



# JUMPING FENCES

Land, food and racial justice in British farming



APPENDIX: PARTICIPANT JOURNEYS IN LAND WORK

# Journeys in land work for British BPOC

As part of the Jumping Fences project during 2022 a number of Black and people of colour farmers, growers and landworkers were interviewed throughout Britain to understand their experiences, expertise and journey into this sector. The findings from the research interviews are compiled into a separate report (Jumping Fences: Land, food and racial justice in British Farming) which analyses emerging themes and proposed recommendations for the British food and farming system. In this Appendix booklet, a fuller description of the different participants journeys is presented, in the form of summaries of the interviews, including some challenges and general support needed that were identified by participants.

The experiences and pathways are diverse, yet there are some common themes that arise. Some pseudonyms are used, as indicated. The stories are listed alphabetically.

The project partners for Jumping Fences are Land in Our Names (LION), Ecological Land Co-operative (ELC) and Landworkers' Alliance (LWA). Research was carried out by Naomi Terry. The project is funded by Farming the Future (FtF).

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## Alexander Thompson–Byer is a crofter in North Uist

“Everyone back in the day would’ve been working the land to grow veg. Plus we’re animals, right? Doing our part to fit in the ecosystem. The greener the place, the healthier the mind.” After establishing and running a successful gardening business in London, Alexander Thompson–Byers left the city for a 3–acre property in Surrey, and then left mainland UK entirely – buying a 10–acre croft, moving to the Outer Hebrides in 2020. With his partner and child he now lives on North Uist, where his partner was raised.

Alexander is a crofting permaculturist, and has a popular following on YouTube where he shares his videos and passion for permaculture: “soil is a like a skin, it’s a living thing.”

He is an environmentalist who pays keen attention to nature and her animals and plants. He says of a robin that comes to sing with him whilst he works, “I’ve always called them the Whitney Houston of the bird world, because they are small but loud.”

Alexander learnt mostly through doing. Also self–teaching and through YouTube and books, and talking to different people. Important learning also happened through trial and error for him, when he bought the land in Surrey. The land was much wilder than he was previously used to, and he had to adapt his plans to work with the environment. Alexander has built extensive ecological, gardening and permacultural knowledge through this, learning how different species interact on his land. For example, how to manage pests naturally. He learnt gardening whilst on the job, and through different people he worked for.

He says he is not a good business person, and has no business plan. The intention is to build the business based upon creating relations with different people and places on the island. There is a different type of economy in Uist that is not only based on cash. It has more elements of a sharing economy. Alexander’s intentions are not profit–orientated, but mainly focused on sustaining his family, the chickens and other birds.

He chose this way of sustaining his living because it makes him happy: “I love that feeling of aching because you know your body has been working.”

Here in North Uist he has become a gardener of the sea – along with his crofting rights he has the right to harvest seaweed, which he cuts by hand along the coast of the loch. It was easy to find a croft to buy, because no one wanted it: they thought it was too boggy and difficult to keep sheep. He liked the challenge, and having a blank canvas.

When he got gardening jobs through flyer letterboxes in London, people always seemed surprised when they saw that he was Black. Alex thinks the media is a big part of causing these warped perceptions that people hold of non-white races. Most of the racism he has encountered has been in the form of microaggressions.

“No matter what I did, I’d always be perceived in that way... I had a piece of land, we had a flat we owned, I had a business and all these different things, I was doing A-list celebrities’ gardens at one point. And... you’re still being perceived that way.” Alexander is motivated by microaggressions, as much as it spurred his anxieties: “I want to do what I want to do, and it can just push me even more to want to do this stuff.”

An early experience of being profiled by the police when he was 14 has had a long-lasting impact, “so I saved up for my camera and I remember running and I remember... police coming out to stop me and stuff and ever since then... I noticed that I was perceived differently to my friends at the time. And it gave me this kind of like, almost like a chip on my shoulder but not horrible chip. It always made me feel like I had to kind of do more to kind of prove myself, if that makes sense, in society. And kinda make people feel like comfortable with me being me. But it used to irritate me sometimes you see these little microaggressions and stuff like that... in my early 20s, I started to get my anxieties.”

One of the reasons he moved to a rural area was because, even though it’s all white people, it is a small and close-knit community, so once everyone knows you, they take you for who you are. In this sense he is not constantly having to interpret how he is being perceived in encounters with new white people. North Uist has been welcoming, and is generally accepting of incomers, especially those who get involved with island life, and carve out their own place in the island and in its community. Knowing people there was a huge help – his mother-in-law is well known on the island. Their plans for the croft are not only about self-sufficiency, there is an intention to provide food around the island. Alexander never knew about the place before his partner introduced him, and would not have come otherwise: the experience would have probably been totally different.

The calmness of the space is important for rest and wellbeing, “it gives me time to think and just focus. The serenity of countryside living. I can’t remember the last time I heard a siren. Like in London you hear them, and then there’s all the associations that come with that – the police, a fight.” Despite appreciating the quiet, music is also a big connector for him, to make him feel connected to his family and diaspora.

## Challenges:

- Up-scaling is intimidating. “Imagine going from like, the usual London garden to having three acres. It’s a bit of a slap in the face.”
- Isolation from BPOC community within and beyond farming: “predominantly, my friends on the mainland were white.”
- Despite his accomplishments as a gardener, always having to prove his worth.
- Navigating council jargon, especially in England. Regulations have been much simpler in Scotland.
- It’s difficult to make a sustainable living from crofting alone, especially with a smaller croft.

## Support needed:

- Financial support is really helpful – LION have granted him funding to build a fence. Similar grants would help with the next steps.
- Future plans to make the croft a site of learning for others.
- He is strongly motivated to inspire young people, so wants to keep putting a positive image out there

## Advice:

“Defy expectations.”



## Cel Robertson trains new-entrant flower farmers in growing and business

*“Everyone thinks, ‘I’ve got a garden, I can grow flowers for sale,’ but without any understanding of the economics of running a farm. Or even knowing anything about growing flowers.”*

Cel Robertson is a flower farmer based in North Norfolk, and has been growing cut flowers commercially for 10 years, and practicing horticulture for over 25 years. She is trained in organic growing and horticulture and operates a no dig one-acre rented field. She places a high emphasis on the importance of good business skills, and she also provides workshop training to people that are interested in getting into commercial flower farming. Coming from the arts, when she went into organic horticulture it made sense to focus on floriculture because of the creative and aesthetic opportunity. She is strongly motivated by providing an alternative to conventional flower farming, with its high environmental impact and carbon footprint. “[Flowers in supermarkets are] cheap, for a reason. If they’re cheap at the till, is because the price is being paid further down the line: the cheaper the flower, the poorer the quality of production.” As well as growing and teach-

ing, Cel is also author of a book with Bloom, several magazine articles and she appears on podcasts.

She grew up in a working class family in East London. Her mother grew up on the 12th floor of block of flats which may explain her lack of connection to nature; this carried through to how she and her siblings were brought up. Her mother is white British and her father is Guyanese. Her Guyanese family heritage traces back through lines of farmers, but some members of her family were really horrified that she was working as a gardener; they don't value that kind of work. Cel notes that there is a need to shift narratives, so that this work is seen as more valuable and skilled. Since she has written a book, her family have been more accepting due to the prestige that comes from being a published author. "I don't think it's something as easy as you know, giving everyone money to go on a bursary or something. It's like that relationship with my family. If there was a higher status applied to horticulture, it wouldn't have been so much of an issue."

Despite her parents and more recent family not understanding her desire to pursue horticulture, Cel says, "I feel more connected with my heritage. On certainly, obviously, on my dad's side, because even though our ancestors may have been enslaved, they worked with the land. And I'm working with the land... even on my mom's side, if we found out more about that side of the family as well, they would have been farmers, or would have worked on the land."

From Cel's own experience working to train growers across the UK, it is apparent that many cut flower growers own land either through family inheritance or property purchase financed by other employment, and many of these businesses are not yet financially viable; the sector appears to be broadly made up of hobby growers. The small-scale growers who are running viable commercial businesses tend to be people who rent their land which is a little counter-intuitive; the need to pay rent and the investment requirement for a site that is not owned appears to drive the incentive to run a profitable enterprise. Obviously if they owned land, then these growers would be able to grow their businesses more and have greater security. Many other participants talked about financial pressure and a lack of economic resources. This demonstrates how, beyond an entry point threshold, coming from a background of financial scarcity can actually be a driver in creating a more successful and economically sustainable business.

Cel has worked to trying to improve racial diversity in flower farming and she has had some negative experiences related to race: "it sort of happens everywhere. But yeah, I mean, I was told I wasn't English. I was literally born within the sound of the Bow Bells in London." The conversations she has engaged with on this have at times drained her energy.

## Challenges:

- Tokenisation – Cel has conflicted feelings around the use of her image in social media, as she would like to attract more racial diversity to the sector but does not always want her image to be used to improve the public image of other organisations working on their EDI.

- Organisations lack the language to talk about diversity, without bringing more harm to BPOC flower farmers. She helped establish a mentoring program for aspiring BPOC flower growers, which was dropped after the first year: "they're not doing something that they truly believe in. They're doing something that they think they need to be seen to be doing."

- Acquiring land – she can't develop her business on the land she has, because she can't invest in perennial planting.

## Support needed:

- Help to shift the narrative so that farm work is seen as valued, high-skill work.
- Finding affordable land.

# Cley knew from a young age that she wanted to be a gardener

*"I've got to the stage now where I just want a piece of land myself. Just all the stuff that I've been doing for everyone else for the last 20 years."*

Cley (pseud.) encountered family expectations to take a profession, so first took an academic route. Pushed towards becoming a medical doctor by her mother, she studied psychology. She soon switched to sociology, and it was then that she reflected through her studies that it was important to live a life with meaning and intention, and so she returned to re-orientate herself towards gardening.

In horticulture she found it difficult to work with white and privileged organizations because they were not very progressive. They frequently used her and her other colleague of colour for photo opportunities, and this also bred animosity from other white colleagues, who were not given the spotlight as frequently.

As a mixed-race Irish Bangladeshi woman, her race has always appeared ambiguous to others. "I can kind of go under the radar: I have a much easier time than say my Black colleagues would, I think." Having the title of being a Dr (PhD) and having an Irish name, has also meant that people can't identify her as a woman, nor as brown, until meeting her in person, and she appreciates this anonymity. Yet still she finds she is not always taken seriously. "So when I go in, and say that I have a PhD, people don't often believe me, because I just don't look like that would be what I do. And so it's quite, it's quite weird... I've had to struggle with that quite a lot, particularly from older white men in the same profession."

Cley grew up first in rural Ireland and, "when I moved to the city, it was awful... to have just been totally ripped away from somewhere that I was really happy, living in the country, and feeling very lost and moving to the inner city where there's just concrete and very little green space and no garden. I felt very bereft from that." As a mixed race child she felt like, "an outsider within."

Being raised in a white family has resulted in feeling distant from her Bangladeshi heritage. She is learning more about that now, as she connects with Asian women through projects she is working on. Accessing land is a major barrier. Her work is motivated by morals, and a lot of the projects she has enjoyed working on most have a community focus. "I think growing food inevitably makes you more aware of the inequity surrounding food, and the social aspects of food." Within the organisations she was working in, she couldn't align her gardening with her political values around food justice. In the places she's worked the priority has always been to get it looking nice for the visitors, resulting in her compromising on her philosophies. "I don't think I've worked anywhere yet where everything is kind of lined up, be it ecologically, socially, practically, expertise-wise, you know, there's always a compromise."

On top of this, she has felt tokenised on multiple occasions. "I think we were kind of wheeled out quite a lot for publicity, because we were the only ones that weren't white... this other British Nigerian woman, she didn't like it either. And we both kind of talked regularly about how we're feeling about it. And actually, we did raise it a few times, but no one really took us seriously with it... once people from the press office were looking for photographs and said like, "have you got any with brown people in," and it's like, I'm sure you can't really phrase it like that."

Cley lives within multiple identities that interact with her profession. "It's not a very active cultural heritage. It's a very latent one, if that makes sense. I think it's a sense of otherness, and then being gay, and then being a woman in horticulture, and trying to make your way through in a very white male-orientated profession. And then also now, weirdly enough, having a PhD has added another level of otherness, because people are a bit suspicious sometimes because they don't think you've got any practical skills."

Comparing market gardening to horticulture to farming Cley notes that, "the boundaries are blurring quite a lot. I know it's a really reductive thing of just thinking of farming as mono-crops and big fields of tractors. But that's kind of what in your mind's eye as a kid. It's a ladybird book version, isn't it? They're definitely not going to be Black. They're going to be a white man, and dungarees... market gardening occupies this beautiful position in the middle, where it takes lots

of elements from farming in terms of this intensity, and maybe a level of mechanisation but takes lots of its inspiration from kitchen gardening in terms of seed saving and crop selection, heritage, flavour.”

“The power we have as people who can grow things is a superpower I think. To be used wisely.”

### Challenges:

- Pressure to take a respectable profession.
- Poor work culture with oppressive values.
- Many of the business models of market gardening rely on volunteers, a level of social skill and human interaction – lending towards extroversion. Unless you have money there is really no other model yet if you are socially shy and introvert. This is particularly evident when it comes to social media and promotion for visibility.
- Poor access to green space in the city.
- Tokenism, especially with promotional photos.
- Social deprivations are so many in the north of England, that land and racial justice don’t take as high a priority as in the south.
- Finding a place to belong.
- Experiencing otherness.

### Support needed:

- Would like to link up with someone with a plot of land upon which they can grow.
- Would like to set up a community land project. Interested something like the ELC model, in the north.
- “Equalising access to green space from any age.”
- The north of England receives much fewer resources and there are fewer market garden opportunities.
- Shifting the narrative on horticulture as a respected profession.
- Trying to find a business model that has an alternative to buying land, because she doesn’t have the resources for that.
- “I’d like to see it being offered as a viable career for kids at school, like being a doctor or whatever, that it’s not something that’s frowned upon. It’s not something as seen as demeaning because you’re getting your hands dirty.”

### Advice:

“Just hold your ground and try and keep your confidence. And don’t shy away from it all. And don’t let anyone tell you what to think or how you should behave. Or put you in a box.”





## Weaving and farming willow, Déa practices a fading craft

“The kind of jobs that that we would get are going to be the unskilled labour lowest pay–level jobs. And I think that’s partly because we’re far less likely to have the education and the skills that would get us a better job in the agricultural sector, purely because we’re not growing up in this environment. So, you know, if you’re living in a city like I did, you’re very unlikely to go to agricultural college, or very unlikely to know how to drive a tractor.”

Déa grows willow for her artisanal woven willow baskets. She doesn’t know any other Black willow weavers; she maybe has seen some weavers of Asian heritage, but a very small minority. “And I think maybe also as a person of colour, as a Black person, [the isolation has] increased, because there’s not just the isolation of being part of a minority craft and minority type of farming. But there’s also a bit more of a barrier there in terms of not being quite the same as the people around.”

To farm willow, Déa has gained casual access to land: “I would love to eventually be able to afford a bit of land myself.” She remarks that, “it’s been quite stressful to be honest. Because even though it’s really quite small amounts of money, for me it’s a lot of money. I’ve invested in somebody else’s land with no real guarantee that I can even access the willow: it’s just entirely based on trust.”

Déa lives in Wales, and grew up in York, and her family would regularly go walking in the countryside. “My mom is Jamaican, first–generation immigrant to Britain. And my dad is white British Yorkshireman. I’m actually also autistic and ADHD, as are some of the members of my family. And I have three children who have mainly been born and brought up in Wales, southwest Wales. And I have a partner who is white. Welsh, well born in Wales, bred in Wales. And that’s essentially how I ended up in Wales. My grandparents were subsistence farmers in Jamaica and I

think my mum probably would have been a farmer... if life had not been different. She loves growing things, it's a really important part of who she is."

Generally Déa has had positive experiences living in Wales. "I like nature and I feel good in nature. The anxiety is dealing with the people. And one of the things about being Black in a rural community is that even though I've only had positive experiences directly with people... people do double-takes all the time. You know, somebody's driving past and they like to do the double-take, so there's something kind of a bit exhausting about always standing out." During recent years, local political affiliations have worried her. "It was quite shocking to see that the town hall in the town nearest to me was letting an office to a UKIP politician. It made me feel that myself and my children aren't safe living where we do." So despite having lots of friendly interactions, there was all this, "evidence that there are racist people around."

Déa has noted that there's a lot of things she would have just picked up naturally about farming, and a lot of useful networks she would have built, had she grown up in a rural area. "All of that knowledge that people who have grown up with within the farming community have, but that's just taken for granted. You know, I don't even know that they would be aware that I don't know all of that."

### Challenges:

- Standing out as a Black woman in rural Wales.
- Transitioning from rural to urban: "getting in a car to do everything has been hard."
- Balancing work with parenting.
- Financial: "at this point, my goal is to get the business to at least break even."

### Support needed:

- Access to knowledge.
- Having more information about the resources available to farmers, e.g. grants.
- More education for children around agriculture.

# Diego is a motivated entrepreneur growing micro greens using an aquaponics system

"I looked around and I saw no one doing anything different, other than the typical jobs - being a musician or being a football player. I looked at that, and I said, I want to do something different, completely different."

Studying at agricultural college required Diego (pseud.) to have thick skin, something that his upbringing prepared him well for. Instead of taking things personally, he takes it in his stride and uses racist responses to help himself grow as well as helping to enlighten others and help them grow. Nonetheless it was quite an isolating experience: he only knows a couple of other Black farmers and hasn't been able to talk about his experiences with anyone in a similar situation. Diego got into aquaponics when he saw how conventional farming is decimating the soil and he has a motivation to change the narrative on who can farm and what future farming looks like, not only in terms of race, but also the techniques used, and how to make it environmentally and financially sustainable.

Diego was influenced growing up by the cultural values his father carried from Africa. "People were always outdoors and always outside playing, barbecuing. At family functions [my father] was always proud to bring those traditions with him and still implement them with, I guess what he would consider his new village, or his new friends and family... That's what rubs off on me.... being outdoors, helping people."

He had never thought about farming until, "my mom mentioned it to me that, 'you know, you do like being outdoors. What if you looked into farming?' And I thought to myself, I've never seen anyone do farming in London... And so she said, 'look outside London.'"

At first Diego's friends were not supportive, and didn't see how he could make a living from it. But he is always someone who beats to his own drum, and, "the support did eventually come. But they've never seen anyone who looks like us do something like this."

Diego has big business plans for the future: he'd like to open a flagship shop, and then expand into other cities in the UK, and also has a desire to take the business back to Africa, where aquaponics could be a great solution to growing in drought. He has plans to formulate a degree for aquaponics, "hopefully to be internationally recognised. So even if you're in Africa, you can learn about it, even if you're in Europe, you can learn about it. Even if you're in America, you can learn about it."

On thinking about the UK farming system he notes elements of structural racism. "The farming industry is not anything racist in your face, what tends to happen is you will have systems in place that aren't necessarily meant to benefit outsiders. So it's the difficulty of obtaining land for you to be commercially successful. Most land is passed down traditionally from parent to child... if said child doesn't want to do farming, the farm is then usually turned into just flats or buildings or houses."

There are numerous social barriers to gaining access to farming, as it's so much about who you know: "the information lies within who you know, and if you've done it before, and if you have access to different people who do it themselves, and have the knowledge from that." Diego also finds that he is having to prove himself with customers and potential clients: "people don't take you as seriously... or they think it's something that's gimmicky."

Diego's experience of university was a lonely experience. "If you don't have thick skin, you won't survive it. If you don't have confidence in yourself, you won't survive it. And when I say you won't survive it, you might give up halfway, or you might not complete the journey and just sort of be so discouraged." A lot of people he came across had never known anyone that was Black in their lives, apart from seeing Black people on the TV. This resulted in a lot of discomfort and ignorant attitudes and stereotyping. "People would say, 'aren't you supposed to just be rapping? What are you doing farming, you're wasting your time on farming.' That was mentioned to me a lot of times where it was like, 'no, you shouldn't be doing this, why are you wasting your time.'"

Whilst he learnt a lot about agriculture, the social experience of university was not what he had hoped. He would be excluded from different events such as parties, and sometimes didn't want to go out. "Depression can sort of sit in and you're always in your room, you don't really want to go out because you're afraid people are looking at you, pointing at you... it might be the microaggressions, and might be the overt racial tendencies or racial slurs or things that happened."

The stereotyping also showed up when anything racially related happened, say a Black person did something in the media, he would have to answer for it, "as if you're some sort of council of Black people... just because we look the same, it doesn't we're all the same." Making friends was difficult. On more than one occasion a new friend would say that they would get in trouble if they brought Diego to their family house, because, "'I've never had a Black friend... my parents wouldn't approve'." Diego exhibited patience and understanding in these situations, and put effort into helping them open up their mindset. "I was doing a lot of explaining and sort of trying to bridge the gap and meet people halfway and really go into their world... that's where you have to have thick skin." He tried to be genuine and hoped that his friends had a broader mindset after becoming friends with him.

"It's their first time. Is it an excuse, though, to have these sort of reservations for someone who just looks different? No, it's not an excuse. But is it sort of understandable of why their reaction was their reaction? Yeah, I see where it's from, sort of I get it. And then my mind is, how do we solve that? And one of the solutions to that is by bringing people of different backgrounds together, by having different events, by creating access. If you're in a rural background, if you're in a city, if you're in a suburb, wherever you are, you can still come together and share information and share your different lives of where you're from."

He has experienced being stared at in rural places. "Somerset, for example, if I would be in the town, or if I would be around, it would like be like a zoo. You know, how everyone's looking at, let's say, a lion, everyone's looking at a lion in a zoo. And we're all just sort of staring at the lion. That's how it felt sometimes being in the rural areas like Somerset... because they're surprised to see someone of my background, my race, in the city, or in that place... when I would be in farming clothes then it would be even more of a shock."

## Challenges

- There's not a lot of people to network with locally about innovative farming techniques.
- Implementing organic-standard aquaponics.
- Financial – acquiring space within London is expensive and difficult to find.
- Not being supported or understood by friends initially.
- Not being taken seriously by customers.
- Racial slurs, microaggressions and ignorant remarks when studying at agricultural college.
- Being stared at in rural places.

## Support needed:

- Changing the narrative on who farming is for: "farming isn't just: you have to be someone in a tractor."

- Wants more "support for people who want to start their own farming business. So it would be good if there was some funding for young farmers or young entrepreneurs that wanted to do this, as well as different courses and different workshops available to those who aren't exposed to farming."

- Wants more in the curriculum education: "implement that in the curriculum at primary school, secondary school and at university level, or college level. So everyone can see if it's something that they want to do. And showing them the different career paths that they can take."

## Advice:

- "Don't box yourself in with what you can grow: you can grow anything on planet Earth. So it's always up to you what you want to grow."

- "Having a plan for what you are going to do afterwards, so you're not just wasting your time on a degree that you won't be able to use."



## Flavian Obiero wants to see more BPOC in medium-scale animal husbandry

*"It's like having four or five wounds on your body. You fix the big one, which is racism, still got three or four here that need healing. And the doctor that can fix the racism one is not the one that's going to fix these others. We've gotta do these ourselves."*

Within Black cultures, Flavian observes that there is still lots of colourism, tribalism, elitism and sexism that needs to be tackled. He has been working in farming for the past twelve years, but still considers himself a "foetus" in terms of what he has to learn and the progress he sees ahead of him as a farmer. He works on a 500-acre farm with around 130 pigs, in Hampshire. He initially intended to train as a vet, and his first experience of farming in the UK was for work experience, which is when he first seriously considered farming – although he had always known that he wanted to keep animals and grow food for subsistence, as– this was a normal part of his upbringing in Kenya. In their home by the sea, his family hired help to look after the food-growing and chicken-rearing, and those people also played a role in raising Flavian.

Whilst he was studying in the UK, he took a very direct approach to finding farm work: "I sort of was knocking on doors on different farms – you can imagine, a Black lad just turning up to a farm." Flavian finds English the countryside and farmers very welcoming. He sometimes experiences ignorant or racist remarks, for example, an employer at Ascot calling him by the name of a different Black coworker without realising his mistake. For the most part these don't get to him. He shrugs them off, or where he deems necessary, he calls out the perpetrator. He didn't use to speak out so much about these things, but he learnt from his father and grandfather to speak out when he saw something that wasn't right. He speaks of how his grandfather had strong post-colonial views: "he was detained for nine years when Kenya was under British colony... he didn't want anything to do with anything British or anything non-Kenyan".

He recognises that many people have different experiences of countryside as, “unwelcoming to non-white people. I think that's a minute number of people and when you get some of them, they are amplified on social media so it feels like everyone, but if you were to walk into any pub here you talk to anyone, people are so friendly.”

He thinks it is important for the farming movement to encourage more BPOC people into farming – but to focus on commercial farming, as he sees that a lot of attention in agroecological farming is on subsistence growers, whereas conventional farms are not so heavily dependent on unpaid and low-waged labour.

When living in Ramsgate he felt very isolated, and would try to get away on the weekends. There was a much greater racial hostility that he felt here, compared to other places he had lived and worked, for example encountering more UKIP supporters.

“I block out that year in Ramsgate. Yeah. And I think when people talk about mental health, it's not something I ever used to think of. But I was not in a good place then... for a whole year. I just wanted to be out of there.”

When deciding to go back to university to do a Masters, and progress his agricultural career, an employer told Flavian and his father, “you don't need a Masters to shovel shit.” Bearing in mind he had two. So he'd worked in big industry for over 40 years, he had two Masters himself. And he's telling me not to do one because I don't need one to shovel shit. And then from that point, I thought, okay, this person doesn't want to see any progress in me.”

“My main reason for doing a Masters was to go back to Kenya and work there. I don't see myself doing that anymore.” So Flavian has put the Masters on hold, as it wasn't worth the cost, and is focusing on the farm work, and processing business – establishing his own line of cured meats.

Whilst at college Flavian found himself surrounded by white friends, and this caused somewhat of a rift between him and Black “London lads” that would come to the campus, and could not accept his affiliation with white people:

“Every Wednesday, we had a party. And there's always altercation between the London lads and the countryside, sort of gamekeeping guys, which is essentially a shooting course, there was always altercations there. And it was always triggered from both sides, I'd end up being in the middle. And then because they didn't understand each other, these guys using words to trigger the other... Because I was there trying to mediate because, I've grown up in Kenya. So I've grown up around Black people. And then now I'm with white people, I grew up with white people, doing this work. And I'm like, ‘what's your issue?’ Like, in Kenya growing up, no one cared where you came from. There's 44 different tribes in Kenya for God's sake.

“And I remember one morning, I was walking to lectures... And I'm just walking past and I hear someone shout my name... one of the young lads. He's like, ‘are you Black?’ He said it again, I was like, ‘I think so. What do you mean?’ He said ‘well, you always hang around with the white kids.’ I said, ‘because they're my friends, because I'm in a course with them.’ He said, ‘why do you not hang with us?’ I'm like, ‘one, you're like three years younger than me. Two, you're doing sports, I'm doing animal management. Three, we've got the same colour skin, but we don't have anything in common. So why?’ And that's probably one of the few times where anything racial was directed at me. And that was from a fellow Black person.”

Sitting as a mediator in different situations between white and Black peers has created a particular form of estrangement. For Flavian, rather than being Black, it is being Kenyan that is a defining feature of his identity. “Even though we're the same colour, some of these people have got such a different upbringing to me, even though I came here at 15, I got such a different upbringing.”

He remarks that people from developing countries are more connected to farming through their own upbringings and recent heritage, compared to white people in the UK, so it would make sense to farm managers to take this into consideration.

“There's such a shortage of staff in agriculture, that I think farmers can't afford to be picky. And I think because people from developing countries have a closer engagement with land than people in this country and where food comes from, I think they're probably better suited than getting someone from a high-rise building in London to go and work in a farm. Because they also don't want to get dirty as someone that's had an experience of going to their Nan's and seeing a chicken get chased and killed and cooked, and have more of a connection.” The work on the farm

is undoubtedly tough: "if you're looking after animals... they need their food, they need their water, they need their bedding. I think the longest day I did was 18 hours."

He misses the culture of home, and connects with others from the African diaspora through cultural events. He speaks joyously of an Amapiano music festival he went to in London: "there was Zimbabweans, people from Barbados, obviously loads of South Africans, Ghanaians, Nigerians... a group of people who society sees as violent... and we're there just having a good time, with nothing going on. And I think if I did have a community of Africans or Caribbeans around me, that would be pretty good."

### Challenges:

- Experienced some isolation in places he lived, which affected mental health at the time.
- Hostility from Black peers.
- Acting as a mediator.
- Some places it is more difficult to connect with other African heritage cultural events.

### Support needed:

- Starting new businesses – "I think there should be some sort of way to give people a chance to try something and fail to a point because you can't always predict things."
- Supporting younger people to get into farming.
- Working on colourism, sexism and tribalism within Black communities.

# Jey trains as a food grower in Cornwall

“Only since doing this internship, just feeling a bit lonely, I think and a bit isolated, and being the only person from my heritage... and coming from really urban background where I didn't know anything about nature at all.”

Connections to the land and to her ancestry have not always been at the fore for Jey (pseud.), but healing and traditional African practices are becoming more important in her farming practice, and connecting with other BPOC has been important for this. “Lots of people on my dad's side of the family were herbal healers.” She thinks about her family's rituals when she is sowing seeds. However it can be difficult for her to connect with these thoughts and feelings in the Cornish market garden where she works, in a very white and English part of the country. Because of this, she considers going back to London to work where there are more BPOC-led community garden projects. She is a young Black woman with mixed heritage, with a white British mother and Black Kenyan father. Motivated by connections to land and community, she wants to establish (or work within) a community-centered land-based project. She currently lives and works in Cornwall in a partially paid traineeship. It is a sharp and isolating contrast having grown up in London; here she only knows one other Black person in the area.

For Jey it is difficult to articulate the “unbelonging” she feels, but despite loving and thriving in farming and growing, she also strongly feels she is not able to be herself in all farming spaces. The extent to which she feels this is affected by what kind of people are in a group, and if the space is framed as being progressive and anti-oppressive/anti-racist. The demographics matter, and in spaces with older white men, it is less likely that she will speak what is on her mind, whether that is about decolonisation of the workspace, or experiencing menstrual pain.

Jey's Kenyan family homesteads on the land and her father wanted to get away from that and into city life, and is just now getting back into growing (perhaps influenced by Jey). So, given that disconnection to her Kenyan farming heritage, if there has been any knowledge that she has picked up about food growing from her family, it is more from her English family. They are into gardening in “an RHS quite colonial sort of way,” nonetheless this has also been really important for Jey's knowledge building and learning about plants. She resents that a lot of the textbooks that she reads are by white men, and is always seeking alternatives, such as *Farming Whilst Black* by Leah Penniman.

Having periods at work is a huge challenge. Especially if it aligns with big harvest days. She worries about the future, finances, maternity. And has a feeling of being perceived as not fitting in as a farmer and notes that she lacks confidence but is unsure about whether this is just her internal thoughts, or if it is real and related to her Blackness, or her being a woman. This gives her a feeling of being perceived as less competent, despite having a lot of skills and knowledge. It would be good if there was more affirmative praise in her workplace, but that is not the work culture, which is male dominated. She has been able to articulate some of these challenges, and is beginning to see positive changes.

Having a white male partner has been a help whilst working in this industry, in terms of having access to opportunities, networking and also being able to draw from the knowledge he has built in the sector, and he has some earned funds that may go into a land project that they would both work on. At the same time, it's harder to connect on the nuances of being Black in this space, as they don't share the same experiences. Despite having a degree in environmental studies, and extensive volunteering experience, in comparing herself to him, she feels less confident in her ability.

“A lot of people that are in this work grew up on farms or in the countryside or closer to nature in some way. Whereas I did grow something, which I'm really grateful for. But I also had a very urban life, it was mostly just like shopping, and I got my nails done and doing like really, really city things... being really new into this lifestyle, way of things and stuff. And just assuming that everyone else has been doing it forever.”

Early racist experiences, especially in Wales but also other rural areas, have put her off the idea of living in certain areas of the British countryside, despite the fact that there might be really good opportunities for farming there. For example, entering into a shop with her sister and the owner saying, “‘oh, there's some darkies in the shop,’ or an old lady just talking to me, really patronising me and being like, ‘are you all the way from Africa?’ touching my hair.”



Jey is drawn towards more alternative farming spaces, and generally feels reassured that she is less likely to encounter racial ignorance there, however she still finds that even if a space is anti-racist, they can't necessarily control whether there are volunteers coming in with prejudiced views, and this is something that she has had to tolerate in the past.

## Challenges:

- Isolation from other BPOC.
- Casual racism.
- Countering perceptions of her competence.
- Building confidence.

## Support needed:

- Regional BPOC hubs and networks.
- Knowledge on land legislature.
- Would like to grow her presence on social media in order to inspire others, as she has felt inspired and connected to see other BPOC farmers through Instagram.
- All farms should have a policy or code of conduct that make it clear that they are anti-racist, and they should follow this. Everyone should have diversity training.
- The resources LION provides have been valuable, as has the Farming while Black book.
- Having a BPOC presence at the Land Skills Fair was really appreciated, and she would value more opportunities to connect.



# Key is a new-entrant flower farmer and long-term horticulturist

“More communities need access to green spaces, to either grow alongside their communities or create a land-based business. And it's just so difficult for people who are in cities and who may not be able to afford associated costs, like driving far to work or move to the outskirts of town.”

Key (pseud.) is an example of someone who is a very well-qualified and adept farmer, who has had to continually demonstrate her worth in this and related industries. Getting a foot into farming in the UK has been an uphill battle; she has been constantly going in circles to figure out what's available in terms of land, and navigating cliquy networks. She found out about the land she now leases through very niche networks. Her farm is a long commute from her home, and there are restrictions against her building a dwelling on the land.

Key grew up in an agricultural part of the USA – her grandfather was a peanut and tomato farmer. She was encouraged to become a doctor by her parents, but always wanted to do farming, and went back to horticulture. Due to growing up in a single-parent household, there was always a financial pressure. “Definitely growing up, it was a constant worry whether or not we would be able to pay for things... within the culture as well, there's an expectation that you're supposed to be able to support or financially take care of your elders. And so it's trying to balance those obligations that are unspoken.”

As part of a TV series, when Key was working as a horticulturist, she would redesign gardens. “I remember being interviewed about interesting aspects of horticulture and design. And then the show aired, the editors had cut all of those pieces and instead made me look like a migrant worker. Not that there's anything wrong with that. But it was like being typecast for something that I didn't audition for.”

This experience had a long-lasting affect that left Key wondering, “maybe we'll just never be respected in this space. And so maybe I do need to go to medical school in order for people to respect me, and the knowledge and information I've gained through university and practical experience. I think that experience definitely stayed with me for a while. So I think that for me, so much of this is about visibility. For other kids and communities they may not see this as a potential career path, because they have never seen anyone doing it successfully that looks like them.” Key has future plans of providing space for education and traineeships. She notes that in the US, “there was a lot more funding available through US grant programmes and local foundations and trusts. Here in Britain: “it seems like all of those opportunities are through word of mouth, and not always accessible within an open forum or a website.”

Key doesn't feel comfortable selling to the local area. “If I did, I would have to present myself in a very specific way. I feel like I would have to straighten my hair and put makeup on to sell flowers. Whereas I feel like I can just show up as my full self here in London to the florists that I sell to. And there's no pretense and no performing. It's just a very transparent relationship and respectful exchange.”

Key tries to shift action on race and diversity in farming, but doesn't have much success when approaching people in positions of power directly. Instead, “I just have to engage white women as influencers and ask them to speak to specific people in decision-making positions or positions of power, and for some reason, those conversations seem to go a lot further than if I or fellow members of non-white backgrounds are having [the conversations] directly with the same people.”

“I told [them] that they would be the only organisation that did not have a channel for new entry farmers from diverse backgrounds. And that was the one thing, the one talking point that made them change their mind, because they didn't want to be cancelled if that got out... the decision was not reflective of the wider membership... it was rooted in reputational risk!”

## Challenges:

- Finding land.
- Media exploitation.
- Finding the rural area unwelcoming.
- Financing.
- Family expectations.
- Gatekeeping of knowledge and resources within farming communities.
- Business planning.

## Support needed:

- Business training.
- Finance,
- Insurance and legal training.
- Understanding the licensing you need in order to be able to sell certain food products.



# Kiki's farm

"Try to find your tribe. And then just get on with it."

Kiki has a strong interest in agriculture and sustainable, self-sufficient living, and has recently purchased land, upon which she plans to create a homestead for her family, keeping different varieties of goats, growing herbs, vegetables and keeping bees. Kiki is well researched in these areas, and herself and her son have taken various trainings. Whilst she intends to sell surplus, the commercial motivation is only to be financially sustainable, rather than profit-driven: "I don't want to attach my goals to profit and then lose myself in the process."

In general, Kiki finds that the people in rural Wales are generally more open and friendly, with a community focus, compared with living in London. It is therefore more noticeable as a stark contrast when she does encounter hostility. For example, on one occasion Kiki was walking with her sister and children, and some young men shouted racial abuse at them. As the young men drove off though, there were many passersby that stopped to apologise and reprimand the action, which made the experience more of an encouraging one for Kiki.

To avoid altercations, when arranging plans on the phone, "sometimes I will just say things that make it obvious that I'm Black, so that it's like, if there's an issue, let that be clear. Before I waste my time and engage."

Kiki thinks of her role as one of stewardship, more than ownership, but she notes that these two exist in a complex dynamic:

"when you think about stewardship, you think more about who else is affected and how? What impact are you making? What happens after you're gone? What is your personal responsibility? Whereas with ownership, it becomes, what am I entitled to? How is this profitable for me? How can I benefit?"

And so I think stewardship naturally resonates more with me. But I am aware, coming from a minority ethnic background, we often find ourselves more interested in stewardship than ownership. We tend to be more connected with nature and have an attitude that everything is to share, and we want to know: how can we benefit the world? But then that's also an easy way to remain in these situations where we don't have ownership of anything, and so we don't have power, choice or access!

So, it is necessary... I have a responsibility to empower myself making it actually really important to get to grips with ownership! It is a real challenge as well, do you get I mean? Because, well... how do you find that balance?"

## Challenges

- Finances – buying land has created substantial debt, causing difficulty funding working the land.
- Financial and legislative literacy – understanding the processes involved in buying land, for example the legal requirements, differences between commercial and agricultural land, law, property and planning processes.
- Knowing how and where to access grants and payments she may be eligible for.
- Kiki didn't need a driving license or car in London, but now that is needed and she doesn't have either.
- Being perceived as a city girl or outsider

## Support needed

- Kiki would appreciate opportunities to connect with people through in-person events and virtual networking events for BPOC in agriculture.
- Kiki observes that whilst LION might not have the capacity to directly support everyone, they, and similar organisations, can use their visibility, power and network to connect different people that are seeking support: "if we had been able to connect to each other, we could have supported each other."

– Navigating an unfamiliar system.

“I have no idea of how the financial system works and what the expectations are. Legally there are big differences between commercial vs agricultural vs residential so what is appropriate for one maybe illegal for the other and irrelevant for the remaining! I didn't know small – but important – things like you have to have the purchase money in your account for 90 days minimum.

Seemingly so random and confusing.

“So it can be like little stuff like that, like just not knowing not having the knowledge... and I did have quite a few solicitors and conveyancers that told me no, they wouldn't take me on and represent me to buy the land. And so if I had given up, obviously, I wouldn't have the land now. But I just kept on calling different UK firms. And it's funny that I couldn't find someone to represent me because my sister is actually in property and has been for almost ten years. It still took me a really long time to find someone else willing to represent me. So yeah, stuff like that as well.

Obviously, it can be a big deterrent.”





## Kumar makes dosa, from farm to fork

*"I think it has to come from the heart to farm."*

Sivalingum Vasanthakumar (Kumar) has a farm-to-fork dosa business in the southwest of England and, born and raised in Sri Lanka, has always known he wanted to work with farming, but his journey there has been filled with an array of different jobs.

His family is of Indian heritage and went over to work on tea plantations in Sri Lanka when they were still under British rule. His family owned a dairy farm, where he used to help out after school, and it was there he intended to work. However, after he studied agriculture in India, civil war broke out and in 1983 he moved to the UK to study for a Masters degree at Wye College (full time with a part time job as a fireman).

After three years of commercial farming work Kumar went to study IT in the UK and then went to US to work for his friend's IT company in New York, with the idea of saving money and buy a farm upstate NY. But after 9/11, he made his journey back to the UK where he started a tour company (community tourism to India and Sri Lanka) and managed a goat farm.

He bought 20 acres near Oakhampton, Devon – the plan was to rear a flock of sheep and grow the produce for street food. He had to give up livestock farming due to the emotional stress of taking them for slaughter – all 100 sheep went to a sanctuary. Now he has bought six acres from ELC to grow vegetables for supplying his street food business that has been trading in Totnes since 2015. "You're not going to make a million bucks out of it. But it's a good-quality life... I can live a comfortable life. A very simple low-impact life. I think one has to believe in that before going into farming."

Growing produce and turning it into food is something which he has an emotional connection to, and he relishes the opportunity to teach people about the unsustainability of the import/export models we have now. In this manner, people can learn about growing, and understand and be engaged in all levels of the supply chain. Kumar believes that food should be nutritious, locally sourced, free from animal products, affordable and accessible to all.

He has also worked in a project in Birmingham called Astromakers, where ethnic minorities grew tropical vegetables. He really enjoyed this work, which brought many people who might not usually farm or feel they could grow something relevant to them, into farming and growing. He hopes to offer training and apprenticeship on his farm.

When it comes to getting more BPOC into growing, or just generally getting more interested in farming, he sees projects like Astromakers, or even having a food truck, going to schools in

low-income areas and talking about food and where it comes from, as vital projects to heighten understanding and connection with the supply chain. In terms of support, he believes the government should fund more of these projects. He feels that another element is the lack of encouragement and education, and so it would be great to see more organisations like National Farmers Union, ELC and Soil Association, working together and supporting ethnic minorities to get involved with farming. "Farming is difficult, particularly in cold, wet weather, and the desire to farm must come from the heart, but many people come from backgrounds where they know a little bit of farming and they could do great things with some financial and technical support."

One of the things that is clear about Kumar's journey in farming is the role that confidence has played. He gained greater confidence through gaining more experience, spending time working on a larger scale conventional commercial farm, and also from coming from a farming background himself. "I think determination and also working and gaining experience and talking to people [was important]."

Speaking of why he chose to go and get more experience in that setting for three years, after already having a lot of agricultural education and experience, he says, "it gives you confidence when you're put in that situation. And then you can go into anything. You can approach other things easily. I think that those three years of experience working on the commercial dairy at my college was the best. And then I was able to use my own knowledge and farm a bit." ... "Yeah, I think it's determination and I just put my mind into it. And I said: I can do it. Without the confidence I don't think I would have gone and taken up farming myself."

Kumar describes the responsibility he feels to make an effort to integrate. "In farming, I got to know people a lot. And I'm good with people. So I got help from neighbouring farmers. And I can go and talk to them. So I think that is important with especially somebody like me, going into a rural area and farming. And it's very white-dominated farming around. I think it was up to me to integrate with them. And I did that. And then farming became easier. I made the effort to make them comfortable."

Kumar doesn't feel he has had any specific challenges related to race in terms of farming. Farming is, he states, an old boy's network, and he has often received uncomfortable comments. "I mean, when I walk into a market, they all look at me. And then... they look at me and go, 'what is this guy doing?' But I came to know people, and then it was fine."

Kumar's determination and ability to talk to people has won many people over, and he says that someone who had previously made racist comments to him is now a friend; indeed he argues that it was up to him to integrate himself. He is also certain that his confidence and skills in farming made it easier, and showed that he deserved to be there. He discusses the importance of knowing how to talk to people, using as an example a friend who moved in from the city and critiqued another farmer – something he states he might also do, but he would be aware of how to phrase it without causing issues.

## Challenges:

- Despite good agricultural training, he had to learn a lot about land ownership and business planning by trial and error.
- "I needed more help, more knowledge and also to talk to people"

## Support needed:

- More encouragement for young people to go into farming.
- Supporting ethnic minorities to come into farming. "Africans, Asian, they have the knowledge, they can do it... most of them come from farming backgrounds."
- "Institutions working together at a national level: Defra, National Farmers Union, Land Workers Alliance, I don't think they should isolate themselves."
- More financial support from government for innovative projects. "One example I can give is having a food truck. That's a nice way of going into schools, go into a low-income area, and then talk about food, cook with them, show them that one has to eat healthy food to have a good wellbeing, a good healthy lifestyle."

# Mey farms, and advocates for better farming

“You have to take action into your own hands a little bit.”

Mey (pseud.) and her partner run a farm in Dorset. The land is 43 acres and has cows, sheep and orchards. The farm produces juice, and sells meat, sheep skins, jam and other food products. Mey is a licensed butcher and learned how to work a juice press while farming at her community space. She also used to make cheese with her daughters, but since they are all attending university in different places, the cheese production has halted. A couple at the farm runs the market garden. In addition to the farm, Mey does advocacy and campaigning work.

Mey was raised by a Goan father and a white American mother in Louisiana, which was quite backwards. She describes that, “when I was a kid, they still had segregated bathrooms. And I didn't even know if I was supposed to be going to the Black one, or the white one.” Growing up mixed, there was always a lot of uncertainty about where she belonged. It was after spending some time in India and seeing the farming there that she realised it was what she wanted to do. She moved to Essex with her English husband. Having previously worked in international development, they decided they wanted to raise their kids out on farms – farming gave them an opportunity for housing and fresh food, and they were able to have a much higher quality of life with a relatively low income. After working at a community farm, they took out a loan and started their own farm in Dorset in 2003 with one other family.

Mey has found that the racism here is less explicit than in the US, and more polite, but works effectively through institutional systems and channels: for example complaints about planning or health and safety. For example rural British people, “are very concerned about what might lower their property prices. And that idea of difference, whether it's racial, or lifestyle, or socio-economic is somehow seen as a bit of a threat.” When the family were building their own house and were living in caravans, people often treated them poorly because they believed her family to be Roma or travellers, which, she argues, is some of the worst forms of racism happening in the UK. Mey particularly found it challenging in the beginning, being a newcomer, and feeling not feeling very supported, particularly when it came to issues such as making a business plan. Perhaps more traumatic than any racism she has experienced is the poverty they went through, and being treated poorly in this situation.

Now when she participates in farming panels or conducts advocacy work, Mey finds that that she is discredited. These spaces particularly lack any representation of youth or diversity.

She has noticed that people, “feel very threatened by the fact that you're challenging land ownership, you're looking for public access, you want to redistribute... that you want to bring in new entrants into farming from diverse backgrounds – they felt so threatened by it. So they act really quite aggressive sometimes towards what you're trying to say.”

Her partner is white and British, which she thinks helps in terms of cultural bridging sometimes. He is also working class and a carpenter, which means that people relate to him more and it means locals think it makes sense for him to be there, rather than people who are moving in from the city and may not have the skills, but are bringing housing prices up.

In order for new entrants to build viable businesses, she advocates a subsistence business model, “to make these kinds of smaller-scale farming operations work, being partially subsistence and partially commercial is the formula that makes it viable, because actually, you're providing for loads of your needs. So you're providing your own housing a lot of the time, your own firewood, your own food, sometimes your electricity, you know, it just brings your cost of living down a lot. So your income that you're generating through sales of products or commercial products can be at a certain level, but it might be lower than it would be for what they would consider a viable living wage. But because you're matching that with providing for so much of your own subsistence needs, then it's a formula that works.”

Both of her grandparents worked with farming, and she credits that as a big inspiration and a big source of being connected to food. She also believes that there is an issue in the “shame” happening around working on land, and this idea that moving up in the world necessarily means



migrating and having a job with a high income. Mey believes her father would have been much happier working on the land, and instead was living in a foreign and racist country working with IT: “actually, he suffered with a lot of depression, because of that disconnection from his community and his roots.”

Linking different political issues is something Mey is inspired to do by her mother, who was a disability rights activist. She feels a strong connection to the Indian Worker’s Movement, and places importance on the neocolonialism of export import trades with the UK, and the ways in which this replicates extractivism. She has been beginning to get involved with the Asian community around where she lives, for instance meeting someone who would pick up sheep’s feet from her farm to prepare Indian dishes, something he would not otherwise be able to get.

She invites people to her farm, and combines it with an Activist Learning Programme, contextualizing the broader systemic issues of lack of access to food. Generally people underestimate the work, access, money and time that it takes for people and specifically BIPOC to go into land work.

### Challenges:

- Being accepted into the community, building networks, financial struggles, being questioned
- persevering, building up, branching out, becoming a network for other people.

### Support needed:

The farming movement needs to create more support networks and bring more diversity into the farming world.

Mentoring: “had I got that kind of mentoring, I would have been in a much stronger position to have not made as many mistakes.”

– Formalising traineeships: “As a movement, we could really do a lot more to formalise the situation, to make a really clear expectation of wages when it's possible, for work regularly done.”

### Advice:

“I think loads of people who said they want to try and encourage BIPOC people into land work or whatever, underestimate how much support it takes to get anybody into land work. One course or this or that – it's not enough, it's a really long, ongoing process. It takes a lot of time, and it takes a lot of money on all stages of the journey to support that, you know, it's not like you instantly hold workshop, and BIPOC people are there, and then all of a sudden, they're gonna be farmers, you know?”

“I think people are sometimes shy to say, actually, this housing you're offering me is not good enough.”

“There's so many good business people within the Asian diaspora community, who would be amazing farmers, drawing on knowledge and skills from within their family, and then applying this to business skills. I see some moving into running farms and they're so good at it, and supplying products that are really useful. It might be halal meat or a certain kind of cheese, or slaughter-free milk and dairy if they're from a Hindu background, and coming up with great business plans, and really good management skills that I actually see a lot of the kind of English traditional heritage farming community struggling with. And so, I think there's a lot to offer, that brings new energy and connections to consumers.”

# Nina loves farming, but experienced many cultural barriers

“Food and cooking is our way around the language barrier, because my extended family doesn’t speak any English and my Chinese isn’t very good. Whenever I go to China to see them, the time is based around going to market, learning how to prepare dishes, serving it up... growing up that’s how I learned to express love for people and bring people together, you know, it’s a huge part of who I am and the way I relate to other people.”

For Nina (pseud.), food is the primary way of connecting with family and heritage in China, but it was only recently, since working in the food supply chain, that she began to see the importance of creating better farming practices in the UK.

Past experiences of overt racism and a culture of microaggressions encountered in multiple farms in rural areas left Nina disillusioned with rural farms and, “nearly stopped me from working in this sector,” and she now does a paid traineeship in a peri-urban farm.

Nina motivations are political, centered around community and building resilience and food sovereignty. “I just think [food growing skills are] something that we don’t have enough of now. And I want to be there when it’s needed.” She describes conflicting feelings around her identity as a racialised person. “I think because I grew up in a big city with lots of diversity and I was around a lot of Asian people growing up and also come from a pretty privileged background, I was somewhat protected from racism. This is why I used to be uncomfortable thinking of myself as a person of colour – it made me feel like a poser and it still sometimes does.”

She explains the cultural barriers she has encountered, and how she perceives that as an area that needs a lot more focus, whereas she has noticed that a lot of attempts to improve access to farming for BPOC have focused on the socio-economic barriers. She gave examples of places where she volunteered, where there was a culture of acceptance around casual everyday racism. Nina’s experiences of racism included overt racist mockery and derogatory comments, and a persistence of microaggressions. What was particularly difficult to her was that there were usually witnesses and bystanders that left such instances completely unchallenged, and in many instances even defended the racist behaviour. In some instances the racism was directed towards her, and in others it was not; initially she made attempts to challenge the behaviour regardless, but at some point that also became exhausting.

“Personally I think, when you have lots of people coming together from different walks of life, you’re going to have microaggressions from time to time. People say stupid things, it’s inevitable. It’s not about that. It’s about how the people around you react to it. When all this racist stuff was said, if others called it out and supported me, I might not even remember it now. It was the indifference and even defensiveness from other volunteers that really stung.” When there is no procedure for reporting such incidences, it can create an unwelcoming work culture.

Because of these experiences, Nina is skeptical of shallow approaches to increasing diversity by increasing the number of BPOC in the sector. “Someone could say, ‘okay, we want to see more BIPOC farmers so we’re going to set up BIPOC-specific jobs on farms across the UK’... if someone did that, yes they’d be creating opportunities addressing socio-economic barriers to farming, and ok you’d be giving BIPOC skills but at the cost of making them work in unwelcoming, potentially traumatising environments. There’s still a cultural barrier there, because in my experience, many UK farms are still deeply, exclusively white spaces.”

“I just think there’s a tendency to focus on things that are easy to quantify, right? The socio-economic stuff is easier to measure, like, ‘there are X number of paid opportunities in the sector, X number of them went to BIPOC,’ you know, stuff that’s easy to show on a graph in a report. Obviously these factors are still really important, but they’re not the whole picture, you can’t just ignore the cultural stuff which is harder to measure.”

Thankfully Nina is now in a traineeship that she enjoys, where they support creating a good work culture, for example by creating a safe space agreement. Working on a peri-urban farm allows her to continue living close to a city. However she notes that, “it really had an impact on my

mental health... I don't know if I could deal with living in rural Britain. Because it's just so unwelcoming... the main thing is, if it's unwelcoming for me, with my fair skin, my BBC accent and all my privilege, if it's unwelcoming for me, it's bad. Right?"

### Challenges:

- Microaggressions and challenging work culture, in particular on rural farms.
- Isolation.

### Support needed:

- Opportunities to talk with others that might have had similar experiences.
- Opportunities to connect with BPOC that might be further progressed.
- Training for organisations and farms on how to create and support culturally diverse environments.
- Whilst making more land accessible and providing more opportunities for BPOC to gain training in agricultural and horticultural skills is important, it must also come with training for organisations to shift their work culture, so that those BPOC are not arriving into potentially harmful environments.

# Rey is a beekeeper, an orchard steward and woodland manager

“If I've planted some fruit and veg, or just veg, and then I'm able to feed a family. I've done some good work, it's good work. You're doing good. Working at a computer all day...– it pays well, but it's not necessarily good work... it might not benefit everyone. But producing fruit and veg or growing a tree helps everyone. There's no disadvantages of that. You've helped the insects, you've helped the bugs, you've helped the neighbour, you've helped yourself.”

Rey (pseud.) feels like he often has to prove himself, and being of Asian heritage he is always careful to do things by the book and according to regulation, for example: “I needed a felling license to cut down some of the trees at the woods, as part of the thinning process. The trees that are weaker or damaged trees are removed, making space for some of the existing trees to grow outward... It's just an additional piece of paperwork. But I definitely want to make sure I've got the paperwork and all the i's are dotted, all the t's crossed. I don't want to be the one Asian person who's doing it, and then does something wrong. And then some person or the media, saying, “oh, this Asian guy did this wrong, damaged the environment”.

He has always wanted to pursue an environmental career, however due to family pressures, he instead followed the route of working in IT, and pursuing his environmental interest as something separate from his financial income. This frees him up to be very attentive to doing what is best for the land and wildlife whilst beekeeping, managing his orchard and growing vegetables, rather than pursuing profit. When he had a hiatus some years ago, he tried applying for green jobs, but wasn't able to find any jobs and so he continues to work in the city to support his family. After planting and managing an orchard for x years, Rey is now being evicted from that site because of the HS2 development. Even though he had been able to buy a different plot, and is now developing an orchard there, it's hard to see all the work he and his family have put in go to waste.

As one of few Asian beekeepers he also feels a responsibility to promote it to others that might need a positive example to pursue that career, or hobby. There are very few other ethnic minorities, and it can be difficult to connect with those that are there. “When I started beekeeping 15 years ago, I was the only Asian guy... there are very few ethnic minorities. I am seeing a rise in that number. And especially when I go to some of the conventions, there is a rise. Yeah, I almost want to wave and say hello. Or sometimes some new beekeepers may look at you with some hesitation. Oh, who's this new guy? ...but there's a hesitancy there on their side as well.”

He'd noticed at conferences that, “generally I get to the lecture ahead of schedule, I'll sit on a bench, and that bench will be the last one to fill up. All the other benches will be filled; when no seats are available they will come to my bench. I should film it! Unless I know them... it's almost like a last resort to come and sit next to the Asian guy... What does that feel like? Disheartening, sometimes it is disheartening, but it doesn't bother me, it means I've got more space.” He usually perseveres to get to know people despite this because, “they're more than happy to talk to you but they just won't come and sit next to you straight away. I have to start the conversation. It does happen.”

“I've seen in Birmingham and Leicester and in London, there are loads of Asian people with allotments and stuff. Yeah, they grow everything from Asian vegetables to potatoes, or flowers.

You know, it's pretty normal. It's just when it's on a bigger scale, they think, ‘oh, that's a bit weird.’”

“I'm actually amazed at how this country does it. So for example, because of the royalty and aristocracy there's very little tax on it. I don't think you're taxed at all on smaller pieces of land. Because I have no water supply or electric there's no tax on it. I paid the initial one-off fee. I don't pay no council tax or anything like that. There're no other charges. In other countries it's different.”

Rey notes the subsidies for landowners: "there's so many subsidies as well. You know, like, I want to put a bat box up in my woods – if I want to do that my garden, no one's gonna pay me. Whereas if you own some land, yeah, they'll help you to do that. Yeah, there aren't many Black or Asian farmers in this country. Maybe when there are more, maybe some of the subsidies will disappear. But I do feel that because of the royal family and the aristocracy in this country, they get a good deal."...."I'm actually amazed at how this country does it. So for example, because of the royalty and aristocracy there's very little tax on it. I don't think you're taxed at all on smaller pieces of land. Because I have no water supply or electric there's no tax on it. I paid the initial one-off fee. I don't pay no council tax or anything like that. There're no other charges. In other countries it's different."

"There's a vested interest in British farming because it's held by so few people. It's difficult to get the equity out. And these days everything is in large scale, small scale guys are mostly looked down upon and frowned upon."

Rey wants to see more BPOC in farming:

"In some industries like IT, media and the medical field where I see that they've bought more Asian or Black people, or just different minorities, I see those areas that have grown. We bring new ideas, new concepts, even ways of doing things. It's a different way of thinking. I think there should be more minorities in farming. The mix reflects modern society as well. It's the right thing to do."

### Challenges:

- Isolation.
- Finding work in the environmental sector.
- Having to prove himself.

### Support needed:

– Network building: "I do hope this builds a network. I don't know if there's a network there – I don't see it. If there is a network, I've not been caught by it. And maybe this is where I'm being introduced to it. But if there was a network when I started, it may have helped me. It would have been useful."

– He wants such a network to be an integrated thing, where race doesn't matter. "I wouldn't want it just to be an ethnic minority network. I would want it as an inclusive network, where we all work together. I think we should all be working together on the land and building a better... a better everything. Yeah, it shouldn't just be an ethnic minority thing. It should be an inclusive one and it's important because I'm not saying they should be quotas or anything like that. But if I go to a wedding, and I'm the only Asian person there, there's something wrong at that party. There should be more other people there."



# The Radwans have built a successful farm through experimentation

“Because of our ethnicity we know we're being watched and held to a higher level of scrutiny than others. Of course people should behave well regardless, but we have a little extra pressure and if we put a foot out line someone will probably complain about us, but saying that we're not constantly looking over our shoulders to behave a certain way.”

The Radwan family have owned and managed a farm in Oxfordshire for more than twenty years. I spoke to Lutfi and two of his sons, Khalil and Adam Radwan. Lutfi and his wife Ruby were motivated primarily by wanting to get out of academia and development work; they no longer wanted to be part of training the next round of UN ambassadors to contribute to upholding a failing system. What they could do on a small scale in their local environs was more significant to them than what they could achieve working with global organisations on environmental projects in places like rural Egypt and sub saharan Africa.

Lutfi Radwan was troubled by the animal production industry, and after at first going vegetarian, didn't think that was the solution either. They started with raising chickens for eggs, and expanded from there, and they now have a rotation of around 1500 birds, along with other animals and some vegetables. Doing everything on a smaller scale allows them to take good care and keep things natural and ethical – which is known as Tayibb in Islam. Their children and even grandchildren are involved in the running of the farm, to greater or lesser extents.

The strong family connection and the moral guide provided through Islam has enabled a great resilience to any racial prejudice they've encountered. They are strongly motivated to support local and wider communities: for example they run volunteer days for those with mental differences. They experiment with progressive land practices, which they have showcased by opening up the farm for educational visits, which they specifically prioritize for ethnic minorities.

Since they've lived in rural Oxfordshire they have received different reactions from the local community. There are some neighbours who have complained with racist remarks on their planning applications for simple farm infrastructure saying, “it's like they're running an immigration centre up there.”

Lutfi explains how the everyday comments and ignorance around Islamic culture can be exhausting: “it's laborious and a little agonizing to have to constantly explain what halal means and what it doesn't mean. There are a lot of misconceptions. A lot of Sun readers think that halal meat is unethical. A lot of Muslims also think that halal meat is better quality. It should be if the ethics are observed but in reality, the meat often comes from the same abattoirs and farms, and is mostly farmed in the same unethical and environmentally destructive ways.”

When we spoke about belonging in the countryside and racial challenges, sons Khalil and Adam offered nuanced thoughts and feelings, again highlighting the resilient “get on with it” attitude that characterises the family's approach to farming. Adam says, “there's no one saying – well, sometimes you do get people suddenly saying you don't belong – but to like, to me personally, not really. But then everything that you see around you, your brain is probably making assumptions based on [the idea that you don't belong].”

They are used to tolerating microaggressions, both directed to them and other BPOC around them. Speaking of a young Black local girl: “they were riding the pony down the lane and our neighbour, who made a comment that I think she thought was nice and positive said, ‘oh, I feel like I'm in a different country.’ Right. Which, of course, that's a very racist thing to say, because it's sort of implying ‘you don't belong here. And having you here, it's nice. It's nice to have you here. But you don't really belong here.’”

The family's heritage includes Turkish–Egyptian, Pakistani and white British. Adam reflects upon this mixed identity. “For me, it's basically confusing, I don't really know what my heritage is, or the parts that I do... the Pakistani side... I'm not really fully connected to that. I've never been to Pakistan. ...the sort of English or British which I do feel more connected to... In a way because that's to do with actually being here, the place, the kind of landscape that you know, the nature the animals that we look after.”

Lutfi points to the old boys' club: "Your average white farmer is quite privileged, usually male, often a landowner or even if he's a working-class farmer, he's going to have access to a historic tenancy, and is going to get access to land because he's in that community. It is so much harder for people of colour to break in to farming."

## Challenges

- Encountering misconceptions.
- Resistance and opposition in planning applications.
- When hosting other ethnic minorities, they are sometimes made to feel unwelcome on local public rights of way.
- There is not enough government support for small-scale, ethical, ecological farmers.

"So we've had 20 years of our neighbours complaining and writing letters to council. But when – they never get anywhere with it, you just drown out his white noise, we just get on with what we're gonna do... It's just a bit sad, sad and a bit disappointing and bit embarrassing for them."

Khalil

"There's a saying from the Prophet (pbuh) that if you're on the last day, if you find yourself on the last day and you have a seed in your hand, you should plant it. So it's sort of the epitome of pointlessness on one level. But it's not really, because the struggle was never about winning and saving the world. It is about doing the right thing with the tools you have."

Lutfi



# Sarah centres racial justice in her community herb garden

*“I am a Black woman leading the garden in a very white space”*

Sarah (pseud.) now finds herself heading a community herb garden, and has developed a community hub with a CIC. She has been running the garden for the past year, and just now, having passed through all the seasons, is beginning to feel settled into the space.

It is also a transitional and unclear time, in that she was previously on a professional career track in climate policy and development work. This feels like somewhat of a deviation, but one that she loves.

The community medicinal herb garden is a space where people can come to learn how to grow their own medicines through workshops, and also purchase medicines on a sliding scale. The paid workshops support the mission of the CIC, to make these medicines and the space more available to racialized groups, that generally have less access to such spaces and to nature in the UK. “We’re just trying to work with nature as much as we can.” Sarah has developed a business plan, and has undergone social entrepreneurship training.

Growing up in London relatively poor, she did not have early experiences of walking out in the hills, and marvels at how normal it is in Devon for kids and teenagers to take their canoes out on the sea on the weekends. It was when she was doing research work for her Masters in Kenya that she encountered many women who were very skilled growers and herbalists, and she longed to rekindle these practices for herself.

Her mother was involved in community activist work, for example organising days out for refugee kids, and she would always go along. “It’s kind of funny, I’m doing a similar thing now.”

Sarah recognizes the importance of representation. She doesn’t know any people of colour in the southwest who own land, except Kumar. When there are people from different backgrounds curating a space, they are inherently more likely to programme a diverse range of people – she noticed this when helping to organise a festival in the local town with a POC friend.

Sometimes Sarah feels that she plays the politics of the CIC a little softly. She works with two white women who are very supportive. Nonetheless she hesitates about being more clear and concrete about the aims of the garden in terms of anti-racist liberation. Is this because of not having the language to talk about it with colleagues? A fear of making people uncomfortable? Maybe it is more to do with an external gaze? She questions how it might be to have only POC leading sessions and working there.

Living in a rural area she had become used to lots of comments which she doesn’t necessarily identify as racism, just comments that make clear she is perceived with difference. “You just get used to it. So it’s really hard to put a finger on things like that.”

She takes creative approaches to balancing childcare with the garden work: “we have like a little village mentality. And we all have to take care of each other’s kids. So some moms want to just garden and we can watch them little ones for them.”

Sarah has a desire to connect with other POC rural projects: “I know of a lot of projects in London, and I’ve got projects and people I can connect to in London, but then there’s things and experiences that I have that are completely different. And so to be able to connect to other people would be nice.”

## Challenges:

- Isolation.
- Maintaining political mission.
- Balancing child-rearing with growing.
- Microaggressions.
- Balancing life, work, family, income.

## Support needed:

- Unrestricted grant money that can help with balancing work and childcare.
- Connecting and networking with similar projects in rural areas.



# Zey cultivates mushrooms in Wales

*"It's hard, but it's something that we love. It's that thing where it doesn't feel like work."*

Zey (pseud.) works on a farm and has a mushroom cultivation business in Wales. They live on land in rural Wales, where they also grow vegetables and intend to apply for a One Planet Development. Their practices are low impact and centred around nature restoration, for example they have allowed some of the land to return to rough grassland, whilst observing an influx of wildlife.

The aim is to get half of their income from mushroom cultivation, and half from other farm work or gardening work that they do with their partner. Zey and their partner's mushroom-growing business was continuing to grow, but has now slowed due to Zey contracting long Covid in 2020. Since then, the land where they live has been a part of Zey's healing, and spending time in their garden (where they grow veg and keep ducks for self-sufficiency) has been important for Zey. Nonetheless, they have a complex relationship with the countryside, experiencing hostility, "casual everyday racism" and microaggressions from white inhabitants. These experiences are especially triggering for Zey, due to repeated experiences of racial abuse during their childhood, teens and whilst at university.

*"I stand out because it's a predominantly white area, and I often feel I'm often condescended to. Called stuff like boy."*

Zey grew up in London, and they and their partner were working there until they decide to pursue farming. They both had been learning about food growing, and experimenting in their small back garden, and were motivated to learn more through extensive volunteering, whilst travelling in Chile and also in the UK. This is how they gained most of their experience, and also through books, podcasts and YouTube. The way they felt about the different places they lived and volunteered varied. In some instances they had a good relationship with the farm managers and learned a lot. In other places they found they were repeatedly given the most menial tasks, learned very little and ended up feeling exploited.

They feel otherized and unwelcome in rural Wales and have experience physical aggression in a pub, along with more regular microaggressions in the farm yard, farm supplies shop, local footpaths and pharmacy. "I just have experiences where I know that people are like, 'who the fuck are you and what are you doing here,' and yeah, that could feel really uncomfortable at times and also really isolating because I don't have people who might understand to talk to about it." On multiple occasions people have remarked that they must have proximity to drug cartels, due to being Colombian. On taking a shortcut through a hedge on the property where they live they bumped into a white woman, "it felt like an interrogation and that like she was probably not that many steps away from calling police."

Generally in these interactions Zey does not confront the perpetrator, due to the cost that might have on their own mental health. "I sort of just shut off, go blank, do the bare minimum to get through the conversation... I guess I feel afraid [we'll be] getting a reputation in a very small way. I don't have the strength... I don't often feel equipped to manage what an escalated situation could be like."

A fear of having to react in this disingenuous way sometimes stops Zey from going out and doing things on their own: they might rather send their partner, who is white, to run errands, or go with her. "I suppose when we think about the racism experienced in suburbia and the city and stuff, I suppose the frequency here is like, I don't know, the same or more, but it's easy to see it as less because I have fewer interactions with people. I don't know if that makes sense. But there's definitely a feeling of not being from here. And people are curious in a way that doesn't always feel friendly, it feels racist a bunch of the time."

Zey thinks that there are interconnections between the ways in which farming culture can be inaccessible for BPOC, and providing barriers to disabled people and different genders. It is important for farm managers to create a culture of care, where various challenges are discussed, and workers' mental health is taken seriously.

"So whilst I see this piece of land, as my space of healing for sure, in a way that I've never experienced in my life before, I still have reminders... So I've got this thing where the land itself is, on the whole, a safe space. But with intrusions. And then the wider community. I have very, very,

very good, strong close network of friends. A lot of them don't understand what it's like to be my skin tone and have my heritage whilst living."

### Challenges:

- Racial aggression.
- Financial challenges.
- Health and disability.
- Trauma healing.
- Isolation, as Zey does not know other BPOC people in the area to talk to about their experiences.
- Access to land.
- Feeling otherized.

"To speak more plainly, there is a very middle, upper-middle class white narrative around the back to the land movement. We bought into it, to be honest, and I guess if we hadn't, then we probably wouldn't have risked coming out and bumbled our way into where we are now. But I feel naive for what I believed. And I wish there was better information, but then that's also just really the depressing information that it is super expensive. And land is super expensive."

### Support needed:

- Finance
- Connection with BPOC landworkers.
- Support through ill health.



## Photo credits

Hoeing in the polytunnel: Anon

Image of Cel Robertson: Salsabil Morrison Photography

Willow baskets: Instagram @dea.styx\_and\_stone.willow

Mushroom face; mushroom hands: Emma Stevens

Lutfi and Ruby Radwan: Instagram @Willowbrookfarmers

Kumar with sheep: Farm Sanctuary video

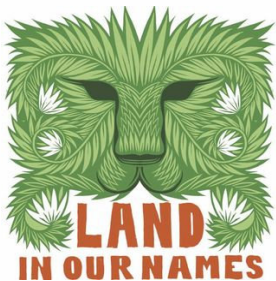
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