**Headline:** How the Braiding Seeds Fellowship Works to Uproot Racism in the Food System

**Teaser:** This Petersburgh, New York, organization fights racial injustice in the food system.

By Damon Orion

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**[Article Body:]**

Racism has been embedded in America’s food and agriculture systems since European colonizers began enslaving Black and Indigenous people for farm and plantation labor. A notable example of how this injustice continued throughout history is the United States Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) [denial of farm loans and resources](https://peoplesschooldc.wordpress.com/food-justice-2) to Black farmers at the height of the Civil Rights era.

In 2023, NPR [reported](https://www.npr.org/2023/02/19/1156851675/in-2022-black-farmers-were-persistently-left-behind-from-the-usdas-loan-system) that Black farmers still had the highest rate of loan rejections, adding that Indigenous farmers “have long been left out of programs despite having high direct loan acceptance rates.” Meanwhile, [Black](https://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/black-communities) and [Indigenous](https://www.feedingamerica.org/sites/default/files/2023-07/FA_HealthEQ_Native_D5.pdf) individuals and members of other marginalized communities in America face food insecurity at more than double the rate of white people.

Petersburgh, New York’s [Braiding Seeds Fellowship](https://www.soulfirefarm.org/braiding-seeds-fellowship/) addresses these disparities by offering an 18-month program for beginning BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color) farmers in the northeastern and southeastern United States. Each of Braiding Seeds’s 10 annually selected fellows receives a $50,000 stipend and resources like one-to-one mentorship, individualized coaching, financial and business planning support, professional development and business acumen workshops, and group gatherings. Twelve runners-up each receive $2,500 in mini-grants.

Created by the Afro-Indigenous-centered [Soul Fire Farm](https://www.soulfirefarm.org/) in collaboration with the [Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund](https://www.federation.coop/), Braiding Seeds is named after “our ancestral grandmothers who braided seeds and promise into their hair before being forced onto transatlantic slave ships,” the group’s [website](https://www.soulfirefarm.org/braiding-seeds-fellowship/) explains. “They believed, against odds, that we, their descendants, would exist to inherit, plant, and pass on that seed.”

I spoke with Braiding Seeds co-director Lulama Moyo and 2024–2025 cohort member Xochitl Bervera about the role the organization plays in fighting racism in our food system.

Originally from Zimbabwe, Braiding Seeds co-director Lulama Moyo “has vast experience in youth work and creative arts community activism in the United States and Southern Africa,” [according](https://www.soulfirefarm.org/lulama-moyo/) to Soul Fire Farm’s website. This includes work with African refugee populations and at-risk youth. In her role as co-director, she helps cultivate “opportunities and audiences for sustained community-centered learning as a BIPOC food justice advocate, university instructor rooted in decolonization and social change pedagogy, spoken-word poet and storyteller, anti-racism organizer, and budding herbalist and traditional healer.”

Xochitl Bervera is one of Braiding Seeds’s 2024–2025 fellows and an oyster farmer in Apalachicola, Florida. She spent nearly 25 years as an organizer in racial and immigrant justice, primarily tackling issues around policing, detention, prisons, and jails and supporting alternative community safety systems. Bervera, who was trained as a lawyer at the New York University School of Law, explains that during that period of her life, she worked on campaigns and in various organizations and coalitions that empowered “people impacted by the criminal legal system to forge a different pathway forward, to move money and investment out of a punitive and failing system and put it into community strengthening that actually keeps our people safe.”

**Damon Orion: How is Braiding Seeds working to uproot racism in the food system?**

**Lulama Moyo:** [The fellowship] was born out of acknowledgment of the violence and degradation of Black and Indigenous farmers in the United States. Discrimination and violence have led to a decline [in the number of BIPOC growers] from 14 percent in 1920 to less than 2 percent today, with a corresponding loss of 14 million acres of land. [That] is a huge erasure that farmers are still reeling from today. With this blatant and overt systemic erasure grew predatory lending processes, outright denial of loans and [disbursement of] small loans compared to white counterparts applying for similar loans, USDA grants leaving out minoritized farmers from opportunities, and continued gaps in understanding and knowledge of jargon and complex ways of coding language so that farmers are left behind.

We are now able to [offer] opportunities without the same restrictions, backing of erasure, and violence behind them. For example, when we provide $50,000 grants to our fellows, we are not policing how they use the funds, [unlike] some federal grants that require strict stipulations on how they are used. We want to acknowledge that these are gaps that our farmers are usually hindered by and cannot break free from, and we want farmers to have the freedom to use [funds] for buying a vehicle, catching up on medical bills, or taking a rest from their full-time job to be able to [dedicate themselves] to farming. We know these things hinder farmers from maintaining these skills and their livelihoods from land.

We also [promote] understanding [of] business composition and acumen in ways that are decolonial and acknowledge systems that are part of our communities, like barter systems and not financialized modes. A lot of our farmers provide free [CSAs](https://stories.opengov.com/jeffersoncountyco/published/qvMWVPWcC) [Community Supported Agriculture], for example. This [runs counter] to other frameworks of farming businesses that want to hyper-financialize on customers when our farmers are trying to meet people’s need for food and resources. So [we strive to] provide business models that enable people to offer free medicine and food in communities in desperate need of these resources.

**DO: What moments from your work with this fellowship are especially memorable?**

**LM:** I’m really excited to share that [in 2024], we’ve reached about 515 acres of farmland combined that are being stewarded across the northeast and southeast through our farmers. We currently have 51 farmers in our cohort, so with this amount of farmers, we are able to reach this acreage, which is an incredible amount of impact. This year, we have also been able to redistribute around $93,000 directly to fellows and alumni. These funds can be used in a range of ways, including legal fees to defend farmland, regaining family land that was unjustly seized by the state, and farm business recovery after hurricanes and floods. This is on top of the $50,000 stipends, so we’re grateful to be able to [facilitate] this direct impact. Specifically this year, we have also been able to work closely with five fellows and alums who, in the process of purchasing farmland, have completed closings or are due to close in the near future, which [collectively] represents around 240 acres.

Through some of our smaller in-person gatherings, we were able to respond to the catastrophe of Hurricane Debby in South Carolina. One of our fellows experienced a devastating loss on her farm at the beginning of receiving the fellowship. They lost most of the pigs they were farming as well as their poultry, along with the farm’s building structures. We were able to come together in November to help rebuild some of the infrastructure and lay down some new plots. Some of the core beauty around the fellowship is creating these safety nets of community where people can be together, grieve together, and rebuild together.

**DO: What are the greatest rewards and challenges of this work?**

**LM:** Farming is not an industry for the weak. It is taxing, painful, and sometimes aggravating and lonely work. It has felt energizing when farmers [who have] the bare minimum say they finally have people, feel seen and heard, and feel like their experience is not so debilitatingly lonely because other people are going through similar things. Because we are growing, we are now developing smaller regional hubs. [We are] building a Northeast cohort, Mid-Atlantic cohort, and Southeast cohort that can come together on similar issues in agriculture, [have access to] skill-sharing and resource-sharing opportunities, and support each other in between these small regions besides being able to recognize the trans-border connections that can be applicable across regionalities.

I would say some of the harder points are that we are still experiencing hard-hitting systemic policy issues. A lot of our farmers are still unable to get the resources they need. [They don’t] receive farm numbers or communication from federal agencies and are being overlooked for loans. Even within the 18 months of the program, we have had folks who have had land seized that has been in their family for a long time. We have continued to see people losing their homes and becoming houseless because of the socioeconomic violence that impacts farmers as very vulnerable people. We have seen people have legal cases developed against them because of insidious factors around the predatory financialization of farmland. We are still up to our necks in some of the violence that has been experienced for more than a century, but it is in new and different ways.

**DO: How do you think the impending Trump presidency will impact food sovereignty and racism in the food system?**

**LM:** We are apprehensive and unclear about what the next four years will look like under the Trump presidency. Many Indigenous tribes were severely harmed during his previous presidency. That administration withdrew support for tribes reclaiming ancestral land and tried to remove reservation land from Indigenous [peoples] like the [Mashpee Wampanoag tribe](https://mashpeewampanoagtribe-nsn.gov/news/2018/10/9/mashpee-wampanoag-protest-trump-administration-land-ruling). We currently have a Mashpee farmer who saw this take place almost overnight on her land. She saw the important reclamation of ancestral land that she had long been fighting for, and then it was instantly seized again during the Trump presidency. She is very fearful of what that might mean when she is trying to rebuild a connection with the community and the land. We have cases like this across our fellowship in different ways—how the Trump presidency leans into large-scale and foreign investments, farming, and land acquisition and edges out small businesses and minoritized farm practices.

We are also nervous about a reduction in programs such as the [MAP](https://fas.usda.gov/programs/market-access-program-map) [Market Access Program], which is a core component of the farm bill, and other important food security operations that our fellows are part of. We are [aware] of the ability for this to continue to hinder initiatives that aim to address historical disparities, as language is already being pressed down upon food justice and food sovereignty work and targeting Black and Indigenous businesses. We are also unsure what shifts it might bring in policies, tariffs, and subsidies, particularly in the framing of nonprofits, as we’re seeing some of the language around supporting nonprofits change—particularly federally supported nonprofits. So, we are holding each other in the uncertainty of regulation and what it might mean for communities on the margins of some of this work.

**Xochitl Bervera:** I think on the national and international scale, Trump’s presidency will have a terribly detrimental impact that will make racism in the food system much worse. I’m not sure if he even understands how much the food system relies on immigrant workers and what mass deportations would do to destabilize our food system. I think on that large scale, things are going to get worse before they get better, and his policies will increase inequity in all spheres. That’s what he seems to be about.

Locally, to be in a small, rural, coastal place in Florida that in some ways sits a little further outside the empire, part of what I am excited and inspired by is the possibility, even inside a Trump presidency, of building a local food system that starts to say, “Whatever continues to unravel under the Republican and MAGA dismantling of everything we’ve gotten used to, we need to rely on each other and ourselves and build networks and systems where we are trading for food, have multiple resources, and don’t just rely on the one grocery store that’s part of the global market.” I think there’s a heightened awareness that may make some of that building, community strengthening, and social cohesion stronger despite the divisiveness, hateful rhetoric, and policies that are going to do much harm to many people.

**DO: How does your background in racial and immigrant justice intersect with your involvement with Braiding Seeds?**

**XB:** That was one of the reasons why finding Soul Fire Farm and Braiding Seeds was so important to me. Of course, [many of us are] fighting for and working toward a different world in which exploitation, violence, and oppression aren’t the status quo. We all have different ways to go about that, and for many years my methodology of choice was direct action organizing. I was in protests; I was in the streets; I did policy advocacy work and partnered with groups who were suing prisons, jails, and police departments. A lot of it was the fight against the current systems and mechanisms. Somewhere in that, I started to feel that I personally, and also our larger movement, lacked some of the skills and capacities to envision what we were actually moving toward and to [take care of] some of the fundamentals. You talk about community safety, and you ask the question, “Can we feed ourselves? Do we know how to build shelter?” As the world around us has gotten more and more volatile and precarious, those questions have gotten louder and louder for me and moved me toward food growing and envisioning what different local economies could look like. That was so in sync with Braiding Seeds and Soul Fire Farm because sometimes you start to move [toward farming], and then you’re in a whole different world of people who might lack the analysis of racial capitalism and [think,] “Let’s just have fun and grow things!” That’s wonderful, too, but for me, [the motivating force] is the understanding of why it’s important for racial justice organizers at this moment to tackle food growing and think about the world past some of the systems we live in and how we’re going to care for ourselves and each other in that time.

**DO: What are some instances of racism within the food system you’ve witnessed or experienced personally?**

**XB:** [Ninety-eight percent](https://farmland.org/active-policy-efforts-to-address-the-history-of-bipoc-land-theft-in-america/) of [U.S.] land is owned by white people. A huge percentage of the folks working that land and producing the food are people of color, yet a lot of folks, including farm workers, don’t even have basic legal rights in this country and are always under attack. I see [racism] in that large way when I look at what’s in the supermarket and where it comes from.

I have a lot of family in Mexico, so I sometimes can really see how the global system and U.S. policies exploit workers not only in this country but also all across the world, to get food for the cheapest price and what that means for how much economies in Latin America and other places are dependent on exports. They export all of the gifts of their land and are left with a very depleted market. I see that with my brother and his family’s struggles with his farm to find a market and make a living. I think whatever we struggle with as small farmers of color in the U.S., there is a whole other tier and level of challenge in other countries that suffer the consequences of U.S. policies [relating to] the food system.

**DO: What’s an example of something you’ve learned from Braiding Seeds and Soul Fire Farm that has changed your approach to farming?**

**XB:** They don’t just go and do whatever they want [to the property]. They ask the land for permission. Sometimes you get signals that something might need to shift for permission to be given. In the case of [creating] the beautiful little pond [that now exists] on their property, they asked for permission and got no as an answer year after year, so they didn’t dig the pond. It took something like eight years before the land said yes. For me, that was really important, because we’re so used to our computers and our devices and the belief in our individual and sometimes collective wills as humans, which we inherited from this culture of domination—this idea that we rule the earth and can use it.

Sometimes even people in environmental justice talk about resources that way: It’s about what they do for humans. [Soul Fire’s approach] was such an embodied way of saying, “We *don’t* rule this earth. We are in partnership and relationship with her.” It’s not just symbolically saying, “Oh, can we get permission? Thanks.” It’s a real asking and listening, and then you have to follow the instructions. I certainly have taken some of that to my [practice] when we go out to our farm. There is a greeting of the water that we do, a thanking, and a requesting permission to do our work and be in as much harmony as we can with the water and wind. There have been days when I’ve gotten a sense of, “Maybe the elements are letting me know it’s not the day to be out here.” Lo and behold, lightning comes that day when it wasn’t in the forecast.

**DO: What are some things every beginning farmer should know?**

**XB:** Wow. Every beginning farmer should know that it’s harder than you think and more rewarding than you can imagine. You should know that you’re going to learn more if you’re open to learning about the earth, water, wind, tides, and sun, and it will shift who you are and how you [make your way] in the world to have that very different relationship of reliance and interdependence with the elements.