of their natural resources and engagement.” I have explained earlier that resources would include financial capital, equipment, crops, and even land. When Abraham said, “natural resources,” I assume he was referring to land. In essence, making resources available is one of the major roles of Black farmers’ cooperatives. An example of access to resources is captured in the excerpts below.

“Gaining information, gaining information, and also you know, by being a cooperative, a cooperative can go together and to be able to acquire different resources, like purchasing.

As the cooperative, you can get things a little bit cheaper than you can individually if you
buy large quantities. So, we at coop, we go together and buy a large quantity of stuff and get those products a little bit cheaper than the cheaper rate. And being in a cooperative, as an individual, I might not be able to access of a particular resource, but at the cooperative because we are cooperative, and I’m a member of that cooperative, I might be able to reap the benefits of some resources there, as an individual might not be able to do it.” (Daniel, 64, male).

Cooperatives do not only create relations with government institutions to access agricultural resources, but they also open opportunities of cheaper markets for their members. These market opportunities pave ways for farmers to at a capacity they would not have without being members of cooperatives. To corroborate this claim, during my field observation, I rode with Daniel in his ‘Kawasaki mule’ on tour of his farm, he pointed to the feeds, fertilizer sprayer and other equipment which he claimed he got from the cooperative at discounted price.

Rosie and Sandra claim that cooperative groups also “make resources available” to farmers who “may not be able to afford” to buy one just so they “can borrow the equipment” from the organization.

“Some of ‘em give seeds, some of ‘em can donate the plastic for covering their crops, they give irrigation, they get, some of them give tools, gloves, equipment, you know, stuff like that. And then with that organization, they have if you have equipment, you can borrow equipment as well.” (Sandra, 59, female).

Specifically, Betsy talked about how coming back into farming was made easy by her cooperative group. The cooperative gave her access to an expensive resource (fence) from the USDA.
“It’s really, for me as just coming back here for the past 20 years, it wasn’t that much. Wasn’t that hard to me. If I went way back further, it was hard. But just in the past 20 years coming back and getting into the group. That’s what saved me. That’s what opened the doors for me to go and do this. Get a fencing around my property so I can have the cows in. Whereas before that was not. If I had to put all of that fence in there myself, I wouldn't probably be able to do it because it's too expensive.” (Betsy, 75, female).

**Youth-Farming Initiatives**

As previously argued, some of the major challenges that account for the decline in the population of Black farmers is aging population and lack of interest among youth. To promote the interest in agriculture, Black farmers’ cooperatives have created programs trying to target youth. One of the farmers stated:

“We have youth program. For example, we’re going to have a demonstration here next Saturday on the 8th, bringing young people here, show them what we’re doing here. See farming is not as labor intensity, as it was a 100 years ago.” (Abraham, 63, male).

Another farmer also highlighted:

“We’ve tried to get them involved, if they’re interested in it. We give them all the necessary tools that they need to work with to get involved. But there’s youth loans out there that some of our people have gotten involved. We have those loans available to us up to age 21. And they it’s been a good starting point for people who want to get involved and want to get them a small operation started.” (Delano, 64, male).

Coops consistently set up youth-centered programs such as demonstration of agricultural practices. They also ensured that interested participants were introduced to the experience of
farming. For instance, Fernando, in his description of the effort of a prominent member of the cooperative that he is connected with, said “she’s hiring youth to come help on people’s farms that want to, you know, work instead of working at a job at a fast-food restaurant. They will work on different farms helping different farmer do stuff.”

In addition, farmers’ cooperatives also connect interested youth to available resources such as youth farming loans from government agencies and institutions. They also provide information about agro-based scholarships available for youth. During my observation of a cooperative’s annual convention, similar information was announced from the podium, it was a scholarship for youth to study agriculture in “one of the 1890s Land Grant” universities.

**Family Support**

Farmers attested to how they always receive support of different forms from their children, spouses, and other members of the extended family.

“My family members, as far as the challenges I had, I had one day it was I had to feed my goats and my dog. And it was on the back of my truck. Well, with my arthritis, I couldn't get that feed off the back of my truck. So, they had to drive down here from 30 miles away and remove the feed and put it where I need to get access. So, you just have to work it out and do what you have to do. That’s how families helped me resolve my challenges.” (Rachel, 70, female).

The nature of the support in most cases are emotion, but more importantly, financial, and practical (being there physically to help with farming activities. For instance, Abraham said “my brothers my sisters helped me financially and mostly, they got me some tractors because they won’t loan me the money.” Joseph said “mostly if I need help… I got my brother coming to help…”
**Children Support**

Many Black farmers I interviewed enjoy the support of their children in farming. Majority of the time, these supports come as hands on the farms, and occasionally, there are instances where children render financial support to their parents.

“My son kind of basically do a little bit of all of it as far as helping with my tractor with doing the tilling and discing for my garden. And then he gets the dog, and he does some of our training with our dog, and then with the helping with the cattle and stuff. So he does a pretty much little bit everything for us when me and my daughter, we mostly in the cattle and then I’m mostly on the vegetable side.” (Rosie, 49, female).

Rebecca, who is into family farming with her mother, gives financial support to her mother. However, Rebecca would inherit the farm when she retires or in case the mother either passes or couldn’t manage the farm anymore.

“If you are physically not here to help, do whatever needs to be done, then you may send financial resources, or you may purchase something that’s needed on the farm to assist with that process. So for example, with my siblings, and I, you know, if they’re in other states, I’m here with a mom, but my work takes me away, but we are still, you know, we still operate as a family farm. So, you know, we have individuals that come in and help with things when we're not here to help with it. So, we just all pull together and provide the financial support or resources when needed.” (Rebecca, 50, female).

**Spousal Support**

Spouses played significant roles in helping farmers with their challenges. Spouses provide both practical and emotional support for their partners. Direct support such as going to
farm to carry out some types of operations is some of the practical supports that participants enjoy.

“Well, she comes out and she helps me. She has helped me plant. Pick um water, the vegetables. She has been a big asset to me in marketing and selling the produce but she [has] come out on the farm and actually helps. Sometimes.” (Kati, 66, female).

Apart from the practical support, farmers also enjoy emotional and spiritual support from their spouses. For example, Sandra said her husband “brainstorm(s)” and “pray(s)” with her. Kati, a 66-year-old female farmer is not only fond of “talk(ing) to” her “husband,” and getting encouraged by him, she also enjoys “getting to hug” him in challenging times, an experience she said compares to “nothing” else.

**Spiritual Support**

The spiritual approach to tackling challenges associated with farming focuses on the shift of attention from the problem-focus tactics (for instance practical approach) to supernatural help. To deal with challenges, farmers pray to God or use biblical references to support themselves emotionally. There was a strong display and belief in supernatural forces among the farmers I interviewed. This belief was often expressed regarding challenges, but also when they explained how they came into farming.

“When I bought the land in 2019, I felt like that was going to be land for future farming, future saving for or when the economy changed. And that was my main motivation. And basically, I felt like the Lord God was telling me to, to prepare that land … like a … haven.” (Clara, 54, female).

To expand this, she said her decision to start was a “revelational information, because it’s been spoken up for a long time that it was coming.” It is not surprising, for someone who claimed to
have received a “revelational information” to go into farming, to trust those religious forces when challenges appeared in the process. The excerpts below explain one of the ways that Clara as new beginning farmer deals with her challenges in farming.

“Well, I kind of get down a little bit. But once I understood what this local group could help me do, I was like, oh, yeah, I’m going for on board. This is a dream and a goal of mine. And I’m determined to see it to fruition. So, there’s a whole ancient scripture that says, David encouraged himself. So sometimes you just have to encourage yourself, and that’s what I did. encourage myself to just keep going.” (Clara, 54, female).

Sometimes, the scriptural encouragement is backed with spiritual songs. Clara, in her 54-year-old voice with an amazing vibrato started singing Deitric Haddon’s “He’s Able.” (She turns to singing) “Don’t give up on God, ‘cos he wants to give up on you. He’s able. (She continues talking) You have to pray, really trust God that this will work.”

Praying to God constituted an important part of this approach because many participants, male and female, expressed how they prayed and what they prayed for. While some focused their prayers on their health and performance of their crops to avoid problems, some prayed for the right network of people that will help them in dealing with their challenges, and others just seek solace in God through prayers.

“Pray. Pray for the success of my, my goats that they have their little babies, and they grow up and be healthy.” (Rachel, 70, female).

I would refer to Rachel’s prayer as preventive measure for potential challenges with her crops. At least, it is better to not have a challenge than looking for the way when problem comes. However, when challenges or needs for resources arise, prayers remained the ‘master key’ for participants.
“They just stay prayed up on it, pray about it, and ask the Lord to send the help that you need and send you to resources. And as far as the funds and the crops and all acids and send it to you. And then go out and let him tell you where you need to go and what you need to do to get the resources that you need and what to work with. But mostly you just have to pray about it. That’s number one that keeps me, you have to pray about.” (Rosie, 49, female).

Pointing to the importance of dependency on God, King narrated how God led him to enjoy networking advantage with another farmer during a meeting. He said:

“So, when I go whatever I’m doing, if it’s challenge there, I say let’s go, like, I lean on God, man. You know, like, God gave me strength. And um, and that’s what I do. I pray and then I just move my feet, man, you know, I go out and whatever I’m praying, I know I got faith in God. He ain’t gonna come do it for you, but he gonna let you meet the right people. He gonna, what I’ve found out, like even the other day, I was eating. I had work to do on the farm. I said this well for this work, I do full time. And they had a meeting there at Holly Spring, that was Thursday. Yeah, I had a meeting over there. And I didn’t want to go because I got work on this farm to do, you see what I’m saying, but it's like, I started praying man… I need to be working, but I need to go to the meeting too. So, I'm aware of that. I said, God, you already know, you know, the future, you know, you know, before I know. So it’s like, I might meet somebody today that can help me on my journey. And exactly what happened, you see what I’m saying. I didn't know but by my faith. I'm like, it’s gonna work out for the good for me.” (King, 45, male).

Personal experience with participants during interviews also supports my analysis on their supernatural belief. At least, two participants, a male and a female, preached to me after the
interview sections with them. They were overly excited to know that I was Christian. Some of them even manifested the opinion that God may have sent me on this journey to help them in their challenges. I heard words like “maybe God might use you.” Jonathan specifically said: “look, God has sent you, he has put you in this position, use it well to help others.”

Drawing from spiritual sources as a mean of coping with farming challenges cannot be discussed without acknowledging the historical importance of religion to Black farmers in this country. Every meeting, event, training, field day, and even the annual conference and anniversary began and ended with a prayer.

**Community Support/Technology**

Another vital source of support for Black farmers I interviewed was the people in the community. Farmers, who live in farming communities, beckon to other farmers or people whom they consider could be of help with their challenges.

“A lot of times, you know, I call my neighbors, you know, my farm I’m from the farming community… You know, things that are challenges, that I have come up against, and by getting information from me like that my neighbors and other people that’s in the farming industry, to help me on things that I don’t know. You know, call somebody and see how they deal with the same issues, because most of the time, we all do pretty much the same issues. That’s how I’ve been able to, you know, to keep going.” (Lucas, 74, male).

Participants highlighted that they made deliberate efforts to reach out to other farmers or their networks for any form of help they needed when they experienced problems. The targets of help calling are farmers who are perceived to have had similar experience or know better about farming. Apart from “call[ing] on other farmers,” mentors are also sources of energy and direction for Black farmers as far as farming is concerned. Family members are also targets of
‘help calling.’ For instance, Rachel’s “family member” and “a neighbor… come down and feed” her goats whenever she travels out of town.

“I call on other farmers. I have a mentor that’s been working with me since 2017. I’m gonna go see him tomorrow. We’re discussing adding some more goats to my herd … to help clear my pasture. [If] I have [a] question, one of my sweet peas is my two-and-a-half-year-old, my animal had some kind of a discharge. Well, I call him to say, “what is this going on with my goat?” Because I had never seen it. And in five years I’ve been working with them. So, I call on other people.” (Rachel, 70, female).

I found that for older interviewees, calling for help was more important. For example, this was highlighted by Lucas (72-year-old male), Rachel (70-year-old female), and Betsy (75-year-old female). For instance, Betsy relied on her “nephew” for strenuous tasks in her cattle farm. Therefore, age, among other reasons, might influence why farmers call for help.

The Use of Information Technology

Information gap is one of the dominant contemporary challenges that Black farmers are now facing. To deal with this problem, some farmers I interviewed talked about the role information technology to fill up the information gap that some farmers may lack. This tactic helped information technology users to avoid unnecessary hitches, and it keeps them abreast of some of the opportunities and programs that were available. For example, Rebecca said using “technology to find” the needed “information” has helped filled “some gaps or some deficits” in access to information.

“We’ve had some people that are in positions, that we can get the information from them now or not only that we got computers, so we can get on there ourselves. And we know what programs, we know, the funds that's going out there. So, we know that it’s there. So,
it’s not a matter of hearing it. Whereas before my parents would hear it, you know, a word of mouth. And that was some White man and told him that somebody heard about it and totally, now we can actually get on the computers and see it for us now. So, we know that it’s there.” (Betsy, 75, female).

Betsy highlighted the role of technology which helps Black farmers to be self-reliant in researching the information they need for their daily farming activities. Fernando stressed the usefulness “research” as a way of understanding “what’s missing” and what must be done to “overcome” the challenges encountered. The research, in some cases are carried out by surfing the internet, reading blogs and newsletters on agriculture and farming programs.

“All, with organizations that put out like information, kind of navigating through which of those would be a good information source to be able to go and kind of read their newsletters or follow their blogs, or what have you to kind of build my knowledge about farming and some of the options that are available.” (Rebecca, 50, female).

“I do a lot of reading. I do a lot of the YouTube and stuff. So that’s how I overcome some of my challenges too, that I’m faced with.” (Rachel, 70, female).

It is important to point out that access to technology has greatly enhanced the proximity of Black farmers to the information about available resources and agricultural programs sponsored by the government at all levels. Hence, technological know-how is a useful tool in dealing with the challenge of access to information. It is also crucial to state that access to information, to a large extent, is instrumental to access to resources and funding. However, I observed the possible role of education in how farmers interacted with technology. Those who have higher education levels (masters and above) used more specific approach that may direct them to the useful information.
than others. It is also fair to say that education level influences the use of technology because almost all participants hold at least an associate degree, many possess bachelors to PhD, while just one participant claimed she had no degree.

In summary, being a member of a cooperative has been very helpful for participants as a coping mechanism. Other support systems included practical support, psychological/emotional support, spiritual support, and family support. By engaging these strategies, farmers were able to maintain their farming practices, which they viewed as an important ancestral legacy. This confirms Hunte's (1992) work (among other scholars) highlighting that Black farmers make efforts to cope with their challenges.

Cooperative’s membership, as an effective strategy has proven highly beneficial to farmers in providing access to information, resources, and networking opportunity for Black farmers. Findings on the importance of coops for Black farmers are consistent with existing literature highlighting similar aspects (e.g., Jones and Alston 2009; McCutcheon 2019; Reynolds 2002; White 2019). These works have found that cooperatives can help Black farmers with access to resources and networking opportunities which they need for farming. Furthermore, farmers rely on the support of their families, including their spouses, children, and extended family members, to help them overcome these challenges and persist in their farming endeavors.
CHAPTER VII
CONCLUSION

Farming is a challenging occupation, particularly among Black farmers in Mississippi. Black farmers, whether male or female, face the challenges of “closed doors” while accessing farming resources such as equipment, funds/loans, and information about government programs. Findings revealed that eligibility requirements, that imply institutional rules and conditions to be fulfilled to access resources, constitute “abstract barriers” or “closed doors,” preventing Black farmers from accessing resources provided by the government. In addition, access to land and youth disinterest in farming also contributed to Black farmers challenges. Black farmers are limited in land possession which may be an obstacle for economic growth. Unfortunately, as the population of farmers grow older, younger individuals become consistently disinterested in farming, thereby leading farming tradition into crisis, and about to disappear. Interestingly, findings of this study show that most farmers considered farming as a ‘retirement haven’ which may have critical implications for farmers’ aspirations of agricultural expansion and/or productivity.

The narratives from most participants show their “closed door” experiences were consequences of racial discrimination. Access to information is crucial for accessing resources and opportunities, but Black farmers in this study manifested the limitations they experienced because they did not have the same relations with government institutions that White farmers
had. Similarly, they highlighted the challenges created by collateral for loans and equipment as part of eligibility requirements, that created and reproduced racial and economic inequalities.

Findings show that agriculture can be a gendered field, usually perceived as a masculine space. The image of a traditional farmer is often masculine, leading to female farmers struggling for recognition and access to resources. Although men and women practiced farming the same way, male farmers were more likely to have access to important farming resources such as equipment and bank loans. This discrimination can be linked to the influence of gendered perceptions of a typical farmer, whom majority of the participants portrayed as a man.

Results from this study show that discrimination based on race and gender is prevalent in agriculture, with Black and female farmers facing numerous challenges. In addition to these challenges, heirs’ property also creates barriers that limit farmers and their ability to make long-term plans. Thus, I argue that race, gender, and heirs’ property have significant influence on the farming experiences of Black farmers in Mississippi.

Despite challenging experiences, Black farmers have developed various and diverse coping strategies. While cooperative membership served a ‘savior step’ for Black farmers coping with challenges, farmers I interviewed also used other support systems from family, community and spiritual sources. Some of the supports they enjoyed included financial help, and practical and emotional help from spouses and children. Drawing from spiritual strength of prayer and faith in God’s help was also significant for some participants.

Summarily, while farmers in this study enjoy useful supports from other sources, cooperative membership has proven to be highly effective in providing access to information, resources, and networking opportunities for Black farmers. By engaging these strategies, they can maintain their farming practices, which they view as an important ancestral legacy.
I believe findings from this study make important contributions to the existing gaps and works on Black farmers, gender, and racial dynamics in U.S. rural settings. However, this study could not properly establish how race and gender intersect in the experience of Black farmers. Future studies should also explore Black farmers’ support from their families, especially spousal support. Future studies should also prioritize the mechanisms to engage youth and future generations in their farming endeavors.

Drawing from the findings of this study, I recommend that access to information among Black farmers should be prioritized. Technological approach should be considered in support of the existing traditional approach for information dissemination by government agencies, especially USDA which is caught up in the traditional paper and mailbox approach. This might aid the efficient flow of information especially to the younger generation. A more friendly eligibility requirement should be considered for loan application, and to ease the strains that farmers experience in accessing credit facilities and equipment. Mechanism to protect female farmers from discriminatory access to loan and equipment should be put in place to ensure gender equity. Lastly, I recommend that government agencies should work closely with Black farmers cooperatives to gain the trust of Black farmers in relationship between the agencies and farmers.
REFERENCES


Pezzini, Enzo. 2006. “Cooperatives, Good Companies ‘By Definition’?” *The Sixth International Conference on Catholic Social Thought and Management Education* 1–24.


APPENDIX A

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION TABLE AND SUMMARY
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SN</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Type of Production</th>
<th>Land</th>
<th>Retirement</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Gender</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Abraham</td>
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<td>Timber/vegetable</td>
<td>510</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Male</td>
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<tr>
<td>2.</td>
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<td>500</td>
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<td>Male</td>
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<td>4.</td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>45</td>
<td>Goat</td>
<td>50</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
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<td>Vegetable</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>11.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
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<td>45</td>
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<td>Cattle/Timber</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Demographic Summary

All but two participants self-acclaimed as Black Americans. One out of the two participants who are exceptions in the racial category claimed a multi-racial identity while the other said her father was White and she had a Native America mother. She further said her maternal racial identity automatically made her Black, so, she identified as Black. The average age of the participants was 60 years. The oldest participant was 81, while the youngest was 45. Two participants had less than associate degree, four completed associate degree, seven, four, and two completed doctoral degree respectively, while the education level of one was undetermined.

Thirteen out of twenty interviewees were livestock farmers, with the majority of them raising cattle and goat. Three female interviewees out of these livestock farmers also others animals like sheep, goat, donkeys, chicken, ponies, horses, and dogs along with cattle, and only one male participant was a goat farmer. Four interviewees were timber farmers. While about three interviewees grow vegetable along with livestock and cattle, three, (a female, and two males) were mainly vegetable farmers.
Research Questions

1.) What are the contemporary challenges associated with farming among Black farmers in East-Central Mississippi?

2.) How do race, gender, and inheritance influence the experiences of Black farmers?

3.) How do Black farmers cope with their farming challenges?

Interview Guidelines

Date of the interview ______________

Time interview occurred and length __________

Location of the interview ________________

Interview Script:

Before we start, I want to thank you for agreeing to meet with me and answer a few questions. You have already filled out an informed consent form and signed that document. If you have any questions about that document, please feel free to discuss those questions at any time throughout this interview. At this point, I am choosing a pseudonym that I can use to identify you for my research for the sake of confidentiality. For the sake of this research, you will go by the name __________

I am going to start this interview by asking you some questions about yourself and then I am going to ask you some questions about your thoughts on your farming experience. Please remember that you do not have to answer any questions that make you uncomfortable or questions you do not feel you have an answer for. Also, feel free to ask me for clarification if anything is not clear to you at any point. I want you to know that there are no right, or wrong answers so please just talk about what each question means to you.

Let us get started with the questions about yourself.
Demographic information: *I would like to know some basic information about you.*

i. How old are you as on your last birthday?

ii. What gender do you feel more comfortable to identify with?

iii. What race do you identify with the most?

iv. Where are you from?

v. Where do you live? How long have you lived there?

vi. Do you live on the farm?

vii. What is the highest degree you completed?

viii. Tell me about your marital status.

ix. How many people are you living with in the same place?

x. How many acres of land do you have?

xi. Do you own the land?

xii. Tell me about the generations of farmers in your family.

xiii. Briefly describe the type of farming that you practice (part-time or full time?)

xiv. What do you grow? Why do grow xyz? Why not something else?

**What are the contemporary challenges associated with farming among Black farmers in East-Central Mississippi?**

1. Tell me about your journey into farming.
   a. How did you become a farmer?
   b. Can you explain what motivated you into farming?
   c. How would you describe your community?

2. I am interested in knowing the importance of farming. Tell me about the importance of farming to you and your community.
a. How beneficial is farming to you?

b. Tell me the importance of farming to your immediate family and community.

c. How important is farming beyond your community?

3. What are the challenges for African American farmers in this part of Mississippi?

a. How would you describe your experience as an African American farmer concerning the challenges in this region of Mississippi?

b. Tell me how much you know about the challenges of farmers in past years.

c. I would like to know if those challenges changed over time. If so, how?

4. What institutions have you worked with as a farmer?

a. How have you worked with such institutions?

How do race, gender, and inheritance influence the experiences of Black farmers?

5. Would you consider farming experience as the same for every farmer in Mississippi?

Why/why not?

a. Are there issues that are specific to certain farmers?

b. As a Black farmer, is your experience different from other farmers?

c. What do you know about discriminatory practices in farming? Why/why not?

d. If discrimination is existing, can you share your personal experience of discrimination as a Black farmer in Mississippi?

e. Do you think discriminatory experiences shapes the life of African American farmers in Mississippi? If so, how?

6. What advantage does your gender give you as a farmer over others?

a. Tell me about the differences between male and female farmers.

b. Do you think gender is an important aspect in farming? Why/why not?
c. What are the limitations for female farmers in your community?

d. Have you ever considered quitting farming work because of gender-related issues?
   Why/why not?

e. Does gender matter in access to resources for farmers?

f. Have you ever enjoyed access to resources because of your gender?

g. In your own experience, what are the effects of gender on the practice of farming?

7. Tell me your thoughts about farming as an inheritance for your children or younger generations.

   a. Did you purchase or inherit your farm?

   b. How would you describe the involvement of youth in agriculture?

   c. What are the issues influencing/affecting youth involvement in farming in your community?

   d. How many of your children are into farming? Why? Why not?

   e. How has youth involvement influenced farming in your community?

   f. Would you encourage your child or youth to go into farming? Why/why not?

   g. What could be done to make farming more attractive to youth? Do you have any successful experiences?

   h. I wish you a long life and sound health. But what plans do you have for your farm when you pass away?

   i. Do you know any cooperatives working to encourage youth participation in farming?
How do Black farmers cope with their farming challenges?

8. I recall you mentioned some challenges associated with farming. How do Black people cope with their challenges in farming?
   a. What are the roles of family members in navigating the challenges?
   b. I know you belong to … Farmers’ Cooperative, tell me about the role of Farmers’ Cooperatives among farmers. What are the benefits of being a member of a cooperative in this region of Mississippi?
   c. If farming is so challenging as you have explained, how have you personally as a Black farmer coped all along.

9. If you have the opportunity, what coping strategies will you suggest to other Black farmers facing the similar challenges in this part of Mississippi?

10. What are other things you would like to share?

11. Would you like to recommend any Black farmer to participate in this study? If yes, please tell me their names and contacts.

We have come to the end of the interview. I really appreciate your and your willingness to share your views with me on your experiences as a Black farmer in Mississippi.
Mississippi State University
Informed Consent Form for Participation in Research

Title of Research Study: Intersections Between Race, Gender, and Inheritance: The Experience of Black Farmers in East-Central Mississippi

Study Site: Winston County, and Oktibbeha County, Mississippi.

Student Researcher
Gbenga Elufisan, Department of Sociology, Mississippi State University.

Principal Investigator
Dr. Diego Thompson, Department of Sociology, Mississippi State University.

Purpose
This study aims to examine the challenges associated with farming among black farmers in Mississippi, and how they cope with the challenges.

Procedures
If you participate in this study, you will be interviewed. Your participation is voluntary. It’s totally fine if you decide not to participate at all or to leave the interview any time. You may skip any questions you feel uncomfortable answering. The interview will last about an hour or a little more. The questions will focus on the challenges of black farmers, and how they cope with the challenges.

With your permission, the interview will be tape-recorded (audio only) and transcribed and will not be reviewed by anybody other than the student researcher and the principal investigators. The recordings will be destroyed by the end of 2026 and assure that, if the transcripts are kept beyond that date, there will be no means of identifying the interviewees.

Risks or Discomforts
There are no anticipated risks to you for participating in this study.

Benefits
Results from this study will be informative and beneficial for researchers, policymakers, and other communities with similar experience in and outside of the U.S.

Incentive to participate
Your participation is voluntary. There is no financial compensation of any kind. However, upon approval of the cooperative leadership and the principal investigators, the student researcher shall share some of the key findings of the study with farmers at a scheduled time.

Confidentiality
The identities of the interviewees will be kept confidential, and they will not be included in the transcripts of the recordings. A pseudonym will be used in place of your name. To ensure confidentiality, digital recordings and transcripts will be stored in secure files, separate from
your contact information. Your contact information and all data gathered from the interviews will be kept on an encrypted, password protected electronic device and the student researcher, and the principal investigators will be the only persons with access to them.

Please note that these records will be held by a state entity and therefore are subject to disclosure if required by law. Research information may be shared with the MSU Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and others who are responsible for ensuring compliance with laws and regulations related to research. The information from the research may be published for scientific purposes; however, your identity will not be given out.

**Questions**

If you have any questions about this research project or want to provide input, please feel free to contact us: Gbenga Elufisan at 4063106916/gie3@msstate.edu or Dr. Diego Thompson at 515-203-1025/dthopson@soc.msstate.edu.

For questions regarding your rights as a research participant or to request information, please feel free to contact the MSU Human Research Protection Program (HRPP) by e-mail at irb@research.msstate.edu, or visit our participant page on the website at http://orc.msstate.edu/humansubjects/participant/.

To report problems, concerns, or complaints pertaining to your involvement in this research study, you may do so anonymously by contacting the MSU Ethics Line at http://www.msstate.ethicspoint.com/.

**Voluntary Participation**

Please understand that your participation is voluntary. Your refusal to participate will involve no penalty. You may discontinue your participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits.

Please take all the time you need to read through this document and decide whether you would like to participate in this research study.

If you agree to participate in this research study, please sign below. You will be given a copy of this form for your records.

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<th>Participant Signature</th>
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