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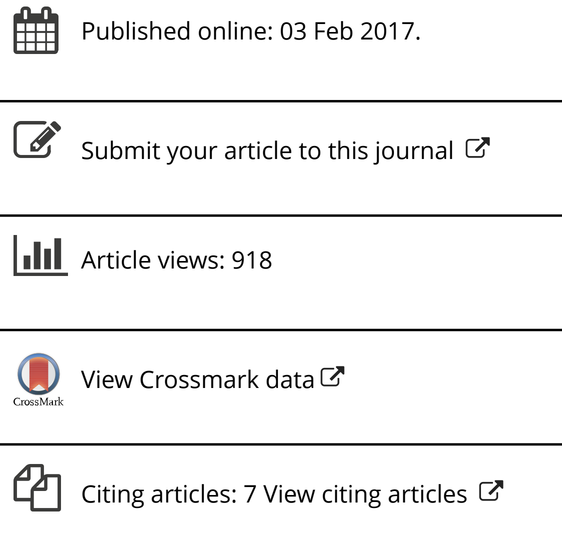

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“A pig and a garden”: Fannie Lou Hamer and the Freedom Farms Cooperative

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ABSTRACT
Much of the scholarship on the work and legacy of activist Fannie Lou Hamer concentrates on her tireless efforts for civil/human rights and African American representation and access to electoral politics. This article brings to light an important project she started in 1969, Freedom Farms Cooperative (FFC) in Sunflower County, MS. An agricultural cooperative built on 680-acres, Freedom Farms included a pig bank, Head Start program, community gardens, commercial kitchen, a garment factory, sewing cooperative, tool bank, and low-income, affordable housing as strategies to support the needs of African Americans who were fired and evicted for exercising the right to vote. Freedom Farms offered these sharecroppers and tenant farmers educational and re-training opportunities including health care and disaster relief for those who wanted to stay in the Mississippi Delta. Using a historical method to analyze extensive archival records, this article offers an analysis of Freedom Farms and illuminates valuable lessons on agriculture as resistance, and alternative strategies of rebuilding and investing in sustainable communities. Using the principles of collective and shared ownership, Freedom Farms and the work of Ms. Hamer, offer us important and valuable lessons on rebuilding our communities and investing in sustainable cities around growing food. This article outlines some of these lessons.

KEYWORDS
agricultural cooperatives; agricultural history; black farmers; civil rights movement; Fannie Lou Hamer

In October of 1967, Fannie Lou Hamer welcomed a truck delivering fifty female Yorkshire gilts (young female pigs) and five brown Jersey boars as the newest residents of Sunflower County, Mississippi.[1] In a reception fitting what were affectionately called the “new celebrities,”[2] there was eating, singing, dancing, and plenty of handshaking, and the “Sunflower Pigs” were delivered to a breeding/boarding barn built by local community women. The women were mostly responsible for meeting the food needs of their families, and often, as experienced farmers, they had the skills. The families who ultimately took possession of the gilts would return interest to the community barn they had built in the form of newborn piglets in the years to come.

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The Sunflower Pigs were a small part of a much larger project. Fannie Lou Hamer founded Freedom Farms Cooperative (FFC) in 1967 as an anti-poverty strategy created to meet the needs of impoverished residents of Ruleville, Mississippi, in Sunflower County. FFC was a community-based, rural and economic development project; its members were displaced, unemployed land/farmworkers, those dispossessed of access to land and displaced by mechanization. This article offers an analysis of Hamer's life and the political philosophy that led her to create FFC as an alternative to the second wave of northern migration—the departure from the rural South for northern cities and work in the manufacturing industry. FFC represented an opportunity to stay in the South, live off of the land, and create a healthy community based upon building an alternative food system as a cooperative and collective effort. It was in keeping with Hamer's perspective that if she had a pig and a garden, "she might be harassed and physically harmed but at least she would not starve to death."[3]

Hamer presumably chose Sunflower County because it was home where she had connections and relationships of trust. But if Mississippi sought to starve black residents into compliance with the racial hierarchy, it was succeeding in Sunflower County. Rates of malnutrition, Type II diabetes, hypertension, and other diet-related illness were among the highest in the nation. As elsewhere in the Jim Crow South, opportunities for employment were scant. The state routinely denied impoverished African Americans public assistance and social services. Sunflower County's black population had the highest infant mortality rates in the country. When Tufts Medical School opened a community clinic in 1967 in the neighboring county of Bolivar, a considerable percentage of the residents were diagnosed with health problems related to malnutrition. Most of the prescriptions written by physicians were for food. "There was as much food in the pharmacy as there was medicine," the Measure for Measure financial support proposal of 1973 reported.[4] White elites used hunger as a weapon, starving anyone who sought the right to participate in the political process into compliance.[5]

These conditions left many black families with little choice but to join the second wave of the Great Migration to northern, urban areas, which promised better living conditions, education and employment opportunities.[6] In 1960, over sixty percent of the African American population in Sunflower County was employed in agriculture, forestry, or fisheries. Ninety percent of the county's black population had six or fewer years of education;[7] sixteen percent of the black male population were employed as farm laborers, with the other thirty percent as draftsmen, foremen, and similar kinds of workers; forty-two percent of black women were employed as domestics or day laborers, and an additional thirty-six percent worked as farmers, farm laborers, and managers.[8] Between 1950 and 1960, Sunflower County's population decreased by twenty percent as African Americans moved north to the rust belt and west to California, two areas courting them with promises of employment and liberation from the exploitative economic conditions of Mississippi. Between 1960 and 1970, the county's population declined an additional twenty percent.[9]

Many scholars who have written about African Americans and agriculture have emphasized the conditions of exploitation that primarily structured the relationship to land—from slavery through sharecropping and Jim Crow era discrimination against black farmers. This has led to a widespread sense that agriculture was oppressive to black families and something from which they needed to be liberated. In contrast, Hamer's Freedom Farm Cooperative provides an example of agriculture as the basis for resistance. The FFC galvanized the work of black farm operators and laborers who fought for the right to participate in the food system as producers and to earn a living wage in the face of racially, socially, and politically repressive conditions. Hamer's work, and that of the Freedom Farm community, provides an important historical foundation for current conversations regarding the resurgence of agriculture in the context of food justice/sovereignty movements in urban spaces like Detroit, Chicago, Milwaukee, New York City, and New Orleans.

From the fields to the Democratic National Convention floor

Hamer, born Fannie Lou Townsend in 1917, was the twentieth child of sharecroppers. She worked in the fields of the Marlowe Plantation[10] in Ruleville, Mississippi, from the age of six. By thirteen, with a sixth-grade education,[11] she stopped attending the seasonal school and worked in the fields full-time. Contemporaries recalled with some amazement that she could pick two- to three-hundred pounds of cotton per day, as much as many twice her age.[12] In her young adulthood she suffered from polio, which left her with a limp. She married Perry "Pap" Hamer, and experienced involuntary sterilization when she underwent surgery to have a uterine tumor removed.[13] The State of Mississippi endorsed such acts of violence as a means to curtail the rate of African American births (Nelson, 2003). While she and Pap adopted three daughters over the course of their long marriage, she never forgave the state of Mississippi for her forced sterilization, as her caustic description of it as a "Mississippi appendectomy" suggests.[14]

In 1962, Hamer attended a mass meeting sponsored by the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in Ruleville and was among the first to volunteer as a field organizer to coordinate and organize voter education and registration drives. Later that year, she led a group of African Americans to the state courthouse in Indianola, Mississippi, and applied to register to vote. The state claimed that they had all failed the "literacy" exam, a quasi-qualification Mississippi and other states used at the time to disenfranchise African Americans. Upon her return to Ruleville, after eighteen years of dedicated service as sharecropper, time/record keeper, cook, and domestic on the Marlowe Plantation, Hamer was given the choice to either withdraw her application for voter registration or be fired. Her refusal not only led to her dismissal but also her eviction, as she rented her shanty as part of the sharecropping/employment agreement. About the firing, she later commented, "They kicked me off the plantation, they set me free. It's the best thing that could happen. Now I can work for my people."[15] In 1963, Hamer was arrested and beaten by a group

of black inmates who were forced to do so by law enforcement officers. She suffered permanent kidney damage from the incident.[16] It was the first of many brutal attempts to curtail her activism by members of Mississippi law enforcement,[17] many of whom held memberships in organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan and the White Citizen's Council.

Hamer became known throughout the Civil Rights Movement for her oratorical skills and for calming organizers and activists by singing spirituals during especially contentious moments. Hamer's nationally televised testimony before the Credentials Committee of the Democratic National Convention in 1964, demanding that the Committee seat her and sixty-seven other African American and white representatives of the newly formed Mississippi Democratic Freedom Party, stunned the nation. Challenging the all-white delegates officially representing the Mississippi Democratic Party, she succinctly described the acts of terrorism to which she had been subjected. She concluded: "If the Freedom Democratic Party is not seated now, I question America. Is this America, the land of the free and the home of the brave, where we have to sleep with our telephones off of the hooks because our lives be threatened daily because we want to live as decent human beings, in America?"[18]

President Lyndon Johnson called an emergency press conference to divert the nation's attention, but his efforts backfired. The video recording of Hamer's powerful testimony was replayed several times throughout the convention, and contributed to the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Hamer continued her participation in electoral politics by runs for Congress in 1964 and 1965, and the Mississippi State Senate in 1971, each of which she lost.[19] In 1968, the Mississippi delegation sent Hamer as an official delegate to the Democratic National Convention.

At the same time, back home in Mississippi, Hamer sought to lay the foundations for a self-determined, politically engaged, liberated community. In her work with SNCC as a major organizer of Freedom Summer, Hamer supervised voter education drives, articulated the struggles of the oppressed, and challenged those with power whose efforts maintained the status quo. She called out black middle class church leaders and educators, identifying them as accessories to the crimes of oppression. She also galvanized resources to respond to the immediate concerns of poverty, including hunger, shelter, health care, and housing. Hamer envisioned a black community that could achieve self-sufficiency, even within the context of the racially contentious Jim Crow State of Mississippi. Freedom Farm Cooperative represented a piece of her long-term strategy of self-determination and self-reliance that had food at its center.

In an interview with the Wisconsin-based magazine *The Progressive* in 1968, Hamer articulated the struggles of displaced farmworkers and the elite's intentional use of starvation as a strategy of oppression. Her interviewer summarized what she told him:

> Down in Mississippi they are killing Negroes of all ages, on the installment plan, through starvation. If you are a negro and vote, if you persist in dreams of black power to win some measure of freedom in white controlled counties, you go hungry …. There is a way to fight back against this "non-violent" weapon of white officialdom ….

In Hamer's words:

> Where a couple of years ago white people where shooting at Negroes trying to register, now they say, "go ahead and register—then you'll starve."[20]

Hamer's personal experience of the condition of starvation as a political weapon enabled her to identify this structural obstacle to collective progress for the African American citizenry. She understood that the exploitative economic relationship between landowner and farm worker, and homeowner and domestic was a major impediment to the movement for the vote. As a field secretary of SNCC, and a founding member of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, she connected the starvation of people in Sunflower County directly, not only to the pressure to migrate but also to the pressure not to register to vote: "Nobody told us we have to move from Mississippi. Nobody tells us we're not wanted. But when you're starving you know."[21] In creating FFC as a black community sustained by agriculture, Hamer illuminated the relationship between economic self-sufficiency and political power and translated the theory into action.

Hamer's strategy explicitly connected land ownership with voting rights. Observers of the time noted: "Fannie Lou Hamer emphasizes that the leverage of owning land and the fact that land supports people has given those people a wedge into the political machine—rich, white, and racist—that has always run Mississippi."[22] Hamer argued simply: "Land is the key. It's tied to voter registration."

As a political organization by and for black people (although it was open to farmers of any race), FFC brought Hamer's insight to life. By pooling resources, the community was designed to become self-sufficient and therefore able to resist disenfranchisement and the pressure to relocate to the North. The organization sought to realize Hamer's vision of economic participation as the path to political participation.

By providing housing, health care, employment, education, and access to healthy food that the white power structure of rural Mississippi denied them, the FFC provided the foundations for the kind of space to which Patricia Hill-Collins has referred in her theory of spheres of influence.[23] In addition to these material elements, however, it provided a sphere for the development of a free mind, an opportunity to create new identities, and a new form of collective political consciousness.

Freedom Farms as resistance

Hamer designed FFC to concentrate its efforts on three primary areas: 1) to develop an agricultural cooperative that would meet the food and nutritional needs of the county's most vulnerable populations; 2) to create affordable, clean, and safe housing development; and 3) to build an entrepreneurial clearinghouse—a small business incubator that would provide resources for new business owners and a re-training for those with limited educational skills but with manual labor experience.[24] Local and regional White politicians and businesspersons had lobbied successfully to deny federal funding and anti-poverty resources to impoverished black tenant farmers

and farm workers in the form of food, housing, education, and health care as part of their larger project of restricting the vote and maintaining the racial hierarchy. No less a figure than Harry Belafonte described FFC's response, in a fundraising letter in March, 1969:

> Now, to give hundreds of landless poor people a chance at self-help, economic self-sufficiency and political power, Mrs. Hamer has organized a farm cooperative. Acreage of fertile soil is available to the cooperative at exceptionally low cost.[25]

Harvard University student organizations involved in fundraising efforts for Hamer and Freedom Farms during this period grasped the connection between material self-sufficiency and politics. The *Harvard Crimson* wrote in 1970: "Mrs. Hamer said that [FFC's] its goal was not only to provide a farm income for landless families, but also to serve as a social and political organizing center for the blacks of the Mississippi Delta."[26]

While Hamer stated that leadership of Freedom Farms should be black and local, she was also very clear that membership and its privileges would be open to anyone who needed the assistance that Freedom Farms offered. At various times membership rolls included a few families who identified as white. Membership fees were minimal.[27] However, inability to pay did not exclude members. During the first year, only thirty families were paying dues, but Hamer claimed hundreds of families belonged in name and countless others benefitted from FFC.[28] Documents of the time reported:

> Freedom Farm Corporation is owned and worked co-operatively by about 1,500 member families in Sunflower County. Founded by Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer, nationally recognized civil rights leader, the co-op presently owns 692 acres, the main portion consisting of a 640-acre parcel bought in January 1971 …[29]

In the context of severe punishment for political mobilizing, the mere survival of black agricultural cooperatives was a matter of resistance. Hamer saw resistance as improving the living conditions of those who were unemployed and homeless, and creating opportunities for farmworkers by utilizing their agricultural skills. Under her model of activism, black farmers could deploy these skills to stay on the land and build a sustainable community, moving out from there to achieve political participation and representation. Through building self-sufficiency, she was creating the basis for her efforts to organize and educate southern, rural farm workers about electoral participation, registration, and mobilization. FFC members actively participated in a political education campaign to educate residents, using flyers and pamphlets that informed residents of Sunflower County about their rights to participate in the political process by demonstrating their right to vote.

Farmers and land workers who fought against the structural and economic inequities inherent in tenant farming and sharecropping, those who spoke out against dispossession of land and labor abuses, and those who participated in voter registration and education drives, experienced repression from local White farmers, business owners, politicians, and members of law enforcement. Hamer's own firing

following her participation in a political action was typical, as an annual progress report from the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW) described:

> The black man who dares speak out or even exercise his constitutional rights usually finds himself and his family thrown out onto the road, and often deprived of the few possessions he did have. "They wouldn't even let me back in my place to get my clothes or a picture of my mother. I just had to leave everything there," said one woman who was evicted after she registered to vote, following the 1964 civil rights legislation.[30]

In other cases, landworkers were "run off the land" by threats against their lives. Some left the South with their families and traveled, under dark of night, to northern cities like Detroit, Chicago, and Gary, Indiana.[31] Others were arrested or murdered.[32] The relationship between members of law enforcement and white supremacy organizations made incarceration especially dangerous, even fatal, through lynchings. The murders of civil rights activists Medgar Evers, James Earl Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner typified the racial and political unrest in Mississippi. The organizing of African Americans who demanded the right to vote and full participation in the political process posed a significant threat to Jim Crow legislation, and the establishment fought in its defense.

Hamer illustrated her awareness that retribution against political activity can take many forms in a conversation with a student organizer. Visiting Hamer's home at Freedom Farms, he noticed that in addition to a freezer that held much of the season's produce, her kitchen shelves were lined with jars of preserved vegetables, especially his personal favorite, cha cha, a traditional African American relish. When he asked her why she needed to preserve canned goods if she had a freezer, she replied, "What will I do if they turn off the electricity?"[33]

Not all means employed by the white establishment to maintain the oppression of blacks in the South were extra-legal. Mississippi passed laws aimed at debilitating the African American community's capacity to galvanize and work cooperatively for better living and work conditions. These laws rendered illegal many of the measures SNCC, NAACP, and CORE had embraced, including economic boycotts, picketing, and demonstrations. White business leaders, politicians, and law enforcement invoked the State's Secondary Boycott and Criminal Conspiracy in Restraint of Trade Statutes.[34] The law journal of Howard University characterized the statute thus:

> This statute imposes civil and criminal liability on any two or more persons who combine to conspire to prevent another person or other persons from doing business with a merchant, who induce or encourage another person or other persons to cease doing business with a merchant in order to effectuate a reasonable grievance over which the merchant has no direct control or legal authority to correct.[35]

Given this context, alternative strategies of resistance, such as agricultural cooperatives, were necessary for the survival of the movement.

The NCNW, a key funder of FFC, conducted an annual review of the organization in its early years. The 1968 review stated:

> And the important part is that the people themselves have a stake in it; they are not relying on hand-outs; they are enhancing their own dignity and freedom by learning that they can feed themselves through their own efforts.[36]

FFC encouraged its members to run for election and invited them to identify potential candidates to seek seats on the county committee of the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service (ASCS). These positions were especially important because they operated as the decision-making mechanism for the allocation of funds for agricultural purposes in the county, one of the ways that funding for black farmers and their organizations had previously been denied. The ASCS was a major force in deciding how federal funds would be allocated to local community, agricultural, and other anti-poverty projects in the region.

The Federal Department of Agriculture issued subsidies to White planters and plantation owners to allow their land to go fallow, in order to control the price and profitability of cotton as well as to induce investment in innovative agricultural technology.[37] The immediate impact was a dramatic reduction in the amount of farm labor needed. The resulting surplus of labor made it easy for white landowners to render activists unemployed and homeless, as any black farm worker might be dismissed and evicted from his or her home, as the shanties and tent cities were a part of the sharecropping and tenant farming agreement.

Against this background and these odds, FFC was a sustainable community offering respect and fair exchange for members' labor; a place where they could grow and provide healthy food, and where they could secure safe and affordable housing, quality education, health care, and employment opportunities. As an alternative to being dependent upon a white power structure, FFC had bold goals.

Food self-provisioning

In an effort to create self-sufficiency and to increase access to healthy food FFC created community gardens.[38] Members worked collaboratively, planting, maintaining, and harvesting the crops. In the community spaces, thirteen of the first forty acres were dedicated to subsistence crops and kitchen crops, where coop members planted greens, kale, rape, turnips, corn, sweet potatoes, okra, tomatoes, string and butter beans.[39] In 1972, these crops fed more than 1,600 families.[40] At least ten percent of the community garden harvest was donated to needy families whose members were unable to work the fields. Cooperative member families shared the remainder, and if there was more than they could eat, FFC shipped the vegetable surplus as far as Chicago to feed needy families.[41] In pursuit of its goal of self-sufficiency, FFC set aside 540 acres to be used for a catfish cooperative and for grazing land for cattle.[42] Two years later, it planted 300 acres in cotton, 209 acres in soybeans, 80 acres for wheat, and 51 acres for wheat.[43] The income from these cash crops went to support the mortgage payments on the land.

To supplement and support the community gardens, in 1969, with a generous donation from the NCNW, FFC developed a tool bank that purchased tools for the cooperative. Member families could borrow tools for specific projects and share the labor on projects if they needed support and help from others.

Sunflower Pigs

In 1969, NCNW donated approximately fifty pigs[44] to FFC, forty-five white Yorkshire pregnant gilts (females) and five male brown jerseys boars (males). The pigs began what was to be called "The Bank of Pigs" or the Oink-Oink Project.[45] As the organization's annual review would describe it, "The plan was not to provide instant food by butchering the livestock, but to breed them, thus establishing a 'pig bank,' which would be self-sustaining and will provide 300–400 new piglets out of the first litters."[46]

Community women built fences and shelters for the pigs and the community men did the pig ringing, a process that protected the pigs from parasitic ringworm. This was Heifer International's first US-based project; they offered expert assistance in the care, maintenance, and animal husbandry of the pigs. Piglets reach full maturity in two years and could either be mated or slaughtered for meat and/or sold for supplemental income.[47] Families kept sows (grown females) and took them to a breeding facility that housed the boars.

Upon delivery of a litter, which typically included 9–20 piglets, families deposited two piglets to the Pig Bank.[48] By 1969, the Pig Bank provided over 100 families with pigs that produced over 150 pounds of meat each.[49] In its third year, the number grew to 300.[50] By 1973, more than 865 families were beneficiaries of the Pig Bank,[51] which had produced thousands of pounds of meat and thousands of dollars in supplemental income for member families. With the pigs they produced bacon, sausage, hog head cheese, pigs feet, chitterlings, and other southern delicacies.

Support for housing

Hamer identified housing as an important cornerstone of community development. The condition of available housing was deplorable. As the *Harvard Crimson* described it, "More than 95 percent of the county's blacks live in houses officially classified as 'dilapidated and deteriorating.'"[52] Additionally, seventy-five percent of homes in Sunflower County lacked running water, and ninety percent lacked indoor plumbing.[53] In 1969, more than 100 families were evicted from shacks and tent homes where they resided on white plantations.[54] FFC helped members to find housing and obtain mortgages and provided financial support so that members might continue to pay rent or mortgages. Hamer articulated the importance of this project thus: "The state wants us out and the government considers us surplus. We must buy land immediately or our people will die forgotten."[55]

Beyond renegotiating purchase agreements of homes to allow members to maintain their residences and assisting with the completion of the paperwork necessary to obtain a new mortgage, FFC began to provide housing to members. The organization purchased ninety-two new housing lots and provided seventy-three families with housing in 1969 and 1970.[56]

In 1971, FFC put down a deposit of $84,000 on 640 acres of land east of Drew, Mississippi, to build additional housing units. They developed the Delta Housing Development Corporation, with Hamer serving on the board of directors. In 1972,

Farmers Housing Administration (FHA) provided funding for eighty new "self-help houses," and construction began. These new homes were wired for electricity and had running water and indoor toilets.[57] The FHA released $800,000 in mortgage funds under its interest credit program, which enabled members to take possession.[58]

Hamer spoke about the significance of a program to provide affordable, adequate housing in the Jim Crow South:

> The one kind of remark which really means the most to me is one that I hear frequently outside on really cold mornings. You'll see two men walking out their front doors. One will kind of stop, look around and say, "Phew I didn't realize how cold it was outside!" Every place they ever lived in before, it was always just as cold inside as it was outside.[59]

Education

White planters had little incentive to support their laborers' children's education. Providing a quality education for laborers threatened the power and privilege they wielded in their economically exploitative relationship. Classroom instruction usually occurred between December and April, after the cotton had been picked and ginned and before the new planting season. Schools in Mississippi had refused to desegregate after the passage of Brown vs. Board of Education in 1955, and educators were often expected to teach classes they were unqualified to teach. They continued to work in inferior conditions that included old, often racially offensive books and reading materials, substandard building facilities, and overcrowded classrooms with several grades in a one-room schoolhouse. Children whose parents were unable to afford weather-appropriate clothing and shoes during the colder months were unable to attend even the seasonal schools.

The implementation of Head Start began to address these issues. FFC housed one of the first Head Start programs in Mississippi. It served as an anchor of community-based development and as a marker of FFC's success. Hundreds of families received health and dental care, early educational experiences, employment, and supplemental nutrition through the program. Millions of dollars in federal funds from the Office of Equal Opportunity were sent to these community-based, black-led centers, under the organizational banner of the Child Development Group of Mississippi. At one point, leaders of the Head Start project claimed to employ over one hundred employees and serve 600 preschool children.[60] It had become a major employer for the county. While white-led political protest over the black leadership of Head Start challenged the organization's claim on millions of federal dollars and ultimately discontinued the funding, the facility was able to find alternate, community sources of support and served the young people of Sunflower County for several years.

In addition to Head Start, FFC provided vocational education. FFC's homes were built with the participation of approximately twenty men, former farm workers, who were enrolled in a Housing Training program that taught construction and home building. These men also assisted with building the community center that housed the FFC offices. The program was just one facet of FFC's education, employment,

and skills re-training program. In addition to the Housing Training program, vocational educational learning opportunities included life skills such as food preservation, sewing, and childcare.

Employment

Freedom Farms was a major employer for Sunflower County. It provided full and part-time jobs for over forty residents, which included secretary, bookkeeper, farm manager, and farm laborer positions for the community garden and cash crops.[61] The Farm also employed summer youth workers who conducted community needs assessments, fanning out throughout the county to survey residents whose identification of need FFC could use to recalibrate its programs.

FFC also developed two sewing cooperatives, where members made clothes, and one clothing cooperative that recycled gently used clothing in the county. Women also made suede and leather handbags, quilts, African-style clothing, and hats.[62] One of the cooperatives had an on-site day care center for the children of its workers. FFC sold the wares through a storefront in Madison, Wisconsin, with ninety percent of proceeds going to pay the workers.[63] FFC paid all of its employees $10/day unless they preferred to be reimbursed in housing, services, and food.

Disaster and poverty relief

Historically in Mississippi, after the planting season, when cotton had been picked, ginned, packed, and sold, farm families no longer worked on the plantations and many had no source of income. Some did day work in white families' houses as domestics or in other service occupations. With meager finances for food and other incidentals, even when housing was provided as part of their employment package, many families needed support to survive the winter season.

During times like this, and in times of disaster, FFC provided social services in adjoining counties as well as in Sunflower County, with assistance such as temporary housing for those evicted or victims of flood, tornado, and other emergencies. Some eighty families received clothing assistance. Others received financial assistance in paying overdue utility bills.[64] In 1972, twenty-five families received financial assistance to purchase food stamps under the FFC's Sunflower County Food Stamp Fund.[65] An additional fifty-seven received support in applying for federal (public) assistance.[66]

Freedom Farms also instituted other social services such as a family mobile health program.[67] When a tornado struck, the organization provided support to more than three-hundred people through its relief measures and through Delta Housing Development Corporation. FFC distributed and facilitated the Send-A-Box program, co-sponsored with NCNW, in an effort to respond to the immediate, daily, food needs of residents in the Mississippi Delta. It was able to assemble approximately ninety boxes for the relief of FFC members.

FFC held fundraising drives for clothing, food, kitchen, and school supplies such as updated books, paper, and writing utensils. In the absence of a secure location or

community center, Hamer's personal residence often served as a distribution center.[68] Pap Hamer described at times being unable to walk through his own front yard during a distribution.[69]

Fundraising

Through her nationwide fundraising efforts, Hamer brought international attention and resources to the extreme living conditions of those in the Mississippi Black Belt. FFC's membership was extremely poor; self-sufficiency and self-sustenance could not come immediately. Hamer used her international reputation and attention and traveled extensively to publicize the struggle of dispossessed land workers in Mississippi and to secure funding for the projects of the FFC. The proceeds from her national and international speaking engagements provided some income for the organization.

In a 1969 fundraising letter, Harry Belafonte wrote:

> A community of free, independent people can be built if financial help is given at this time .... Contributions of $10, $100, $1000 will start a pioneer development, given a new life to Americans whose living standard is as low as that of the peasants of the underdeveloped world.[70]

The NCNW provided important technical assistance and fiduciary support. NCNW's historical records list Hamer as a county representative of the organization. The organization's annual reports on FFC fed the enthusiasm of their membership, documenting the conditions under which Hamer and FFC acted. Its financial contributions enabled FFC to purchase seeds for the community garden and provide other support projects. The subsistence crops FFC grew from these seeds yielded thousands of pounds of produce that FFC harvested to feed hundreds of families. NCNW's annual reports also effectively brought federal attention to the situation of those in the region.

Though the reasons are unclear from the historical record, NCNW withdrew its support in 1970. Hamer was able to replace the lost funding with support from Measure for Measure, a Madison, Wisconsin-based civil rights organization. Itself a collective—membership consisted of academics and progressive clergy—Measure for Measure donated tens of thousands of dollars, supplies for schools, clothing, and crucial and expensive materials like sewing machines for the sewing cooperative. Measure for Measure held a walk against hunger in 1969 to raise money for FFC. Similar events sponsored by American Freedom for Hunger and the Young People of Harvard University, Young World Development, raised $21,000 and $120,000, respectively. FFC purchased 640 acres and farm equipment with these proceeds.[71]

Crucially, these major funders supported FFC's need to be governed locally. As NCNW's 1969 annual report explained:

> NCNW is convinced that much of the success of the program stems from the constant involvement, identification and coordination with local community leadership. Thus, County Coordinators have been selected by NCNW and community representatives to maintain this liaison between the communities and national organization.[72]

Measure for Measure shared this point of view. An internal document stated, "Our role has been one of aid and support: we set up no programs, push no plans; we seek to meet needs as expressed by local Black leadership."[73]

The demise of the FCC

In 1971, several tornadoes hit Sunflower County. FFC members concentrated their efforts on disaster relief in response. Measure for Measure reprimanded the organization for allocating monies for disaster relief that should have been used to purchase the seeds needed for the growing season. These events were the first inklings of the cooperative's unraveling over the next few years.

In spite of the setbacks the tornados represented, the organization continued to provide meaningful assistance. In 1972, member families planted and harvested 300 acres of cotton, 209 acres of soy, 80 acres of wheat, and they were able to feed thousands in the community with the vegetables they grew on 51 acres of land. FFC assisted forty families with their application to FHA that year. All but two received funding. The organization was able to assist thirty-five families with funding for a deposit on 2–4 bedroom homes. Thirteen families successfully applied for grants in the amount of $82 each to make their mortgage payment.[74] In 1973, FFC had six hundred acres in crop production, three hundred families were recipients of animals from the pig bank, and seventy families were living in the organization's low-income, affordable housing. They distributed scholarships to local high school students to attend college and were able to support the start of several black businesses.

But donor funds began to dry up. The United States had plunged into economic downturn and existing donors had far less to give. The Board of Directors decided that FFC's survival depended on a massive reorganization in 1972. The social service programs consumed a considerable amount of the organizations' attention and funding. Until the farm was financially capable of "independent operation …[and] sustaining its own existence," the social service programs would be ended.[75] The part time professional staff would become full-time so that it could manage both the farm operations and the social programs. Additionally, they deemed it necessary to engage financial and management services for audits and management suggestions and recommendations.[76]

In late in 1972 and early 1973, farmers in the Mississippi Delta experienced droughts and floods, which caused a tremendous crop loss. The sequence was disastrous, as harvesting the few crops that survived the drought from drenched soil was complicated. FFC became unable to pay its seasonal employees. Letters to funders described crops that rotted in the fields because there was no one to harvest them. All told, floods destroyed fifty acres of cotton and soybeans. As a result, the organization stopped farming altogether. FFC could not make payments on its mortgages, its biggest expense, without the cash crops.

A mere four years after the successful launch of the pig bank, FFC closed down its operations. It had not survived long enough to become independent of financial support of grants and donations. The organization sought federal funding from the

USDA and other entities that supported anti-poverty programs and strategies. The Interreligious Foundation for Community Organization, the Commission on Religion and Race of the United Methodist Church, as well as the organization's former funder Measure for Measure, declined appeals for support. Harry Belafonte sent out another letter in order to raise funds, to no avail.

In August of 1974, FFC's business manager suffered a heart attack and died. Hamer also fell ill. At the age of 57, she was suffering from high blood pressure, diabetes, and fluid retention.[77] Losing her as a fundraiser and an inspiration was devastating. The Board established the Fannie Lou Hamer Foundation to provide funding for FFC; for the emergency and medical programs, to which they were deeply committed; and to offer scholarship and other financial assistance for the children of farm families to further their education. Nevertheless, FFC had to sell its land to pay overdue state and county taxes in 1976. The dream of a self-sufficient agrarian community was over.

Conclusion

Hamer's work with Freedom Farms put food at the center of a liberatory agenda. Contrary to perspectives that emphasize the legacies of oppression of black farmers and farmworkers in agricultural communities, and the long history of disenfranchisement/enslavement tied to agriculture, Hamer made food and its production an act of resistance and a strategy to build a sustainable community. Freedom Farms represented her vision of the centrality of food and agriculture in building self-reliant communities as a base for political activism.

The Civil Rights Movement was successful in dismantling many oppressive Jim Crow policies. It extended voting privileges to African Americans and enforced desegregation of educational and public facilities. These were all seen as challenges to the power structure. Nevertheless, in the context of the simultaneous decline of the cotton industry, the powerful maintained the status quo in states like Mississippi by other means: exacerbating the conditions of poverty, inferior education, inadequate health care, precarious housing, unemployment, and a lack of access to healthy food. Illustrating their blatant racial hostility, the regional and local white power structure obstructed federal funding efforts to respond to the severe conditions of poverty. They used these conditions of deprivation as strategies of oppression, to maintain political, economic, and social control in the hands of the white power elites and to keep the numerical black majority from mobilizing politically. Hamer's Freedom Farms created an oasis of self-reliance and self-determination in a landscape of oppression maintained in part by deprivation.

As an organic intellectual, Fannie Lou Hamer identified this shift in tactics to keep black Mississippians politically and economically disenfranchised, and responded to it with efforts to provide a basic standard and quality of life. Freedom Farms became what Hill-Collins calls a "sphere of influence." Hamer's efforts to develop a cooperative intentional community, with housing, employment, educational opportunities, health care and access to healthy food, reflected a vision of a self-determined, politically engaged, liberated community.

Civil Rights historians, biographers, and journalists have often ignored, dismissed, or concentrated on the failures of Freedom Farms Cooperative. While it is important to critically analyze the problems that ultimately led to the organization's demise in 1975, we cannot undervalue its successes. Given its time, scope, intention, and liberatory vision, and the fact that this vision was enacted within a pervasively oppressive and racially hostile environment, the movement—while short lived—was a manifestation of self-reliance and the capacity of a community to come together to provide food, housing, shelter, education, health care, and employment. This radical experiment constituted an important chapter in the Black Freedom Movement. It offered lessons for black farm workers in the 1960s that are important today for families displaced by the automobile industry and others in urban areas who struggle to access healthy food, adequate and affordable housing, access to water, quality education, health care, and employment. The work of Hamer and Freedom Farms offer an example for those who today live in food insecure communities, such as in Detroit, Milwaukee, Chicago, and New Orleans. It articulated a practical vision of how those with limited resources and difficulty accessing healthy food can pool their resources and use cooperative strategies to solve problems. Although Hamer's Freedom Farms ultimately closed, it demonstrated new ways for those who have historically been excluded to build sustainable communities.

Notes

1. Freedom Farms Corporation Report, 1973 (Fannie Lou Hamer Papers, 1966-1978: Box 1, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, La., accessed August 1, 2014), 1.
2. Jean Carper, "A Report On Operation Daily Bread," National Council of Negro Women, Inc., October 1968 (Interreligious Foundation for Community Organization records, 1966-1984: Box 48, Folder 43, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, New York, N.Y., accessed November 7, 2013), 8.
3. National Council of Negro Women, Inc., "Self-Help Campaign Against Hunger, Progress Report," June 1969 (Madison Measure for Measure Records, 1965-1977: Box 1, Folder 15, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Madison, Wis., accessed September 11, 2014).
4. Madison Measure for Measure Records, 1965-1977: Box 1, Folder 15, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Madison, Wis., accessed September 11, 2014.
5. Jill Cooley, *To Love and Dine in Dixie: The Evolution of Urban Food Culture in the Jim Crow South* (Athens, Ga.: The U of Georgia P, 2015). See also Opie, Fred. *Hog and Hominy: Soul Food from Africa to America*. New York, NY: Columbia UP, 2008 and Wallach, Jennifer Jensen. *How America Eats: A Social History of U.S. Food and Culture*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2012.
6. Lisa Krissoff Boehm, *Making a Way Out of No Way: African American Women and the Second Great Migration* (Jackson, Miss.: UP of Mississippi, 2009).
7. U.S. Census Bureau, "General Social and Economic Characteristics," *Census of Population: 1960*, Vol. I, Part 26, Table 87, U.S. Department of Commerce, Washington, DC, 1963 (accessed September 2014).
8. U.S. Census Bureau, "General Social and Economic Characteristics."
9. Ibid.
10. Chana Kai Lee, *For Freedom's Sake: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (Urbana, IL: U of Illinois P, 1999).

11. Seasonal schools offered six seasons of segregated education during December–March, until it was time to plant the crops.
12. Neil R. McMillen, *Dark Journey: Black Mississippians in the Age of Jim Crow* (Urbana, IL: U of Illinois P, 1990).
13. Earnest N. Bracey, *Fannie Lou Hamer: The Life of a Civil Rights Icon* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co, 2011).
14. Alethia Jones and Virginia Eubanks, eds., *Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around: Forty Years of Movement Building with Barbara Smith* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 2014) 259.
15. James C. Cobb, *The Most Southern Place on Earth: The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity* (New York: Oxford UP, 1992) 243.
16. Lee.
17. David Cunningham, *Klansville, U.S.A.: The Rise and Fall of the Civil Rights-Era* (New York: Oxford UP, 2013). Cunningham argues that the relationship between the KKK, or related and similarly violent racist organizations, and law enforcement ranged from direct support, to partnerships, to departments being infiltrated and Klansmen holding positions such Sheriff and Police Chief.
18. Fannie Lou Hamer, "Testimony Before the Credentials Committee," Keynote Address, Democratic National Convention, Atlantic City, N.J., August 22, 1964.
19. Janice D. Hamlet, "Fannie Lou Hamer: The Unquenchable Spirit of the Civil Rights Movement," *Journal of Black Studies* 26.5 (1996): 560–576.
20. "Notes in the News: Going Hungry for Freedom," *The Progressive* 32 (June 6, 1968).
21. Ibid.
22. Megan Landauer and Jonathan Wolman, "Fannie Lou Hamer …Forcing a New Political Reality," *The Daily Cardinal* (Madison, Wis.), October 8, 1971 (Madison Measure for Measure Records, 1965-1977: Box 1, Folder 21, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Madison, Wis., accessed September 11, 2014).
23. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Boston: Unwin-Hyman, 1990.
24. "Proposal for Community and Economic Development," January 13, 1969 (Madison Measure for Measure Records, 1965-1977: Box 1, Folder 15, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Madison, Wis., accessed September 11, 2014).
25. Harry Belafonte, Fundraising Letter on behalf of Fannie Lou Hamer and Freedom Farm Cooperative, May 1969 (Fannie Lou Hamer Papers, 1966-1978: Box 1, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, La., accessed August 1, 2014).
26. James M. Fallows, "Black Southern Farmers Need Money to Buy Land in Mississippi for Co-Op," *The Harvard Crimson* (Cambridge, Mass.), March 10, 1970, 2.
27. There are instances in the archives where membership dues were listed as $1/month per family and others where they were posted as $1/year.
28. Franklynn Peterson, "Pig Banks Pay Dividends," *Commercial Appeal Mid-South Magazine* (Memphis, Tenn.) January 7, 1973 (Sweet Family Papers, 1970–1977: Box 7, Folder 5, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Madison, Wis., accessed September 11, 2014).
29. "Madison Measure for Measure Brief on Freedom Farm Corporation and North Bolivar County Co-op Farm," n.d. (Madison Measure for Measure Records, 1965–1977: Box 1, Folder 16, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Madison, Wis., accessed September 11, 2014).
30. Jean Carper, "A Report On Operation Daily Bread," National Council of Negro Women, Inc., October 1968 (Interreligious Foundation for Community Organization records, 1966–1984: Box 48, Folder 43, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, New York, NY, accessed November 7, 2013) 11.
31. Wendell Paris (Civil Rights Activist), in personal communication with author, March 2013.
32. Shirley Sherrod and Catherine Whitney, *The Courage to Hope: How I Stood Up to the Politics of Fear* (New York: Atria Books, 2012).

33. Wendell Paris, personal communication. August 2016.
34. Madison, Isaiah. “"Mississippi’s Secondary Boycott Statutes: Unconstitutional Deprivations of the Right to Engage in Peaceful Picketing and Boycotting.” *Howard Law Review* 18 (1975), 584–609.
35. Isaiah Madison, “Mississippi’s Secondary Boycott Statutes: Unconstitutional Deprivations of the Right To Engage in Peaceful Picketing And Boycotting,” *Howard Law Journal* 18.3 (1975), 584.
36. National Council of Negro Women, Inc., “Self-Help Campaign Against Hunger, Progress Report,” June 1969 (Madison Measure for Measure Records, 1965-1977: Box 1, Folder 15, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Madison, Wis., accessed September 11, 2014), 5.
37. David Asch, *The Senator and the Sharecropper: The Freedom Struggles of James O. Eastland and Fannie Lou Hamer* (New York: The New Press, 2008).
38. For more information on what families ate please see, Marcie Cohen Ferris, *The Edible South: The Power of Food and the Making of an American Region* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press. 2016). Also see Opie, *Hog and Hominy*.
39. National Council of Negro Women, Inc., “Self-Help Campaign Against Hunger, Progress Report,” June 1969 (Madison Measure for Measure Records, 1965–1977: Box 1, Folder 15, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Madison, Wis., accessed September 11, 2014).
40. Fannie Lou Hamer, “Freedom Farm Corporation, Annual Report,” November 1972 (Madison Measure for Measure Records, 1965–1977: Box 1, Folder 17, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Madison, Wis., accessed September 11, 2014).
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42. Fannie Lou Hamer, “Freedom Farm Corporation,” June 1970 (Fannie Lou Hamer Papers, 1966–1978: Box 10, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, La., accessed August 1, 2014).
43. Fannie Lou Hamer, “Freedom Farm Corporation, Annual Report,” November 1972 (Madison Measure for Measure Records, 1965–1977: Box 1, Folder 17, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Madison, Wis., accessed September 11, 2014).
44. The accurate number of pigs that began Freedom Farms is contested in the primary documents.
45. “Sunflower County Freedom Farm Co-Op,” 1967 (Fannie Lou Hamer Papers, 1966–1978: Box 10, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, La., accessed August 1, 2014); Jean Carper, “A Report On Operation Daily Bread,” National Council of Negro Women, Inc., October 1968 (Interreligious Foundation for Community Organization records, 1966–1984: Box 48, Folder 43, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, New York, N.Y., accessed November 7, 2013), 8.
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47. Jessica Gordon Nembhardt, *Collective Courage: A History of African American Cooperative Economic Thought and Practice* (University Park, Pa.: The Pennsylvania State UP, 2014).
48. National Council of Negro Women, Inc., “Self-Help Campaign Against Hunger, Progress Report,” June 1969 (Madison Measure for Measure Records, 1965–1977: Box 1, Folder 15, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Madison, Wis., accessed September 11, 2014), 5.

49. Fannie Lou Hamer, Fundraising Letter, May 15, 1970 (Fannie Lou Hamer Papers, 1966–1978: Box 1, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, La., accessed August 1, 2014).
50. Franklynn Peterson, "Pig Banks Pay Dividends," *Commercial Appeal Mid-South Magazine* (Memphis, Tenn.) January 7, 1973 (Sweet Family Papers, 1970–1977: Box 7, Folder 5, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Madison, Wis., accessed September 11, 2014), 32.
51. Fannie Lou Hamer, "Freedom Farms Cooperatives, First Year Report," April 28, 1970 (Madison Measure for Measure Records, 1965–1977: Box 1, Folder 17, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Madison, Wis., accessed September 11, 2014).
52. Fallows, "Black Southern Farmers Need Money to Buy Land in Mississippi for Co-Op," 2. As part of a national fundraising campaign to purchase land for housing, Lester Salamon, a teaching fellow in Harvard's Department of Government, was listed as the FFC representative collecting funds on FFC's behalf. Journalist Fallows wrote an article in 1970 for the *Harvard Crimson* on the condition of housing in Sunflower County.
53. "Proposal for Community and Economic Development," January 13, 1969 (Madison Measure for Measure Records, 1965–1977: Box 1, Folder 15, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Madison, Wis., accessed September 11, 2014).
54. Fallows, "Black Southern Farmers Need Money to Buy Land in Mississippi for Co-Op."
55. Fannie Lou Hamer, "Freedom Farms Cooperatives, First Year Report," April 28, 1970 (Madison Measure for Measure Records, 1965–1977: Box 1, Folder 17, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Madison, Wis., accessed September 11, 2014).
56. Ibid.
57. "Domestic Project: Mississippi Freedom Farms Cooperatives," n.d. (Madison Measure for Measure Records, 1965–1977: Box 1, Folder 17, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Madison, Wis., accessed September 11, 2014).
58. Kay Mills, *This Little Light of Mine: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer, Civil Rights and Struggle* (Lexington, Ky.: UP of Kentucky, 2007), 262.
59. Fannie Lou Hamer Papers, 1966–1978: Box 10, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, La., accessed August 1, 2014.
60. "Proposal for Community and Economic Development," January 13, 1969 (Madison Measure for Measure Records, 1965–1977: Box 1, Folder 15, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Madison, Wis., accessed September 11, 2014).
61. Joseph Harris, "Freedom Farm Corporation, Annual Report," January 23, 1973 (Madison Measure for Measure Records, 1965–1977: Box 1, Folder 17, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Madison, Wis., accessed September 11, 2014).
62. "Proposal for Community and Economic Development," January 13, 1969 (Madison Measure for Measure Records, 1965–1977: Box 1, Folder 15, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Madison, Wis., accessed September 11, 2014). See also National Council of Negro Women, Inc., "Self-Help Campaign Against Hunger, Progress Report," June 1969 (Madison Measure for Measure Records, 1965–1977: Box 1, Folder 15, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Madison, Wis., accessed September 11, 2014).
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64. Fannie Lou Hamer, "Freedom Farm Corporation: Status Report and Request for Funds," March 1973 (Fannie Lou Hamer Papers, 1966–1978: Box 10, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, La., accessed August 1, 2014).
65. Jeff Goldstein, Letter to S. L. Cobbs and Presbyterian Children's Home, July 18, 1968 (Madison Measure for Measure Records, 1965–1977: Box 1, Folder 14, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Madison, Wis., accessed September 11, 2014). Based on the Food Stamp Act of 1964, the USDA had ceased in to distribute surplus commodities in favor

of providing food stamps, but the poor had to buy them. FFC established, managed, and administered the Sunflower County Food Stamp Fund under a committee of local citizens. Using funds raised from philanthropic organizations, it purchased and distributed the stamps and other donations. As the Measure for Measure report points out, by bringing federal money into Sunflower County, the program also benefited local merchants and storeowners.

66. Fannie Lou Hamer, Letter to Madison Measure for Measure and Mrs. Eugene A. Wilkening, January 23, 1973 (Fannie Lou Hamer Papers, 1966–1978: Box 10, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, La., accessed August 1, 2014).
67. National Council of Negro Women, Inc., "Self-Help Campaign Against Hunger, Progress Report," June 1969 (Madison Measure for Measure Records, 1965–1977: Box 1, Folder 15, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Madison, Wis., accessed September 11, 2014), 7.
68. Ibid.
69. Ibid.
70. Harry Belafonte, Fundraising Letter on behalf of Fannie Lou Hamer and Freedom Farm Cooperative, May 1969 (Fannie Lou Hamer Papers, 1966–1978: Box 1, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, La., accessed August 1, 2014).
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