

# Afroecology: A Preliminary Investigation of Black and Indigenous Food and Farming at the Rural-Urban Interface



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## Abstract

**Afroecology** is a term developed by the farmer-activist, **Blain Snipstal**, of the **Black Dirt Farm Collective** in Maryland. The term valorizes and re-centers Black and Indigenous thought and cultural beliefs about land, soil, and relationality, in the context of sustainable agricultural practice. Afroecology is an intersectional movement rooted in collective land stewardship, racial justice, and the political and cultural struggle for Black and Indigenous food sovereignty and liberation. Afroecology is a rejection and refusal of the industrial, anti-black food system. This research project asks what social and cultural purpose do ancestral reverence and invocations of 'Africanness' that are present in Afroecological spaces push forward. Invocations of ancestry are common practice by Black and Indigenous farmers and became of particular interest to in this study.

## Theoretical Frameworks:

The theoretical frameworks I used in my research were informed by Anthropologists Carole McGranahan and Lorena Muñoz. McGranahan theorize about refusal as generative and strategic process that is a deliberate move toward one belief, practice, or community and away from another." Refusal is distinct from resistance and can be social and affiliative. Lorena Muñoz writes about the emotional labor and performance required to do cultural work and to evoke feelings of "home". She described this as productive nostalgia. Refusal and productive nostalgia are two phenomena we Afroecology and that I analyze using the works of McGranahan and Muñoz.

## Research Questions

What is the role productive nostalgia and memory as a part of the ideological work of Afroecology? How and why are certain African and Afro-Indigneous histories and cultural beliefs being invoked in an agricultural setting by Black Americans?

## Conclusions and Further Inquiry

Afroecology is a concept and movement rooted in Black and Indigenous thinking, political struggle, and one that situates itself as antithetical to the industrial food system. Invocations of African ancestry emerge as important ideological and cultural tools for creating alternative communities that are committed to Black and Indigenous liberation. A deeper understanding of the role of ancestral invocations will come from interviews with people at the edge of Afroecology. This research project will continue to develop throughout the 2020-21 academic year.

## Methodology

**Virtual ethnography:** I attended many community discussion forums, webinars and panels that were related to my research questions. Additionally, social media became a 'research site' where I engaged with content about Afroecology and the Black and Indigenous farming movement more broadly. My virtual ethnographic research allowed me to understand that landscape of current issues and conversations within these movements.

**Literature Reviews:** I engaged with a number of texts— mostly contemporary—about Black and Indigenous food and farming. Reading about the history of the movement from different perspectives helped me to develop strong foundational knowledge about Black and Indigenous farming, food and liberation efforts. Please refer to **Key Sources** for more information on the texts I read for this research project.

**Interview profiles:** I researched and wrote profiles on Black and Indigenous farmers, activist and scholars in preparation for my interviews in fall 2020. The experts who frequently speak on and are well-established in Black and Indigenous food and farming movements include: Blain Snipstal (Black Dirt Farm Collective), Shakara Tyler (Black Dirt Farm Collective), Naima Penniman (Soul Fire Farm and Wildseed Community Farm), Violet VeVe King (Dreaming Out Loud).

## Key Sources

**Foundational texts:**  
*Farming While Black*, Leah Penniman (2018)  
*Black Food Geographies*, Ashanté M. Reese (2009)  
*In the Shadow of Slavery: Africa's Botanical Legacy in the Atlantic World*, Judith Carney  
*Black Rice*, Judith Carney (2001)  
*Freedom Farmers*, Monica M. White (2018)  
*Dispossession: Discrimination Against African American Farmers In The Age of Civil Rights*, Pete Daniel (2013)  
*Land Justice: Reimagining Land, Food, and the Commons in the United States*, multiple authors. Edited by Justine M. Williams and Eric Holt-Giménez

**Articles/Blogs/other texts:**  
*Afroecology: Cultivating-connectivity* (2016), Creative Community Builders, LLC  
*Black Farmers Reviving Their African Roots*, Kevon Paynter (2018)  
*Land and Power: Sustainable Agriculture and African Americans*, Edited by Jordan et al. (2009)  
*The Seeds of Ancestors: A Day at Soul Fire Farm*, Chelsea Steinauer-Scudder  
*For Black Farmers, Growing Food Has Been A Form Of Resistance*, Ashley Gripper (2020)

# Aforecology Blog post

My Summer Scholars research project was born from my Food Systems (ENV9) final project--where I mapped concentric circles and intersecting circles that represent various aspects of Black-centered Agroecology and Urban Agriculture in D.C., Maryland, and Virginia. My current research project is a more sophisticated iteration of this original ENV9 final project. Through my ENVS and Anthropology course experiences, I have been able to combine my research interests--Blackness, Indigeneity, and critical Food Studies— with my own, unique positionality as an African person who was raised in the DMV and has a vested interest in the future of Black and Indigenous land stewardship and agrarian community in this region. All this to say, my research project is deeply important to me and has helped shaped orient my re-imagining of food, land ancestry. As Black and Indigenous food movements gain broader attention and support, I find research projects like my own incredibly relevant and worthy of study. Afroecology is intertwined with Black life and liberation.

As Xavier Brown, a member of the Black Dirt Farm Collective has noted, “Afroecology is [the] reorientation of our connection to the land, an organizing principle and the way we express our culture while we grow food and grow healthy people”. My inclination toward cultural anthropology has greatly shaped the trajectory of my study of Afroecology, as you may have gleaned from my poster. As Brown states, Afroecology is about re-orientation and culture. My research aims to highlight and explore the cultural and ancestral parts of the Afroecological movement. Through questions such as “What is the role of productive nostalgia and memory as a part of the ideological work of Afroecology? How and why are certain African and Afro-Indigenous histories and cultural beliefs being invoked in an agricultural setting by Black Americans?” in addition to my first research question, “How and why are Black farmers in the D.C./Maryland/Virginia (DMV) region cultivating Black and Afro-Indigenous food sovereignty, and mobilizing principles of Afroecology at the rural-urban interface?”

The theoretical frameworks that contribute to my research are Carole McGranahan’s theory of refusal (a four-part theory that says refusal is generative, refusal is affiliative and social, refusal is distinct from resistance, and finally that refusal is hopeful and willful) and Lorena Muñoz’s theory of productive nostalgia and emotional labor as it relates to cultural performance. As I mentioned in my poster, Afroecology is a concept and movement rooted in Black and Indigenous thinking, political struggle, and one that situates itself as antithetical to the industrial food system, and as such Afroecology is an example of generative refusal. To the point of productive nostalgia, Black and Indigenous farmers use a sort of productive nostalgia— building a desire for a particular imaginary— when invoking a connection to ancestry. Afroecologists carry the responsibility of performing their Blackness and Indigeneity as they work within and embody the movement. My research will continue to follow these threads as I interview key farmers and activists at the edge of the Afroecological movement.