

**Symposium – “Let Justice Roll Down Like Waters”: The Role of Spirituality in African  
American Environmental Activism in the US South**

**“Peace be Still:” Rediscovering My Spirit through Agrarian Fieldwork**

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The winds and the waves  
Shall obey my will, peace be still.  
Whether the wrath of the storm-tossed sea  
Or demons, or men, or whatever it be.  
No water can swallow the ship where lies  
The Master of ocean and earth and skies;  
They shall sweetly obey my will,  
Peace be still, peace be still.  
They all shall sweetly obey my will;  
Peace, peace be still.  
(James Cleveland and the Angelic Choir, “Peace be Still”, 1963)

Silence was an unexpected and at times unwanted gift during the fieldwork for my dissertation. However, for my first three months of fieldwork at Beulah Land Farms, the only voices that I

could hear were the voices inside of my head and the silent whispers coming from the land. The constant chatter that accompanied my other research site was nowhere to be found; I felt lonely and isolated. It was only through the still landscape of the farm that I was able to reflect on myself, my spirit, and my Blackness in relationship to the agrarian landscape. The purpose of this intervention is to briefly consider the necessity of silence during the research process. In thinking back to this crucial time, I have come to understand two important factors about silence. First, silence connected me to the agrarian landscape in a profoundly spiritual way. Second, silence was cathartic and needed during this difficult time in my academic journey. I end with some concluding thoughts about why, as researchers, we should all be more silent.

In the summer of 2010, I came to Beulah Land Farms, the beautiful 1,600-acre farm of the Pan African Orthodox Christian Church (PAOCC), in Calhoun Falls, South Carolina (PAOCC 2010). The PAOCC was founded in 1967 by Rev. Albert Cleage, a Presbyterian minister who was disillusioned with the church's lack of attention to issues of racial justice. He coined the term "Black Christian Nationalism", an expression of his theological belief that [i] God calls all Black people to be liberated and [ii] God calls all righteous Black preachers to preach the word of Black liberation (Cleage 1972). Beulah Land Farms was constructed as a Promised land for Black people, a place "flowing with milk and honey" (Leviticus 20:24 King James Version). On this land, members of the PAOCC grow fruits and vegetables, raise catfish through aquaponic farming, and also raise grass-fed cattle. The church aims to create a utopian space for Black people where they can grow and have access to safe, healthy, and affordable food (PAOCC 2010).

At this time, I had already begun fieldwork at a bustling emergency food program in the heart of downtown Atlanta, Georgia and grown accustomed to constant conversation with my fellow volunteers and those coming in to be served. These varied conversations made me feel as though I was at home, and were a nice escape from the solitude of graduate school. At Beulah Land Farms, I was immediately assessed for my farming skills and put to work pruning trees, painting fences, and tagging cattle. I had a partner who went out with me into the wide-open

space of the field, though he rarely spoke to me. I found myself lonely and cut off with no cell phone signal or access to people. The silence was deafening, and I questioned how I would be able to understand anything about Beulah Land Farms through silence.

Silence is not uncommon in the research process. As qualitative researchers, we are taught to recognize silence and discomfort in others, paying particular attention to what is not being said and the reasons behind such silence (Mazzei 2007). Though we are trained to acknowledge silence in others, there is little information on the importance of silence to the researcher themselves, as we strive for a reflexive research process. Silence requires that the researcher look inward, constantly examining themselves. Silence further blurs the line between researcher and research participant, bringing self-awareness and positionality to the forefront. Silence forces the researcher to take a step back and think critically throughout the research process.

Silence enabled me to get in touch with not only the material, but the spiritual also. It was only through silence that I was able to reconnect with my spirit and its intricate connection to the land and my ancestors. This deeper connection between food/agriculture, race, space, and spirituality is what I sought to understand in others. Methodologically, this required a slow and steady research process, of which silence forced me to pay attention to what may have been missed in research sites with more chatter. In previous fieldwork with Black farmers, many expressed a spiritual connection to the land that occurred both inside of and outside of organized religion. Negro spirituals like “Wade in the Water” (1901) reference Black slaves’ connection to nature, but also their belief in the power of nature to lead them to freedom. bell hooks (2011) reiterates the comforting power of mother nature; simply white farmers were not exempt from the glory or wrath of mother nature. To put it as frankly as possible, this spirit, ushered in by silence, evoked a stillness in me that connected me to the agrarian landscape. The landscape became frightening, haunting, peaceful, and beautiful all at the same time. The work that I was doing, pruning trees, tending to cattle, and painting fences, was hard work, but also deeply emotional work. Through such profound silence I understood how those that I interviewed could

say that the land evoked an unexplainable sense of awe. By experiencing this, I became more comfortable with the realization that there were some findings that would be difficult to write about and analyze, but remained vital to my research.

The second, less obvious effect of feeling the spirit through intense silence on the landscape was me rediscovering my purpose both professionally and academically. Even as a child, there was something immaterial that guided me academically. I had lost, or perhaps suppressed, that spirit, and was suffering because of it. The silence and stillness of the land forced me to reckon with these important emotions. This spirit that had been suppressed through years of graduate study where a certain wall and performativity marked who my professors and cohort knew me to be. This necessary wall came down when all I had to listen to were the silent whispers of the land. There were times when I was out pruning trees, that I would break down in tears with the chorus from “Peace be Still”, by the late gospel great James Cleveland running through my head. In the song, Cleveland draws from the Parable of the Sower in Mark 4:29 where Jesus calms the earth and says to the sea “peace be still”. It was in these still moments that I realized that my connection with agriculture was deeply personal as the land connected me to my family. These moments made me confront feelings of isolation and uncertainty that had arisen during my graduate program. I never doubted myself academically but had begun questioning my purpose. Listening to the land reminded me what this purpose was, and that it was uniquely mine. Simply, silence forced me to be still, tap into my introverted nature, and find a sense of comfort, peace, and purpose in the work that I was doing.

Skepticism may accompany your reading of my self-discovery and spiritual awakening on the land. Cronon (1995), for example, critiques the Western and Biblical notion of white men who go out into the wilderness to find themselves. Cronon’s critique does not take into account how people of color have always spiritually communed with the land, even through the oppressive conditions of slavery, sharecropping, and land dispossession. My spiritual reawakening on the land included a remembrance of the ways in which white landowners used the agrarian landscape to brutalize and attempt to dehumanize Black slaves. Oppression through

agriculture has continued throughout history. Simply, this awe-inspiring land that I speak of is the same site of oppression. However, there was still peace, perhaps a haunting peace, that could only come through the silent landscape. This experience taught me to be more self-reflexive and pay attention to the changes coming from within. The land speaks to me during the research process, and though I still hesitate, I have learned to listen.

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