A BRIEF HISTORY: Racism, Extraction, and Exploitation in the Food System

In encouragement of all biennial participants (re)considering the ways their own resources, positionality, and bodies interact with what brings food to our plates and why, we present a very brief and incomplete historical timeline of racism, extraction, and exploitation in the food system of the political body of the United States. Consider this information while interacting with biennial events, presenters, the land you live on, your farmers, neighbors, and grocery store shelves.

We are intentionally fractured from our food systems in the land currently referred to by many as the United States in ways that keep us from knowing the answers to very basic questions about the many soils and hands that bring food to our plates.

To counter harm imposed by the continued romanticization of American agrarianism, it's crucial to recognize the histories of our food systems and the ways we, as individual consumers, contribute to, perpetuate, and/or are impacted by the environmental and economic harm imposed by these systems. Narratives of the idealized American bucolic are particularly strong where the Fisher Center of the Performing Arts and Bard College Annandale are situated, in the historically agricultural Hudson River Valley.

Systemic inequities in food production date long before this presented timeline begins. In many ancient class-based societies, from Mesopotamia to Ancient India to Medieval Europe, farmers were members of the lower classes or in systems of forced labor, including but not limited to enslavement, indentured servitude, and feudalism. Yet, the societal divisions caused by farming were never, and are still not, a monolith. In many spaces, farming is a reclamation of connection to Earth and ancestral lineages.

The following timeline illustrates the current inequities of our food systems in what is now called the United States. This timeline, while condensed, is a beginning written for us to understand how we got to where we are today. Diverse systems of food production, distribution, processing, preparation, and consumption have long existed and continue to exist within Indigenous communities. Food cultures in immigrant communities have similarly resilient histories.

Trigger warning: The following article contains information about racial violence and harm. We encourage those of dominant culture (especially those of European descent and financial privilege) to lean into the discomfort, but for all to move forward with caution and care, especially in these times of continued political turmoil and danger, and especially those who experience the continued violence of systemic racism and colonization.

At the end of every section, please find a non-exhaustive list of sources and further resources.

Scott, James C. *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017.

ECONOMIES OF EXTRACTION

1455: The “Doctrine of Discovery,” a religious, political, and legal justification for the seizure of non-Christian lands by Christian nations, primarily the Spanish Empire, served as a moral basis for the colonization of the so-called “New World.”

1492: Columbus landed in Guanahani (currently referred to as the Bahamas). Although this is marked as the beginning of the “**Columbian Exchange,**” Native peoples in the Bahamas and on Turtle Island[1] had trade relationships with Spain and other countries for at least 100 years prior. European colonizers brought the **mindset of extraction and profit** with them to new lands.

1609: English colonists arrive on Kiskiack land, a nation of the Powhatan confederation, on the so-called “New World" for the first time, to exploit and extract both the land and people.

Jones, David S. “Virgin Soils Revisited.” The William and Mary Quarterly 60, no. 4 (2003): 703–42. https://doi.org/10.2307/3491697.

Wynter, Sylvia. “1942: A New World View.” In Race, Discourse, and the Origin of the Americas. Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, n.d.

Zamora, Margarita. “Gender and Discovery.” In *Reading Columbus*, 152–79. Latin American Literature and Culture. Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1993.

FOODWAY DESTRUCTION AS GENOCIDE

1620: After the first “Virginia colony” failed, colonists tried again on Wôpanâak land in November of 1620. With the expansion of the Euro-colonial regime, colonists **destroyed Native crops**, foodways, and plants. They brought invasive plant species that changed ecosystems. Colonists enclosed Native homelands, allowing their cattle to roam freely and disrupt the ecological communities already present. They burnt Native seed stores and killed entire populations of animals, including pigeons and bison.

Virginia DeJohn Anderson. “King Philip’s Herds: Indians, Colonists, and the Problem of Livestock in Early New England.” The William and Mary Quarterly 51, no. 4 (October 2994): 601–24.

Andrew Isenberg, *The Destruction of the Bison: An Environmental History, 1750-1920,* Cambridge University Press, 2020.

KNOWLEDGE EXTRACTION AND ENSLAVEMENT

[1] “Turtle Island” is a name commonly used to refer to the geographic territories currently referred to as “Canada” and the “United States of America,” “North America,” and/or “The New World,” among other names. The language refers to the creation myth of the Five Nations (Haudenosaunee Confederacy), which is shared with other nations, in which the world was created on the back of a giant sea turtle. John Norton, “Iroquois Creation Story,” in The World Turned Upside Down: Indian Voices from Early America, edited by Colin G. Calloway, St. Martin's Press (1994).

1526-1857: Transatlantic Slave Trade

1619: The first **enslaved Africans** were brought to Turtle Island, bringing their own seeds, ways of farming, and land-based knowledge. Colonizers and plantation owners who enslaved both Native and Black people believed that their ownership extended to the knowledge that their slaves held, abusing and extracting the intellect of their captives. Plantation owners used fields of cotton and gardens of African diaspora crops for their capital gains. The plantation economy of the south **relied on enslaved people and their knowledge systems.**

Judith A Carney and Richard Nicholas Rosomoff. *In The Shadow of Slavery: Africa's Botanical Legacy in the Atlantic World.* Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 2009.

LAND THEFT, SEED THEFT

Land theft from Indigenous nations continued with the incredibly violent **Indian Removal Acts** of 1830, the **Homestead Act of 1862**, and the continuation of **Indian Appropriations Acts** from 1851-1889 which moved tribes to reservations, instated farm and food rations, declared Indigenous nations no longer sovereign, forced tribes to sell land, and allowed white settlers to encroach on "unclaimed" Native lands. Meanwhile, large populations of European immigrants came to the United States, requiring space and resources. In total, "land grants" of 270 million acres were stolen from Native nations and allotted to western settlers.

With the **Dawes Act of 1887**, the federal government aimed to assimilate Native Americans into mainstream US society by encouraging them towards farming and agriculture, which meant dividing tribal lands and reservations into individual plots. Only those who accepted the division of tribal lands were allowed to become US citizens. Over 90 million acres of tribal land were stripped from Native nations from the United States government, which was then sold to non-native US citizens.

The theft of Native and Black ancestral seed stores contributed to colonizer capital gain. As capitalist agriculture was continuing to expand with the United States, the Secretary of the Treasury initiated a program that gathered and studied seeds and their data. In 1839, the U.S. Patent Office began an agricultural division which collected and distributed seed, eventually developing into The American Seed Trade Association (ASTA) in 1883. Through the 1850s, Jefferson began to advocate for **importing seeds** from abroad. At this point, the ASTA noticed an opportunity to profit off seed distribution and began to lobby for the end of free seed distribution. By 1924, ASTA won, and the free seed program ended so that seed for sale could take its place.[2]

"Homestead Act (1862)," *Our Documents,* accessed October 19, 2020. https://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=false&doc=31.

[2] Melina Ann Roise, "At the Nexus of Resistance, Resilience, and Repair: Agricultural Violences and the Healing Promise of Seed," (2021).

"Transcript of Dawes Act (1887)," *Our Documents,* accessed October 19, 2020. https://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=false&doc=50&page=transcript.

Lisa Brooks, *The Common Pot: The Recovery of Native Space in the Northeast*. Indigenous Americas Series. University of Minnesota Press, 2008.

Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *An indigenous peoples' history of the United States*. Vol. 3. Beacon Press, 2014.

William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1983.

POST-CIVIL WAR SLAVERY

1865-1940: Following the civil war, formerly enslaved individuals were not given promised reparations. The plantation system of food production in the United States switched to a system of sharecropping, and changed little about the lives of newly freed Africans in the south whose knowledge and labor built the food system of the United States. **Sharecropping and tenant farming** created systems where many black farmers had greater debt to landowners at the end of season than the beginning, keeping them dependent on those who formerly enslaved them.

1865-77: A series of policies referred to as the **Black Codes** labeled African Americans as criminals to keep them working in neo-slavery conditions.

1865-1941: The beginnings of **convict leasing programs** leased prisoners to private employers, many of whom were owners of farms.

1877-1950: An organized **"terror campaign"** that led to over 4,000 African Americans lynched, with targets primarily being Black land owners.

1881-1965: The establishment of **Jim Crow Laws** acted as a legal continuation of Black Codes.

Leah Penniman, *Farming While Black: Soul Fire Farm's Practical Guide to Liberation on the Land.* United States of America: Chelsea Green, 2018.

Keri Leigh Merritt, "Land and the Roots of African-American Poverty." Aeon, March 11, 2016. https://aeon.co/ideas/land-and-the-roots-of-african-american-poverty.

THE GREAT DISPOSSESSION

1900: Black farmers organized to combine generations of financial savings together to buy land, finally releasing some communities from sharecropping conditions despite continued **neo-slavery policies.**

1950s-1975: In a moment of what some now call **"The Great Dispossession,"** Black-owned cotton farms of the south reduced from 87,000 to just 3,000, largely due to land-grabs by white

farmers with generational wealth.

Daniel, Pete. Dispossession: Discrimination Against African American Farmers in the Age of Civil Rights. University of North Carolina Press, 2013.

W. E. B. Du Bois. “Chapter 7: Of the Black Belt.” In The Souls of Black Folk, Chicago: A. C. McClurg and Co., 1903. Accessed https://etc.usf.edu/lit2go/203/the-souls-of-black-folk/4446/chapter-7-of-the-black-belt/.

Newkirk II, Vann R. “The Great Land Robbery: This Land Was Our Land.” The Atlantic, September 2019. https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2019/09/this-land-was-our-land/59474.

Morgan, Jennifer L. Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004.

INTERNMENT AND IMMIGRATION

1935-1938: Through the drafting of the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) and the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA), legislative compromises were made to incorporate the lobbying of the beginning of big agricultural businesses, excluding farm workers from basic labor protections including child labor, minimum wage, hour caps, and more, while **completely omitting BIPOC agricultural workers.**

1943-1945: During WWII, the **Bracero Program**, a diplomatic program between the United States and Mexico which allowed for short-term labor contracts, was designed to meet the demand for labor increase. New York State recruited 375,000 seasonal labor workers through this program. (Today, Bracero-like programs continue in the form of H2A and H2B seasonal contracted worker programs.)

1942-1945: Before WWII, over two-thirds of west coast Japanese-Americans worked in agriculture, many of whom were land owners and managed their production. Throughout WWII, Japanese-American **internment camps** forcibly relocated these workers in another land grab, leaving their lands to be stolen by government agencies and white farmers.[3]

NEOLIBERALIZATION & THE STATE OF AGRICULTURE TODAY

Continued federal discrimination against Black farmers through withheld USDA support in the form of loans, crop allotments, and technical support **(Land Grant Universities)**. New Deal legislation enacted after The Great Depression, including social security and fair labor standards, categorically excluded agricultural and domestic workers, who were, and continue to be,

[3] Lisa Morehouse, “Farming Behind Barbed Wire: Japanese-Americans Remember WWII Incarceration,” National Public Radio “The Salt,” February 19, 2017.

majority Black. Today Section 152 (3) of the National Labor Relations Act still **excludes agriculture and domestic workers**, who are disproportionately Black and Latinx, from key protections.

Policies of privatization, industrialization, and biopatenting continued to limit and control food production, creating an overreliance on corn, soy, and cattle, creating public health and environmental issues. Through continued government subsidizing, these monocrops created barriers for other farmers, especially those systematically excluded, to begin their own farms or survive as existing farm owners.

Mass incarceration continues to enact **neo-slavery conditions**, most notably at Angola, one of the largest prisons in the United States, which runs an 18 thousand acre for-profit farm entirely on prison labor.

Migrant exploitation continues with the majority of United States farms relying on undocumented workers. Although numbers are difficult to estimate, recent conclusions believe at least 2.5 million farmworkers are migrant workers (both documented and undocumented), with over 40% of that population being of Indigenous descent. In New York, Cornell University estimated as recently as 2020 that over half of all farm workers are undocumented. Nationwide, estimates rise to over 75%.

National Young Farmers Coalition. “Statement on Farm Workers and COVID-19.” Accessed April 11, 2021. https://www.youngfarmers.org/farmworkerscovid19/.

Gray, Margaret. *Labor and the Locavore*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 2014.

“Identifying and Countering White Supremacy Culture in Food Systems.” Durham, North Carolina: Duke Sanford World Food Policy Center, September 2020.

Vileisis, Ann. *Kitchen Literacy: How We Lost the Knowledge of Where Food Comes from and Why We Need to Get It Back.* Island Press, A Shearwater Press, 2008.

THE STORY OF OUR DINNER PLATES and grocery store shelves, then, is one filled with grief, trauma, and loss of lives, lands, homes, and cultures. Despite these realities, resistance has been continuous, strong, and continues to grow more urgent. From the Northern African women who braided seeds into their hair to the Indigenous seed keepers who carried future generations in

their pockets, and the continued protest, advocacy, and fight for land by so many, our food systems today are shaped equally by resilience as they are by trauma.

In the face of food apartheid impacting over 24 million Americans, the climate crisis growing ever more disturbing, continued public health crises disproportionately impacting BIPOC communities and livelihoods, mass incarceration largely motivated by food production, and farmers everywhere, of all backgrounds living on the edges of poverty, we move towards action with historical context and compassion.

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1wskLanDqYFgJuUpn9oJp9RtqbjOW96MR6Z0MIW7ma74/edit

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1DPIhEWjFyKealSkqLCW1Zs42ws37ptvFOKFA2Af3lK8/edit