

Hard Labor, Soft Space: The Making of Radical Ruralism

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[When we say “the world has ended,” it’s usually a lie,

because the *planet* is just fine.

But this is the way the world ends.

This is the way the world ends.

This is the way the world ends.

For the last time.]

—N.K. Jemisin, *The Fifth Season*¹

INTRODUCTION

“*Hard Labor, Soft Space*” is a research-based design investigation on the current surge of collective farms and radical food systems in and around the Hudson Valley.

What does it mean to create an infrastructure of care, and systems of resilience within a capitalist landscape of production, extraction, and exploitation?

Against the backdrop of land distribution laws such as the *Homestead Act* (1862) and *Alien Land Laws* (1913 to present) that have driven the current racial disparity in agricultural land ownership, this project reframes rurality as a site of radical reclamation. This research forms a comparative genealogy of utopian agrarian projects in the U.S. Starting from Pietist settlements (such as Icarians, Shakers and Amana Colonies) to 19th and 20th Century Abolitionist movements in the United States, to the current wave of BIPOC-led radical farms. Through creating a continuous timeline, the project links together more than fifty agrarian based communities across the U.S. From early forms of abolitionist communities such as *Nashoba Community* (1825-1828) and *Timbuctoo* (1848-1855), to Black cooperative movements such as *Freedom Farms Cooperative* (1969-1976) and *New Communities Incorporated* (1969-1985). The project creates a BIPOC-centered historical narrative for recent land justice projects such as *Sweet Freedom Farm*, *Gentle Time Farm*,

Soulfire Farm, *Choy Division*, and *Ayni Herb Farm*, all located within the state of New York.

In 1972, Liselotte and Oswald Mathias Ungers’ published “*Communes in the New World: 1740-1972*”, a study on utopian commune living.² “*Hard Labor, Soft Space*” is part-homage, and part-critique by addressing the erasure of racial history in rural ideation, and proposes future living strategies rooted in racial and social justice. Through archiving, interviewing and counter-mapping, this project highlights alternative agrarian settlements and renounces models of industrial farming that thrive on the extraction of labor, capital, and lands of others.

THE PLANTATIONOCENE³

Following the global food crisis of 2007-2008, international land grabs are redrawing the global map of farmland ownership as foreign direct investments continue the legacy of colonization. While global famine becomes a major concern, Western, Chinese, and Middle Eastern companies are leading a 21st-century land rush in African farmland where more than a hundred million acres are under a 99-year lease. Colonizing forces, now guised as foreign corporations, aggressively deplete rural corners of the global south. Local smallholder farmers are dispossessed from their native land as it is secured to produce sustenance for the rest of the Western Hemisphere. In the plantationocene, modern industrial agriculture violently irrigates farmland into plots of controlled “colonies” underneath high tunnel structures. This research highlights current alternatives to these closed systems of industrial and capitalist exploitation. It is part of an ongoing, speculative investigation on rural spaces as modern utopian testbeds.

What is the rural future in the era of postcolonial uprising and post-COVID migration? How do we dismantle modern industrial capital that extracts labor from disenfranchised workers?

Hard Labor, Soft Space addresses these questions by examining the role of race, labor and land in agriculture-based collective living projects, particularly in the Northeast region of the United States. The state of New York holds an early history of settler colonialism dating back to 1545 when Giovanni Verrazano, an Italian explorer, landed in New York Bay and encountered the



Figure 2. Fannie Lou Hamer, *Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party* delegate, at the *Democratic National Convention*, Atlantic City, New Jersey, 1964. Image credit: Warren K. Leffler.

Lenape tribe. Hudson Valley's colonial history is foundational to the agricultural extraction of Indigenous tribes as well as the subsequent human trafficking during the Atlantic slave trade for forced agricultural labor. As the post-pandemic world romanticizes countryside living and gentrifies local townships such as Kingston and Hudson, NY, it is imperative to construct a counter-history of agricultural settlements in the Northeast region.

RURAL IMAGINING

The idea of agrarian settlement is something deeply embedded in the pastoral imagination of the United States. The Homestead Act of 1862 was widely marketed as a democratic law allowing "citizens to claim 160 acres of surveyed government land", effectively giving away traditional or treaty lands of Indigenous Americans to US settlers from the east and those from Western Europe at a time of radical pietism and religious persecution. Dolores Hayden describes the construction of a distinct American Utopianism by religious based pietist communities such as *Am Olam*, a 19th Century Russian Jewish movement that built around twenty agricultural colonies around North America.⁴

Figure 1 consolidates American Agrarian Utopianism of the past two centuries, interlinking a timeline with global events that cause human displacement. The x-axis show the years in progression showing when communities formed and ended, while the y-axis show the numbers and increase of immigrant populations. Clusters of communes intersect with spikes in immigration



Figure 3. Timbuctoo Historic Marker, *North Elba, NY*, 2023. Image credit: Author.

numbers. There is a legacy of agrarian imagination within the American consciousness that is grounded in displacement and racialized land ownership.

Although predicated on a notion of redistributing government land to anyone regardless of gender, race and nation of origin, the Homestead Act of 1862 systematically established a legacy of racial disparity. By the end of the land distribution act, land patents were issued to 1.6 million white families in comparison to 5000 African Americans.⁵

As for Asian Americans, land laws such as *Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882* or *California's Alien Land Law (1913 to present)* prohibited Asian Immigrants from owning property or entering leases. Furthermore, Franklin D. Roosevelt's *Executive order 9066*, or Japanese internment programs (1942 to 1946), dispossessed Japanese-American agricultural land ownership. At the time Japanese American farmers were producing more than 40 % of California's commercial crops. Benefitting the interests of California's corporate agribusiness, records indicate that around 258,000 acres were confiscated and placed under the government agency's jurisdiction. This period marks yet another brazen agricultural land grab within the US.

In response to this disparity, rural development projects in the South starting with *Tuskegee Institute* (founded in 1881), the *Freedom Farm Cooperative* (1969) and *New Communities*

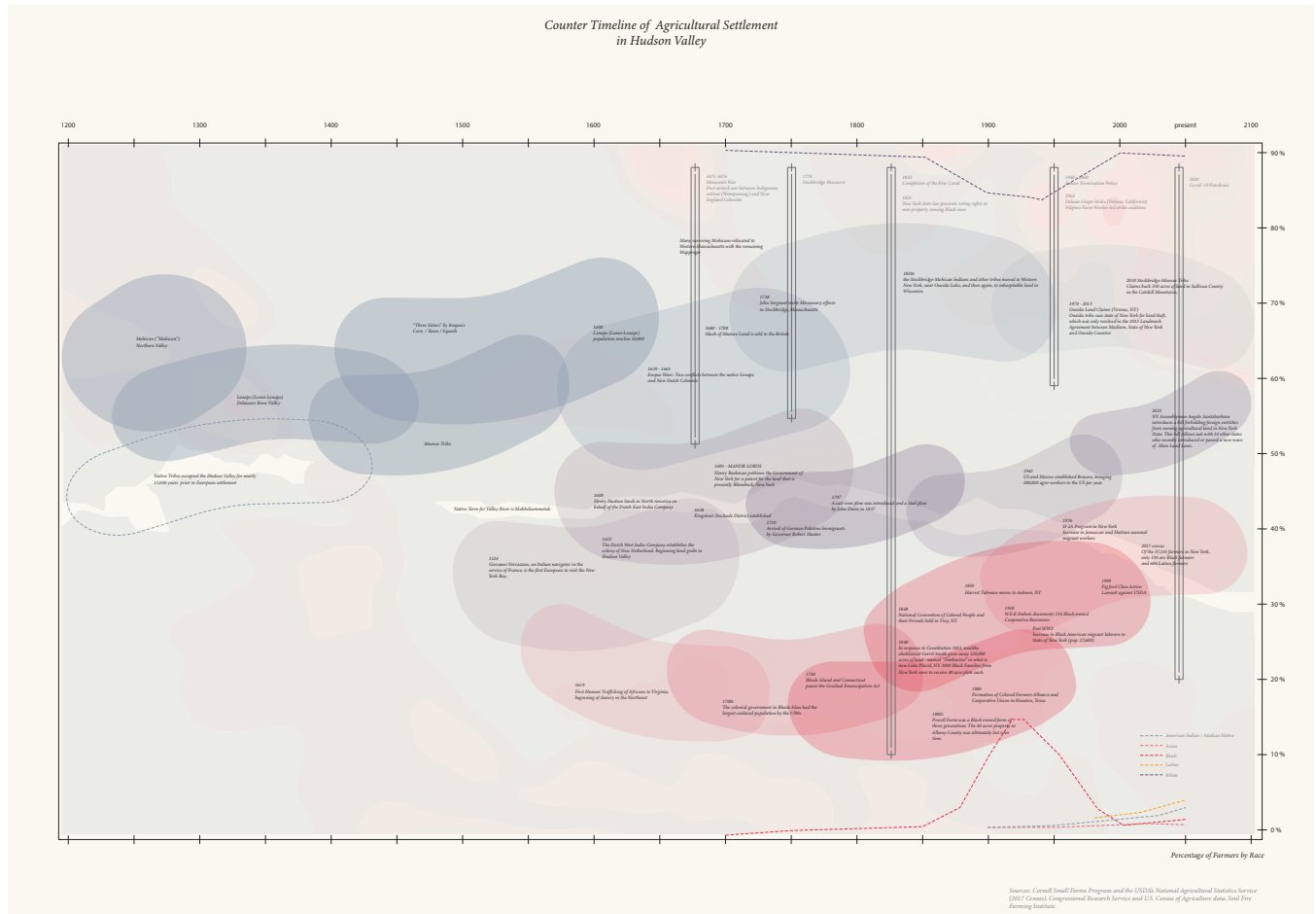


Figure 5. Agricultural History of Hudson Valley. Image credit: Author.

Incorporated (1969-1985) used agriculture and cooperative farming as tools for Black liberation and reparation. Black Agriculturalists declared the countryside as a site of radical activism against racialized capitalism.⁶ Fannie Lou Hamer, a civil rights leader and founder of *Freedom Farm Cooperative*, believed that cooperative land ownership was key to food justice, housing justice, and labor justice for the rural south. These sites of abolitionist farming formed a lineage to current radical farms.

In the midst of social change and the rise of counterculture in the 1970s, Liselotte and Oswald Mathias Ungers embarked on a research project to document communes across the United States. Inspired by and interleaved with this work, Ungers taught an Architecture Studio at Cornell University focused on Self Help Housing Systems. *'Hard Labor, Soft Space'* takes Ungers' pedagogical approach as a model for design research in the Hudson Valley [Figure 7 and Figure 8].

How do we reflect and redefine Architectural Pedagogy during a time of upheaval?

SOFT SPACE: THE RADICAL LOCAL

Figure 5 represents 12,000 years of agrarian history in the Hudson Valley, foregrounding the displacement of Indigenous people and highlighting Black abolitionist farming communities in the mid 19th century (such as *Timbuctoo*, now known as North Elba, NY).

It is within this history that I situate current land-based BIPOC centered farming communities in the Hudson Valley. Within a 60 mile grid, there is a growing network of more than 30 farms, non-profits and CSA programs [Figure 6]. Each project practices unique forms of land-based activism. *Sweet Freedom Farm* in Germantown, NY operates in the intersection of abolition activism and food justice by working with the Incarcerated community at the Sing Sing Correctional Facility. *Choy Commons* is an alliance of AAPI farmers in the Northeast including *Choy Division* (Chester, NY), *Gentle Time Farm* (Chatham, NY) and *Star Route Farm* (Charlottesville, NY). These case studies relay to a uniquely exterior network, connecting Hudson Valley to New York City or Albany, notorious for its current state of food apartheid (a term defined by Karen Washington from *Rise & Root Farm*). These radical farms create an infrastructure of fresh

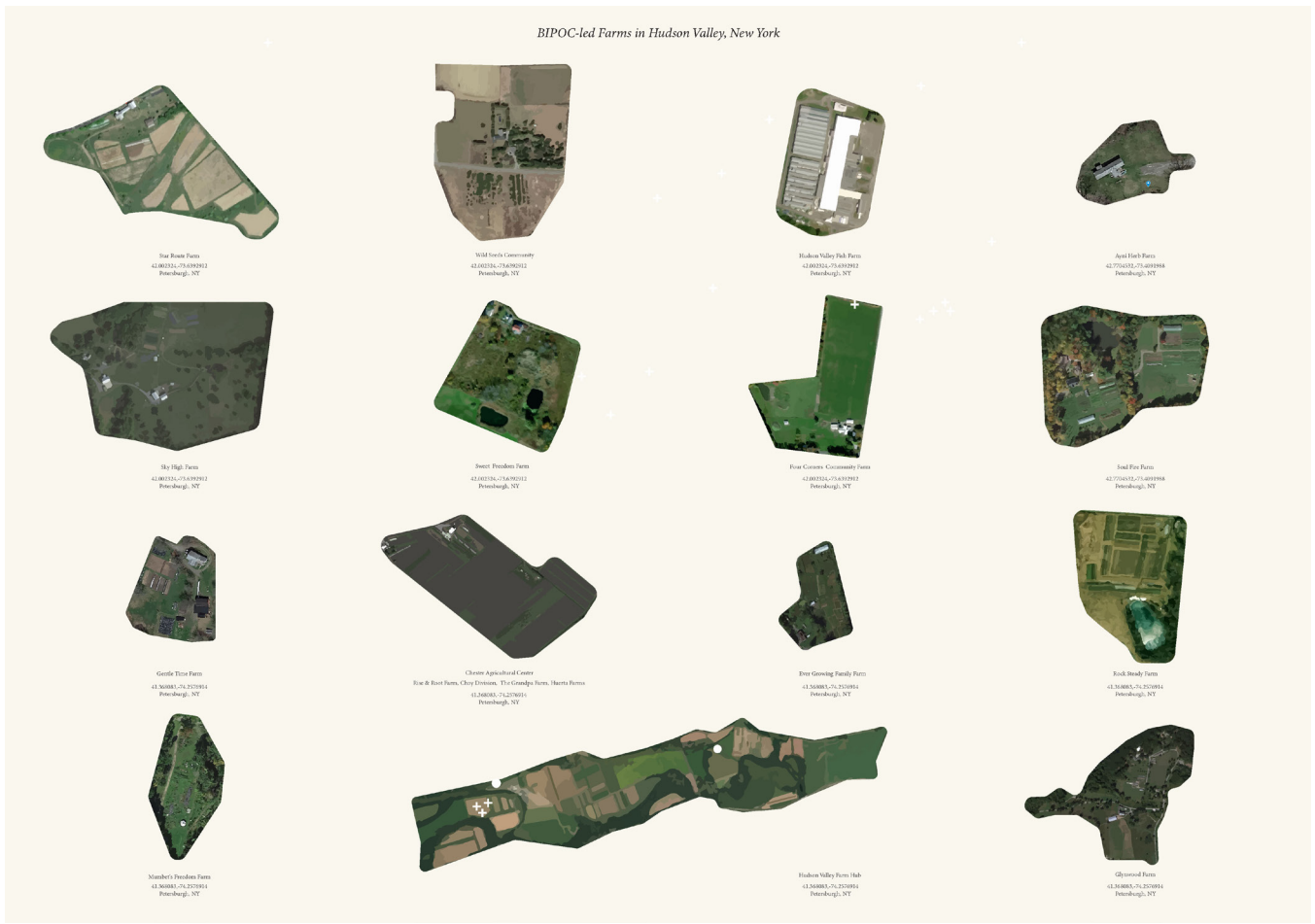


Figure 6. Collection of BIPOC centered Hudson Valley Farms. Image credit: Author.



Figure 7. Studio Visit to Gentle Time Farm, 2022. Image credit: Author.



Figure 8. Studio Visit with Sweet Freedom Farm, 2023. Image credit: Author.

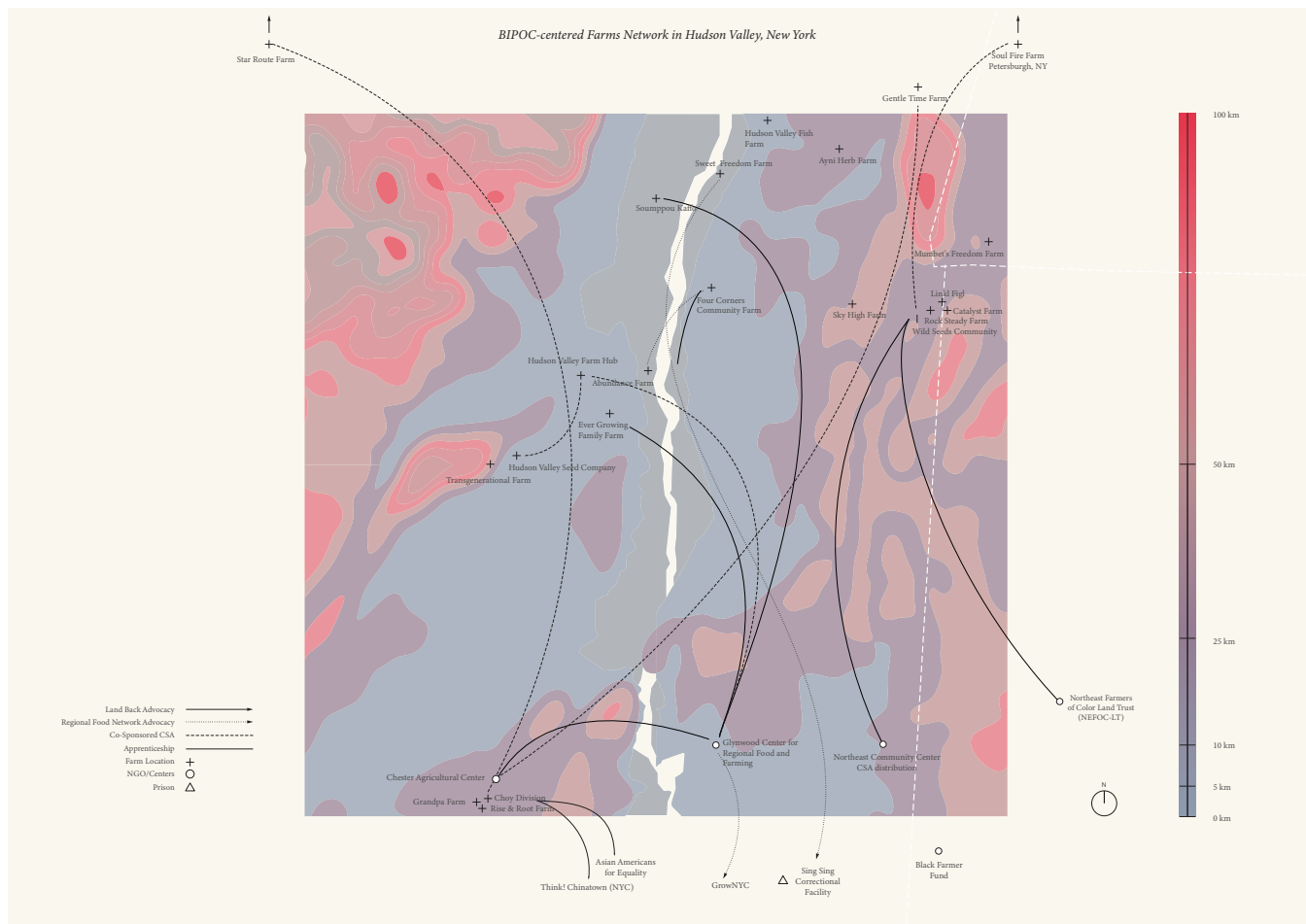


Figure 9. Hudson Valley Radical Ruralism Network Drawing. Image credit: Author, assisted by Raneem Ayad.

produce for the city, as well as outreach for urban food gardens in Harlem, Bronx and East New York (as shown by the works of *Soul Fire Farm* in Petersburg, NY).

Current projects surrounding the Hudson Valley create a concentrated group of intentional farms with a grassroots approach to ecological crisis and social inequity. They address racial, social, and economic displacement that has often targeted BIPOC communities. **Figure 9** shows a network of radical farm strategies that hint at a regional narrative of resilient, regenerative farming to construct a subaltern network of economy. This list of projects counter racial capitalist realities. Together, these radical farms have come to create an infrastructure of care for both human and non-human entities through ethical land stewardship. Within the Hudson Valley, BIPOC centered small scale farms, non-profits, and incubators form the nodes of a non-linear regional network, collectively imagining the conditions for a new radical ruralism.

ENDNOTES

1. N.K. Jemisin, *The Fifth Season: The Broken Earth, Book One* (New York: Orbit, 2015).
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5. Trina W. Shanks, "The Homestead Act: A Major Asset-Building Policy in American History," in *Inclusion in the American Dream: Assets, Poverty and Public Policy*, ed. Michael Sherraden (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 20–41.
6. Monica White, *Freedom Farmers: Agricultural Resistance and the Black Freedom Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 65–87.