

WOMEN FIGHTING FOR SUSTAINABILITY: EXAMINING GRASSROOTS AGRICULTURAL SOLUTIONS

Take a moment (or two!) to think about what motivated you to come here today. When you are ready, turn to the person next to you, introduce yourself and identify 2-3 values that drive you to volunteer.

Read the following quotes out loud. Ruth, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Winona LaDuke each created grassroots structures that address the land ownership and food insecurity in their communities. How do these three women organize their communities through their transformative solutions?



Source: Richard Childress

Ruth and the Fields of Boaz

In the book of Ruth, the titular character starts with a choice. In the wake of her husband's death and bereft of any family patriarch, will Ruth remain with her Judean mother-in-law, Naomi, or return to her Moabite family to remarry? Ruth makes the radical decision to pledge her life to Naomi, her people, and her God. However, as two widows who just uprooted their lives, Ruth and Naomi did not have a source of food or income.

Ruth 2:2-3, 8-9¹

(2) Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, "I would like to go to the fields and glean among the ears of grain, behind someone who may show me kindness." "Yes, daughter, go," she replied; (3) and off she went. She came and gleaned in a field, behind the reapers; and, as luck would have it, it was the piece of land belonging to Boaz, who was of Elimelech's family. (8) Boaz said to Ruth, "Listen to me, daughter. Don't go to glean in another field. Don't go elsewhere, but stay here close to my girls."

רות ב'ב'ג', ח'ט'

(ב) ותאמר רות המואבית אל־נַעֲמִי
אלכה־נא השדה ואלקטה בשבִּלִים אחר
אשר אֲמַצֵּא־חַן בעֵינָיו ותאמר לה לכי בתי:
(ג) ותלך ותבוא ותלקט בשדה אחרי
הקצרים ויקר מקרה חלקת השדה לבעז
אשר ממשפחת אלימלך: (ח) ויאמר בעז
אל־רות הלוא שמעת בתי אל־תלכי ללקט
בשדה אחר וגם לא תעבורי מזה וכה
תִּדְבְּקִין עִם־נַעֲרֹתַי:

Fannie Lou Hamer and the Freedom Farms Cooperative

Fannie Lou Hamer, civil rights leader and grassroots organizer, founded the Freedom Farms Cooperative, a black-majority farming cooperative, in 1969 in the Mississippi Delta. Fannie Lou Hamer, the youngest of Jim and Ella Townsend's 20 children, spoke about how her personal experiences with hunger informed her approach to the Black community's economic independence through land ownership and sustainable food systems.

Nov. 16, 1971 letter from Fannie Lou Hamer to the Field Foundation

"The only thing Freedom Farm is generating is food—and lots of it. It is feeding people who previously starved in one of the richest agricultural [areas] in the world. It is building pride[,] concern and all the other superlatives professionals use to describe hard-working folk. But much more important[,] Freedom Farm Corporation is working. Its purpose of feeding people on [one] hand is the essence of humanitarianism; but at the same time it allows the sick one a chance for healing, the silent ones a chance to speak[,] the unlearned ones a chance to learn, and the dying ones a chance to live."²

¹ | Ruth 2:2-3, 8-9

² | Chana Kai Lee, *For Freedom's Sake: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (Chicago and Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 158.

Source: "Ruth in the Fields" Merle Huges, 1876



Winona LaDuke and White Earth Land Recovery Project

Environmental justice and indigenous rights activist, Green Party Vice Presidential Candidate and writer, Winona LaDuke founded the White Earth Land Recovery Project in 1989 to recover land that was originally a part of the White Earth Indian Reservation land base and to revive cultural practices like the cultivation of wild rice.³ Born to an Anishinaabe father and to a Russian/Polish Jewish mother, she continued her parents' legacy of fighting for social change, living and working on the White Earth Indian Reservation in Northern Minnesota.

An Interview with Winona LaDuke, YES! Magazine, Sarah van Gelder, Jun 17, 2008⁴

"I've worked in my own community since 1981. We tried waiting for the federal and state government to take care of things, and if we had not taken action, we would still be waiting and I'd probably have a big ulcer from complaining, or kvetching as we say in Yiddish. We decided instead to put our hearts and minds together..

After the harvest, we have a big feast, and we dance and tell stories. The anthropologists watched us, and they didn't like that. They said we would never become civilized because we enjoyed our harvest too much. We did too much dancing, too much singing.

When you no longer enjoy your relationship to your food, to your plant relatives, to the harvest, to the dancing and singing—when you end up with a harvest that has no relationships or joy, I think that must be the mark of civilization and industrialized agriculture."

Source: speedkouthnow.org

Guiding Questions

- What are Ruth's, Fannie Lou Hamer's, and Winona LaDuke's relationships to the land?
- What are the similarities and differences in their attitudes and approaches to ensuring food security? Who has ownership over them? What powers do they need to fight against?
- What does the ability to produce food mean for them and their communities?
- What are underlying values that inspire their actions? How do their lived experiences inform their approaches?
- What's the significance of these three women rooting their food justice work in their own communities and traditions?

Conclude by reflecting on the following questions together:

- What injustice are you trying to uproot through volunteering?
- Have these texts impacted your understanding of the impact of your service?

3 | White Earth Land Recovery Project

4 | "An Interview with Winona LaDuke," Sarah Van Gelder. YES! Magazine. Jun 17, 2008.

Inspired by the Jewish Farm School's "Uprooting Racism" Workshop