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“Land Was One of the Greatest Gifts”

Women’s Landownership in Dakota Indian, Immigrant Scandinavian, and African American Communities

KAREN V. HANSEN, GREY OSTERUD, AND VALERIE GRIM

Abstract: In rural societies, equity in land is key to women’s position, much as wage labor is in urban, industrial society. Access to productive property is especially important to women in marginalized, subjugated, or newly arrived racial-ethnic groups. The ownership of land shapes the resources that women and men can differentially obtain, control, and utilize. Native American, African American, and immigrant women obtained land in a variety of ways: allotment, purchase, homesteading, and inheritance. Ownership enabled them to cultivate land to support the family, rent it out for income, and exercise the leverage it provided them throughout their lives. Using cases spanning the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, we explore landholding from the perspectives of Dakota and Scandinavian immigrant women on the Northern Plains and African American women in the South. Through careful attention to what women made of the land they owned, we can better understand gender and power in a settler colonialist society.

In an oral history interview with Karen V. Hansen, Spirit Lake Dakota tribal member Eunice Davidson relayed the perspective of her grandmother: “She always made that remark that the land was one of the greatest gifts. That’s

what it was to her, a gift, she said.” It was her livelihood, a basis for her culture, and a place for worship—as well as the source of conflict with white settlers.¹

In an agricultural economy, land was *the* means of production. It was far more than a commodity to purchase or an investment that yielded dividends; it was a flexible resource as well as a place to live and work. The self-directed nature of rural women’s work—the ability to turn their time and energies to whatever tasks seemed most important in their current circumstances—made land even more valuable. Many farm women combined income-producing labor with childrearing, rather than paying for child care out of their earnings as women with off-farm jobs had to do. In our investigation, these characteristics are based on the fusion of landownership with

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labor. We seek to incorporate the value of land-owning into the analysis of gender and racial-ethnic inequalities.

Throughout American history, landownership has provided individuals and groups with crucial resources and a measure of power, and its denial has both impoverished and disfranchised them. Until the mid-twentieth century, landholding was central to Americans' claims to autonomy and citizenship. From the beginnings of settler colonialism, European immigrants and their descendants continuously expropriated land from Native Americans. After the American Revolution, white male property owners enjoyed the economic independence that qualified them for active participation in the market and the polity. During Reconstruction, African Americans' claims of entitlement to the land on which they and their forebears had toiled were rejected by the state. In the farmers' and tenants' movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, rural producers organized to control the transportation, processing, and marketing of their crops and to make the state advance economic democracy; their defeat marked the triumph of capitalist social relations. Historically, for both US-born and immigrant groups, land signified wealth and conferred power; for marginalized racial-ethnic groups, it also translated into citizenship and safety.²

In this article we investigate the significance of women's control over and ownership of land within excluded, subordinated, and disfranchised racial-ethnic groups. Women who owned land independently could manage their resources as they chose and control the proceeds of their labor. Those who held land jointly with their husbands, brothers, or sons exercised the prerogatives as well as the responsibilities of propertied workers, but kin rela-

tionships were always subject to negotiation. Jointly owned assets, such as credit and wealth, have profoundly different meanings and consequences for women than resources they hold in their own name.³ In all three groups, men did not automatically enjoy the privileges of white male citizenship and thus could not exercise the patriarchal power that property ownership and control over their "dependent" wives were assumed to grant them. Yet women enjoyed somewhat more autonomy than those in more privileged groups. Their labor held greater political-economic significance than it did among the dominant classes of whites. The key question we investigate is, What did access to and ownership of land mean to women in these distinct racial-ethnic groups?

Women's Landownership and Settler Colonialism

Previous scholarship on America's dominant settler colonial society has tended to emphasize the systematic exclusion of women from the ownership and control of property that resulted from patrilineal cultural patterns and married women's legal coverture. Daughters were usually given "movables" rather than real estate when they married and after the death of their father; if they did inherit real property, it was rarely more than half the amount given to their brothers. Even women who brought land to a marriage could not exercise direct control over it themselves.⁴ Such reasoning suggests that there is little more to say on the matter once we acknowledge gender inequality. But jumping to that conclusion means leaping over countervailing evidence from outside the dominant racial caste and socioeconomic class.

In "Settler Colonialism as Structure," Evelyn Nakano Glenn offers a comprehensive "frame-

work for comparative studies of U.S. race and gender formation.”⁵ Settler colonialism involved establishing control over resources, removing indigenous peoples, occupying the continent, and setting up “an exclusionary, private property regime and coercive labor systems” in the state and political economy (52). This framework was designed to encompass the “specific racisms and sexism affecting different racialized groups” (52), including Native Americans and African Americans, and to be “amenable to intersectional understanding” of the mutually constitutive character of race and gender (55). Glenn admits, however, that as it was initially laid out the framework told us more about race than about gender (69), beyond the fundamental fact that settler colonial society was founded on the migration of families and the formation of communities and their reproduction across time and space. But what, concretely, did that mean for the women in subordinated and marginalized racial groups and their relationships with the settler colonial state and political economy? Glenn recognized that settler colonialism “had different effects on men and women from subjugated groups” (69) but developed this point mainly through discrete examples rather than comparative analysis. Moreover, it is worth noting that the article has little to say about African Americans during the century between the end of enslavement and the current regime of urban ghettos and mass incarceration.

In an effort to apply Glenn’s framework and extend her comparative analysis, we present three case studies of gender relations within racial-ethnic groups that stood in different relationships to the settler colonial state and political economy during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: Native Americans during and after the process of allotment,

which turned tribal lands into private property; settler colonists who were immigrants rather than US-born persons of US-born parentage; and African American tenants who became landowners. What did access to and ownership of land mean to women in these distinct racial-ethnic groups? In groups that were undergoing continuous expropriation of their land and exploitation of their labor, as well as among recent immigrants whose foothold in the United States was still tenuous, women’s landownership was especially important, both for themselves and in their communities.

The inclusion of southern African American women in this conversation is especially useful because their experiences illuminate the great difficulties that existed for women of color who, with their husbands, struggled to become landowners. Yet, against tremendous oppression and intimidation, many African Americans persisted in the effort to acquire land because they knew it was the key resource they needed to provide for and protect women and children, especially in a region of the country where norms associated with racism, Jim Crow, and segregation were designed to make Black people believe that self-empowerment and self-sufficiency were impossible.

Rural women’s access to and control over land is strikingly absent from current models of the intersecting determinants of gender relations. Feminist scholars have paid most attention to the division of labor, job segregation, and wage disparities in workplaces and the devaluation of unpaid caregiving work within households.⁶ While the gendered division of labor shapes the valuation of women’s work and strengthens or undermines women’s position in their families, their relationship to productive property is equally fundamental. Women’s ownership of or exclusion from pro-

ductive property has been structured by law as well as custom and varied among racial-ethnic groups.⁷

The sole comprehensive analysis of women as agricultural landowners in the United States, coauthored by Anne Effland, Denise Rogers, and Valerie Grim, set out to discover how women came to own land and with what effect, since these matters have seldom been assessed.⁸ In comparing ownership rates between men and women among various racial-ethnic groups and across regions over the twentieth century, these researchers found “indications that women have controlled surprisingly large amounts of agricultural land” (236), although national data on landownership has been collected, compiled, and analyzed in ways that conceal female ownership. Part of the problem arose from the gender biases that pervaded the legal system. As Joan Younger put it, “land that is jointly owned by a man and a woman has been, until recent years, the property of the man.”⁹

Drawing on a variety of local and regional studies that allowed them to differentiate between female and male farmland owners, Effland, Rogers, and Grim found that women owned more land in the late twentieth century than they had earlier. A national assessment in 1946 revealed that men owned 91 percent of land and women 9 percent; by 1988, women constituted between 11 and 21 percent of agricultural landowners depending on the region, with more women owners in the South and Midwest (246). Women consistently owned smaller parcels than men (245). Women were more likely than men to have acquired their land through inheritance and were, on average, older than male landowners (247). Women have rented their land to others more often than male landowners and been more dependent on the income it yielded (249). Effland,

Rogers, and Grim’s close examination of the quantitative evidence combined with their interviews with women landowners suggests that most women regarded land as a resource to be kept in the family, although how they acquired and used it has varied markedly.

Here we explore the significance of women’s ownership of land and the intersections of gender with racial-ethnic stratification. Did landownership shape the life choices that were open to women, as it did for men? Could women translate land into bargaining power, decision-making leverage, and old-age security? Did women who held land command respect and participate actively in politics? Could landownership help to protect women who belonged to vulnerable racial-ethnic groups? Providing definitive answers to these big questions would require comprehensive and systematically comparative research on women’s varied and changing relationships to land in different racial-ethnic groups. Using an intersectional lens, we compare three case studies that, despite the fact that they were undertaken independently, when considered together shed light on key dimensions of women’s landownership in excluded, subordinated, and marginalized racial-ethnic groups.

Overview of the Case Studies

In this article, we consider Dakota and Scandinavian immigrant women on the Spirit Lake Dakota Indian reservation in northeastern North Dakota, whom sociologist Karen V. Hansen studied, and African American women on Brooks Farm in the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta, the subject of historian Valerie Grim’s research. While this African American landowning community is located in the South, its history exhibits patterns of Black



Fig. 1. Map of Devils Lake Region. The Spirit Lake Dakota Indian Reservation at the center is bounded by Devils Lake to the north and the Sheyenne River to the south. Map drawn by David Deis. Used by permission of Karen V. Hansen.

community formation that also existed on the Great Plains. Our discovery of the powerful themes of economic independence, cultural autonomy, and political participation in the lives of women in all three groups inspired us to bring our cases together.¹⁰

We each carried out long-term, multi-method research projects that utilized local and regional land records, the federal manuscript censuses of population and agriculture, and extensive oral histories. For the Spirit Lake Reservation and for Brooks Farm, Hansen and Grim developed quantitative data bases of landownership, reconstituted family histories, and compiled economic histories of individual

farms.¹¹ To complement these quantitative analyses, we collected personal narratives through oral histories, individual and family memoirs, and local histories.

The Spirit Lake Dakota Indian Reservation forms the heart of Hansen’s study of coexistence between Native Americans and Scandinavian immigrants. Focusing on the period from 1900 to 1930, when whites were allowed to homestead on the reservation, Hansen conducted 35 oral history interviews and analyzed another 100 oral histories collected by both state-sponsored and Native American projects. Roughly equal numbers of interviews were with men and with women; Indians, Scandinavians, and members



Source: Economic Research Service, USDA.

Fig. 2. Location of Brooks Farm community. The Brooks Farm community encompasses 4,000 acres of farmland in the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta region of Mississippi. Source: Economic Research Service, USDA.

of other immigrant and US-born groups were all represented.

The social history of the Black community in the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta, which was founded during the 1920s, has been reconstructed by Valerie Grim, a historian and advocate for Black farmers who is also a daughter of Brooks Farm.¹² Most of the families who bought land

there were linked by kinship, friendship, and religious affiliation. Grim has interviewed forty women who live at Brooks Farm or were born there and retain close ties with the community.

In analyzing these case studies, we examine the differing, often multiple paths that women took to landownership (see Table 1.) Native American women had long enjoyed access

Table 1. Women’s Paths to Landownership

	<i>African Americans</i>	<i>Dakota Sioux</i>	<i>Scandinavians</i>
Allotment		X	
Homesteading	X	X	X
Purchase	X	X	X
Inheritance	X	X	X
Marriage	X	X	X
Widowhood	X	X	X

to land that was owned collectively by their people, but their historic land base had been sharply restricted by their confinement to reservations. After the US government decided to dissolve communal landholding in favor of private property, women were allotted land as individuals and inherited it from kin. The non-Native people who initially took land on the reservation were homesteaders, many of them first- and second-generation Scandinavian immigrants. Single adult women could claim homesteads of their own, while single and married women could inherit land from their parents and widows could inherit land from their husbands. Women, single or married, could also purchase land on the open market, acquiring public land on or off reservations, buying it from Native allottees, or bidding for “dead Indian land.”¹³

The families at Brooks Farm, like those in other autonomous Black landowning communities, defied the exclusion from landownership that was fundamental to the subordination of African Americans after Reconstruction.¹⁴ Women and men at Brooks Farm purchased land jointly, largely through their years of shared labor on the land. Women also inherited land from their parents and husbands and held onto it for their descendants. Differing paths to

landownership shaped its meanings, uses, and potential to confer power on individuals and communities.

Dakotas on the Northern Plains

The Native Americans who lived on the reservation at Spirit Lake were descended from indigenous peoples who had inhabited not only this region but also the area that became Minnesota. After the US-Dakota War of 1862, survivors sought refuge in Dakota Territory and Canada. Members of the Siouan-speaking Sisseton, Wahpeton, and Ihanktonwanna (“Cut-Head” or Yanktonai) bands negotiated a treaty in 1867 at Fort Totten, which established the approximately 240,000-acre reservation that became home to the next generation.

In 1887, with passage of the General Land Allotment Act, commonly known as the Dawes Act, Congress intended to incorporate American Indians into the dominant political economy by granting privately owned property—allotments—to individuals. The law allotted tribal members parcels of land on reservations that had formerly belonged to their tribe as a whole. Informed by an idealization of the yeoman farmer and a desire to take more Indian land, the Dawes Act was based on the presumption that enabling individual Indians to own 160-acre plots, instead of sharing the vast acreages owned collectively by their nation, would encourage them to develop farms, learn the logic of private property, and assimilate into the agricultural economy and US culture.¹⁵

The federal land legislation sought to transform the gendered division of labor. Historically, Dakota women had cultivated large gardens; now men were to become farmers while women were supposed to become their domestic helpmeets.¹⁶

Despite the dominant society's model of women's subordination, women were included as landowners in the division of tribal land which began in 1890 at Spirit Lake. The Dawes Act mandated that each man or woman who headed a household be allotted 160 acres. Married and single Dakota women were also allotted land but received only half the amount allotted to men. Children, like adult women, were allotted eighty acres. As landowners, women were able to play a central role in the defense of their culture in the wake of their massive late nineteenth-century dispossession. They had the resources to feed their families, and they had sufficient standing in their personal, kinship, and community networks to participate in vital political struggles.

In recognition of Indians' lack of familiarity with private property ownership, the Dawes Act stipulated that the allotted land be held in trust by the US government for twenty-five years. Thereafter the allottee was to obtain the patent—the legal title—to the land. The trust status of the land stemmed from a paternalistic policy intended to prevent land-hungry whites from defrauding Indians while they adjusted to market-oriented agriculture. Indians whose land was held in trust did not enjoy the same privileges and responsibilities as non-Indian landowners. For example, allottees could not take out a mortgage on their property. Nor could they sell it. First, they had to petition for the patent to the land and prove their fitness, or “competence,” to act independently. Importantly, most tribal members were not US citizens with full rights and responsibilities.¹⁷

A second stage outlined by the Dawes Act mandated that the US government negotiate an agreement with each tribe that opened unallotted reservation land, deemed “surplus land,” to white homesteading.¹⁸ At Spirit Lake the tribe

made this agreement in 1901, and 100,000 acres became available to homesteaders starting in 1904. Reservation land not allotted to Indians was claimed by the US as “restored” public land. Not only were white settlers able to homestead, but later they were able to commute their claims. By paying cash directly to the US government they received a patent on it.¹⁹

In 1910, when Spirit Lake was first platted, the Dakota were the largest group of landowners on the reservation. Significantly, 38 percent of Dakota landowners were women.²⁰ The growing scholarship on indigenous landownership tends to neglect gender, making this documentation of the gendered distribution of land especially valuable, although difficult to compare with other reservations.²¹ Dakota women's rate of landholding at Spirit Lake is astonishingly high in comparison to that of non-Indian women. In her study of homesteading in North Dakota, Elaine Lindgren found that women claimed between 5 and 20 percent of homesteads in the townships she sampled.²² A 1920 study of farms rented to tenants found that only 8 percent of the owners of North Dakota farms were women and the regional average was 16 percent.²³ The proportion of women among Dakota landowners was more than double the regional average. Although there are no comparable data for other reservations, the high rate of female landownership at Spirit Lake reflected and reproduced conditions of greater gender equality than existed in European American society.

While the number of landowners is important, so too is the amount of land they owned collectively and individually. As individuals, Dakotas owned a total of 99,038 acres in 1910. Among the various racial-ethnic groups that owned land after the reservation was opened to white homesteading, the

Dakota had, on average, the smallest parcels: 98.7 acres. This figure is evidence of their continued dispossession. While men owned larger parcels than women across the region,²⁴ Dakota women came close to parity with men: the parcels they owned averaged 95 percent of the amount of land that men owned (95.7 versus 100.6 acres). This relative parity may reflect the consequences of receiving allotments and inheriting land in equal numbers. When allottees died, their land was divided equally among their heirs, men and women alike. Over time the disparity between men and women narrowed, and Dakota women continued to be major land holders in the tribe.²⁵

At Spirit Lake, few Dakotas took up commercial farming; their plots were too small and their farms undercapitalized. But most women cultivated gardens. As Eunice Davidson put it, “My grandma loved a garden. She had ten children so they had to make every means so they could make it every year.” Her grandmother called her expansive garden “the woman’s project” because it was “her domain.” She grew corn, potatoes, turnips, radishes, and dill. Other women grew cucumbers, carrots, beans, rutabagas, and melons.

Alternatively, Indian land could generate income through being rented to non-Indian farmers, an arrangement often encouraged by federal Indian agents. Mary Blackshield, a prizewinning baker who cared for her elderly mother, rented land that she had inherited from her recently deceased husband, Frank Blackshield, to the Knudson family, Norwegian farmers on the reservation. She even hosted the Knudson’s twelve-year-old son for a week when he came to her farm one spring to do the plowing.²⁶ Renting had a rationale of its own that was consistent with the Dakota’s sense of territorial use. It allowed the Dakota to live on a

portion of the land but to let white farmers cultivate it. Renters would pay with half the crop in lieu of cash, or make an annual payment after the harvest.²⁷ Income from leases could be evenly divided among multiple owners. Dakota people also used their land and the crops and livestock it sustained to generate other sources of income, making butter for sale, or harvesting and selling “June berries, goose berries, currants, raspberries, choke cherries, plums. They even used to pick dandelions and sell it.”²⁸

Securing land for individuals and families was a way of maintaining tribal integrity and providing a base for practicing culture and extending kinship into the future. Purchasing land may not have been common, but Dakota women did so when they could afford it. Jenny Brown Cavanaugh, who was married to a white man, continued to accumulate land after her husband died in 1916, and by 1929 she was the largest Dakota landowner on the reservation. Like Dakota men, Dakota women were central to the process of retaining land within the tribe. They were equal participants in claiming a home for their children, providing a source of regular annual income, and resisting tribal dispossession.

Scandinavians on and off Indian Reservations in North Dakota

After the allotment of reservation land to Indians, vast expanses of “surplus” land were made available to whites at Spirit Lake and other reservations. While the Dawes Act outlined the terms that applied specifically to Indian reservations, the Homestead Act of 1862 set the broad parameters for land-taking. An adult could claim 160 acres of land, one quarter of a square mile. All homesteaders had to be twenty-one years old. A woman had to be sin-

gle, that is, widowed, divorced, never married, or head of household, while men could be married or single. If the homesteader paid a nominal fee, improved the land by cultivating it, and lived on it, after three or five years he or she could take title.²⁹ The foreign-born could claim land as long as they declared their *intention* to become naturalized citizens. To prove up and take title, they had to have followed through.

Women homesteaded in order to obtain the economic foothold that landownership offered. For single immigrant Scandinavian women, whose primary occupation in the US was domestic service, land-taking offered a unique opportunity.³⁰ Elaine Lindgren found that women made an average of 12 percent of homestead claims in the nine North Dakota counties she surveyed. The highest proportions of women were in predominantly Norwegian counties; for example, 20 percent of claims in McKenzie County were made by women.³¹ In North Dakota, where 27.6 percent of the population was foreign-born and an additional 42 percent had at least one foreign-born parent, Norwegians constituted the largest immigrant group (29.4 percent of the foreign-born).³²

In her investigation of *all* 7,548 homestead claims proved up at the Devils Lake land office up through 1903, Elizabeth Jameson found that 10 percent were made by women.³³ Of women homesteaders, 18.8 percent had been born in Norway. Variation by county ranged from zero to a high in Pierce County, where 41 percent of female claimants were Norwegian. Slightly more than one-third of all women homesteaders registering at the Devils Lake land office were widows. Importantly, Jameson notes that some proved up their own claims (80 percent) and others proved up claims their late husbands had initiated. Widowed women, regardless of age, encountered many obstacles to self-

sufficiency, particularly if raising children, and owning a homestead made a real difference.

Homesteading offered a potential investment with prospects for long-term productive labor. In 1900, 62 percent of employed Scandinavian immigrant women worked as laundresses or servants, which included work outdoors as well as in. Their wages were half those of men.³⁴ Women's labor was devalued not only because their jobs were sex-segregated, but even when they did the same work as men. In contrast, when they worked on their own land their products brought a price that was not gendered. Still, wage labor complemented working the land for both women and men.

Were women to marry, they would no longer be eligible to claim homestead land in their own names. As Rebecca Wingo and Richard Edwards point out, married men who filed homestead claims depended on their wives' multifaceted reproductive and productive labor in order to be successful, yet the women's names were not on the deeds.³⁵ Having her own homestead could enhance a woman's prospects on the marriage market. As Carrie Young insightfully observes in her biography of her Norwegian mother, "Homesteading men were desperate for wives."³⁶ Single women with land could afford to be more choosy than those without property. Land served both as a dowry and an old-age pension.

When the Spirit Lake Reservation was opened to white homesteading in 1904, the high concentration of first- and second-generation Scandinavian immigrants, particularly Norwegians, in the surrounding counties meant that they benefited disproportionately.³⁷ By 1910, Scandinavians owned some 49,000 acres on the reservation. By 1929, they had expanded their landholdings to nearly half of the reservation and owned more land than the Dakota.

Scandinavian women were active agents in this process. In 1910, 13 percent of Scandinavian landowners were women; by 1929, they constituted 24 percent. Through proving up and commuting homestead claims, buying privately owned land on the open market, and inheriting it, women acquired land and effectively leveraged it for themselves and their kin.³⁸ On average, Scandinavian women owned approximately 84 percent as much land as Scandinavian men. They were closer to parity with men than women in any other European American group, although still behind the Dakota. With average holdings of 153 acres, Scandinavian women owned over 50 percent more land than Dakota women and men.³⁹

Unlike non-citizen Dakotas, Scandinavians, whether or not they were citizens, could use their land as collateral for loans, which were essential to success in an industrializing agricultural economy because they covered expenses between harvests and allowed for expansion. When Annie Bostrom came to North Dakota from Sweden in 1922 she met and married Gust A. Berg, a second-generation Swedish American, who had purchased eighty acres of land on the reservation near his father’s and brother’s homesteads. Although their combined holdings were never very large, they farmed together. They had little capital, so they had to borrow in order to sustain their operations:

Gust Berg: “We had seed loans and feed loans.”

Annie Berg: “And cattle loans.”

Gust Berg: “Yeah, barnyard loans.”

Annie Berg: “And they even come and wanted loan on my few chickens out there. And I told ’em, ‘You want me, too?’ [chuckle] I was young then.”⁴⁰

Although Annie Berg’s name did not appear

on the deed to the land, her labors produced the assets that generated much-needed cash income and, when the bank required a guarantee, served as collateral for loans.

Mortgaging land put it at risk and threatened dislocation for Scandinavians in a way it did not for the Dakota. If individual Indians sold or lost their land, they could still live on the reservation. Agnes Greene, a respected Dakota elder, reflected on the difference between the Indians and white homesteaders, whom she called “farmers”: “The farmers were poor too. They didn’t have nothing. And they were worse off, because if they didn’t keep up their payments, well, the banks took their land and they had to get off, *go*. Where the Indians is, they stayed here. They had reservation to live on.”⁴¹ Agnes Greene captured the ironies of landowning on an Indian reservation. The Dakota had been removed and confined to the reservation; it was neither their ancient homeland nor a place they had chosen. Nonetheless, they were recognized as entitled to it in a way that white settlers were not. Whether or not they owned land, Dakotas had a legal right to be there. In contrast, Scandinavians had a place to live only as long as they could generate a living, pay their taxes, and make installments on their mortgage. In the event they could not, they were compelled to leave.

Landowning opened a door to political participation, although for whites it did so in a way that differed from the tribal power exercised by the Dakota. The franchise promised electoral power for Scandinavians, in part because they constituted a critical mass in the state. In contrast, when Dakotas became citizens, they were fewer in number, and their primary political leverage was on the federal government, filing suits for unmet treaty obligations in federal court.⁴² For immigrants, the

process of becoming a citizen went hand in hand with taking land. The foreign-born had to swear their intention to reside permanently in the US, recruit two citizens willing to attest to their good moral character, and forswear allegiance to any other nation.⁴³

Between 1910 and 1920, a major social movement in North Dakota sought to reform the agricultural economy. Building on the long tradition of farmers' cooperatives and the American Society of Equity, farmers organized against those who profited from their labor, especially the middlemen who controlled the transportation, storage, and large-scale marketing of farm commodities. The Nonpartisan League (NPL), an agrarian organization founded in 1915, mobilized farmers on the basis of their discontent with capitalist agribusiness. When the NPL won a plurality in the state legislature in 1916, it quickly passed womanhood suffrage and established state-run banks and granaries.⁴⁴

Mamie Larson, a second-generation Norwegian American, grew up in Sheyenne just south of the reservation, married a farmer, and worked with him in partnership on the land. Mamie recalled her activism in the NPL: "I fought very hard for that." When asked if other women were active in the League, she replied: "Most of them. There was so many that were so backward about their language that they didn't like to take part much. . . . But they were very helpful when it come to working, see. Very much so." When the interviewer asked if it was hard to get women to vote, Mamie exclaimed: "No, oh no. . . . They voted all right. They'd go to vote . . . when they found it was for their own good."⁴⁵ Understanding the power of the franchise, women voted their economic interests.

By 1920, when the federal woman's suffrage amendment was ratified, 83 percent of Norwegian immigrant women in North Dakota

had already become naturalized citizens, as compared to 52 percent of foreign-born women nationally.⁴⁶ The links among homesteading, landowning, Norwegian culture, and farmers' mobilization show that women understood the relationship between their livelihood and exercising their political voice. Moreover, like Dakotas, Scandinavians understood the importance of land in providing a place to practice and perpetuate their culture, speak their language, and observe their religion.

At Spirit Lake, Scandinavian women bought as well as homesteaded land that had a few years before belonged to the Dakota. Through purchasing public land, buying privately owned land, and inheriting land from their husbands, women acquired more land and effectively leveraged it for themselves and their kin.⁴⁷

African Americans and Landownership in the Rural South

The relationship between freedpeople and the land on which they and their enslaved forebears had toiled was *the* fundamental question of Reconstruction.⁴⁸ Black people who cultivated the land, like many of their white counterparts in the North and West, believed implicitly that the earth and its fruits belonged to those who mixed their labor with the soil to bring forth its bounty. Although their demand for "40 acres and a mule" was quickly denied lest the rights of private property be transgressed, ex-slaves still aspired to become independent property owners rather than propertyless wage laborers on white-owned plantations.⁴⁹ In the political economy of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, rural whites as well as Blacks understood that only those who could support themselves through their labor, free from the control of a landlord or an employ-

er, could exercise and defend their civil rights and be recognized as full citizens.⁵⁰ The denial of these rights to freedpeople in the South led to an economically devastating regime of labor exploitation, sharecropping, debt peonage, convict labor, and then to political disfranchisement, the contravention of civil rights, and legal segregation.⁵¹ Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, white supremacy was enforced by lynching, rape, and other forms of violence and terror.⁵²

The existence of communities of Black landowners was of profound importance.⁵³ An overwhelming majority of farmland was controlled by whites. Nationally, Black farming families owned less than 15 percent of the land, while 80 percent of the African American rural population earned their living from the land prior to the 1950s. Those African Americans who were able to acquire and retain title to land generally clustered in small, all-Black communities in the interstices between white-owned plantations and small towns, often on land of marginal quality.⁵⁴ In the South, African Americans purchased land from impoverished whites in tracts that they subdivided and sold to relatives and friends.⁵⁵ In contrast to the Dakota and other Native Americans, who were consigned to a bounded place on the land, African American landownership defied the racial order.⁵⁶

African American landholders who gathered together in separate communities were better able to defend themselves than those who were scattered among whites. They quickly established their own churches and schools and practiced forms of economic exchange and mutual aid that enabled them to be as independent as possible from white control.⁵⁷

Brooks Farm, located in the Yazoo Delta of northern Mississippi, was established as a 4,000-acre plantation by the combined efforts

of a white landowner interested in agricultural development and a group of Black families who aspired to the dignity and relative autonomy that landownership afforded. Black families at Brooks Farm held on to their hard-won legacy. As daughters inherited land and wives became officially recognized as co-owners with their husbands, the proportion of land held in women's names rose markedly over time.⁵⁸ Most Brooks Farm women, however, held land that was worked cooperatively with or by others in their extended family. Widows inherited land that their sons and daughters-in-law or daughters and sons-in-law cultivated; sisters inherited land that their siblings cultivated. As among Dakotas and Scandinavians, the income from renting land to non-kin also sustained women landowners.⁵⁹

Black women were full partners in farming families. The rough equality between men and women under conditions of enslavement meant that they entered freedom with a common perspective.⁶⁰ As families made a living from the land, women's and men's work intersected and overlapped.⁶¹ They understood the importance of property ownership in enabling them to secure the fruits of their toil. In landowning families, wives and daughters worked alongside their husbands, fathers, and brothers in the cotton fields, as well as doing household chores. But they had the freedom to allocate more of their land and labor to family subsistence and small-scale, market-oriented operations.⁶² Only landownership provided women the space they needed to redefine gender and to limit white oppression, Black male patriarchy, economic exploitation, and social dominance.⁶³

Almost every woman at Brooks Farm had some sort of income-earning business. Women tended poultry flocks and sold eggs and chickens; they kept dairy cows and sold milk, butter,

and cheese. Others took in laundry, did sewing, or styled hair. Women ran boardinghouses, cafes, or small grocery stores, which often functioned as local exchanges. Women could sell their produce for credit, which they used to purchase others' produce as well as staples from outside the locality. Cash-saving and income-earning activities complemented one another. Economists calculated that in landowning families, women's work yielded at least half their household's real income.⁶⁴ The money earned by Brooks Farm women from their home businesses and off-farm employment was used to support the household, so that the farm income could be reinvested in the operation.

Women's integral participation in productive labor, coupled with the flexibility in the gender division of labor and the variety of forms of income-earning, ensured that men understood the value of women's work and accorded them an equal voice in decision making.⁶⁵ Given their equal labor in subsistence and market-oriented production, all the women Grim interviewed maintained that regardless of whose name was on the deed, the land was as much theirs as their husband's.⁶⁶ Black women believed that landownership brought power. Their quest to own and retain land, both individually and jointly with their husbands and sons, must be interpreted within the framework of their racially gendered position.

Under the regime of white supremacy, rural Black women were the least protected from exploitation and violence. The meanings they have assigned to landownership extended far beyond subsistence to the philosophy that land provided the capacity to sustain Black people, just as the reservation was significant for the continuation of the Dakota. Brooke Farm resident Birdell Vassel put it succinctly:

We did all we could to make a living from the land and have it make a living for us, and 'cause there was women out here who own they own land, farm, stores and business, they naturally saw themselves in a different light and was good examples to other women to follow, so they could understand how to operate in a society that like to make the man the head and the Black folk the bottom.⁶⁷

While few families were able to survive solely by farming, since their acreage was relatively small and sometimes of marginal fertility, cultivating their own land gave Black women a secure economic foundation, sustaining their sense of womanhood and enabling them to practice mutual aid.⁶⁸

The landowning community's relative economic independence created a zone of safety that was critical to active participation in political struggle. Histories of the civil rights movement in the South highlight the central roles played by people who were independent of white landlords, employers, and customers.⁶⁹ Some people from Brooks Farm participated in voter registration drives and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, and the community served as a refuge for activists suffering from repression. White supremacists had long been deterred from intruding into the community by the residents' well-known commitment to armed self-defense. Fannie Lou Hamer, from nearby Ruleville, spent nights here; so did Black and white women organizers from the North. From the end of Reconstruction on, rural African American women have leveraged their landholding into economic independence and political clout.⁷⁰ As with Scandinavians, landowning was a critical foundation for political activism.

For rural Black women in the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta, land meant the transmission of traditions and rituals that built self-respect and empowered them to protect themselves and their daughters from the sexual advances of white males. Brooks Farm women concurred that as long as they could earn a living on their land, they would not have to work in the homes of whites where they were at risk of rape. In keeping with the idea of autonomy and dignity, rural Black women at Brooks Farm also indicated that landownership enabled them to keep their sons focused and out of trouble, limiting the risk that they would be arrested and sent to the state prison and labor camps.⁷¹ These women have maintained landownership as a way of giving their children the freedom to make different choices in life.

The Power of Landownership

While these in-depth case studies are illustrative of racial-ethnic and geographic variation rather than systematically comparative, each case takes on greater meaning in relation to the others, as Table 2 shows. Where landlessness constitutes inequality, landownership by women in both dominant and subordinated racial-ethnic groups mitigates against their disempowerment. Glenn outlines a useful way of approaching these intersections: “Power is seen as a simultaneously pervasive and dispersed in social relations of all kinds, not just those conventionally thought of as political. This point is particularly relevant to race and gender, where power is lodged in taken-for-granted assumptions and practices, takes forms that do not involve force or threat of force, and occurs in dispersed locations.”⁷² Women used land as a resource to exercise power: in establishing cultural autonomy, supporting their economic

independence, and facilitating their political participation. They differed, however, in the degrees to which they were subject to coercion and in the ways they used land to create safety for themselves and their communities.

Rural women devoted their efforts to nurturing social networks and to maintaining the productive and reproductive capacities of their communities, particularly their own racial-ethnic groups. For Native Americans and new immigrants, land rooted a community in a place; it enabled them to speak their own language and practice their culture. For African Americans, as for Dakotas and Scandinavians, landownership was the single most powerful resource that created opportunity for women to make decisions that improved not only their own lives but those of their children, other family members, and the community as a whole. Some Brooks Farm women indicated that their ownership of land guaranteed the education of their children and their ability to establish support networks, mutual aid societies, and home missions to help those in need. Land established control over the distribution of food and certain aspects of health care, and it enabled rural Blacks to raise their standard of living.

The economic benefits land yielded were substantial, even if women owned only a few acres. Through their own labor, they produced a subsistence for their families and sometimes a surplus for sale or trade. If they were unable to cultivate the land themselves, they leased it to others to provide an income. Some exchanged a farmhouse for a house in town where they might make money by taking in lodgers and boarders. Widows who inherited a working farm would customarily be taken care of by adult children or other kin who operated the farm in the expectation of eventual inheritance.

Table 2. The Power of Women's Landownership

	<i>Dakota Sioux</i>	<i>Scandinavian Immigrants</i>	<i>African Americans</i>
Cultural Autonomy			
Home place	X	X	X
Decision-making leverage	X	X	X
Kinship and community	X	X	X
Legacy	X	X	X
Economic Independence			
Subsistence	X	X	X
Income			
from sale of products	X	X	X
from renting land out	X	X	X
from investment		X	
Collateral			
for loans/credit		X	X
for support in old age	X	X	X
Political Participation			
Respect and entitlement	X	X	X
Citizenship and a voice	X	X	X
Safety	X		X

Land served both as a dowry and an old-age pension. All these advantages held special significance for women within these racial-ethnic groups.

Placing women's landownership in historical perspective alerts us to the importance of property as a form of equity that lends value to women's labor. Not only did landowning increase the share of their products that they retained, but it also partially exempted them from the pervasive devaluation of women's labor in the market. Still, wage labor complemented working the land for both women and men. In rural households, women and men shared labor in flexible ways with children and their neighbors.

The respect, entitlement, and safety that re-

sult from that autonomy had the potential to translate into political participation and electoral clout. All groups took collective action to defend their ownership of land and their control over the produce of their labor. Those who were US citizens participated in forming cooperatives. Their political mobilization took diverse forms: the movement for tribal autonomy; the effort to establish an anti-capitalist, pro-farmer government through the Nonpartisan League; and the Civil Rights Movement. We see women as central to these rural cultures and as sustaining as well as being sustained by the principles and practices of mutuality at the heart of political activism.

Dakotas and African Americans relied on the safety that landowning made possible. The

accounts of Brooks Farm women reveal the complex and deeply racialized meanings of land as a social reproductive resource conferring gender power and Black power. Landownership provided the basis for holistic living and healing for women whose very existence was under constant threat but whose empowerment sustained everyone. It enabled Black women to secure religious autonomy—the freedom to attend church without being forced by white landlords to work in the fields on Sundays. It served as a base of power and a refuge in adversity. In a profound way, holding onto the land was an act of communal salvation for both Native Americans and African Americans to which women were central. The threat of land loss and dispossession that was so powerful in North American Indian history highlights the importance of maintaining a space devoted to the Dakota. After two generations, the reservation, a legally bounded place, served to anchor them as well as to mark the loss of their historical way of life.

Land was most valuable to women when they labored on it; it did not grant them immediate, visible power. But the consequences of its absence point to its importance. Exclusion from the ownership of productive property has been a major form of the oppression and exploitation of subordinated racial-ethnic groups, especially the dispossession of Native Americans and the enslavement of African Americans. When women did not own land, they had fewer options in courtship, in marital negotiations, and in ways of making a living. In old age they had less security. While many landowning women remained poor, women who owned land fared better than those who did not. Land gave them leverage in relation to men in particular racial-ethnic contexts. It enabled Dakotas and Scandinavians to prac-

tice their distinct ethnic cultures, and it gave Dakotas and African Americans a modicum of safety against white assaults.

Conclusions

Landownership was key to mitigating intersecting gender and racial-ethnic inequalities. Arguably, it did that by placing women in a different *class* position than those who worked for others. As they often put it, they worked for themselves and their families, not for the boss or the landlord.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, access to land was fundamental to rural women’s livelihood and agency. Whether Native American, Scandinavian, or African American, all these women understood landholding as the foundation for family security, political-economic autonomy, and cultural continuity. They held onto the land they inherited, acquired more land when they could, and tried to pass on this legacy to the next generation.

The South helps to provide a comparative context for understanding how women from different parts of the country came to the realization that they must also own land to have autonomy. These women’s participation in landownership reveals similar and very different meanings of autonomy, even though their hope was the same: freedom from economic oppression and labor dominance.

In a society where a place on the land signifies belonging—a principle that was once basic to the dominant American political economy but now endures mostly among rural African Americans and Native Americans—landownership has been fundamental to citizenship and cultural continuity. Across the global South, women’s access to land is still

a crucial determinant of their well-being and power.⁷³ In the US, it has conferred power on women, enhancing the value of their labor and serving as a secure base for self, family, and community. In rural locales, during and even after urbanization and industrialization, the ownership and control of land is at least as important as wage labor in understanding the resources that women held and the power they exercised. The combination of women's land-ownership with their labor dynamically altered their economic and social circumstances. Their ownership of property enhanced the value of their labor, and their labor transformed the land into a productive resource for themselves and their community.

Notes

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8. Anne B. W. Effland, Denise M. Rogers, and Valerie Grim, "Women as Agricultural Landowners: What Do We Know About Them?" *Agricultural History* 67, no. 2 (Spring 1993): 235–61. All page references in this paragraph and the next are to this article.

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and Rachel A. Rosenfeld, *American Farm Women: Findings from a National Survey* (Chicago: National Opinion Research Center, 1981).

10. Grey Osterud initially brought us together at the Berkshire Conference on the History of Women and has helped to develop our comparative analysis.

11. Valerie Grim, "Black Farm Families in the Yazoo Mississippi Delta: A Study of the Brooks Farm Community, 1920–1970" (PhD diss., University of Iowa, 1990); Karen V. Hansen, *Encounter on the Great Plains: Scandinavian Settlers and the Dispossession of Dakota Indians, 1880–1930* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Karen V. Hansen and Mignon Duffy, "Mapping the Dispossession: Scandinavian Homesteading at Fort Totten, 1900–1930," *Great Plains Research* 18, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 67–80.

12. For fuller accounts of Grim's sources and methods, see Grim, "Black Farm Families in the Yazoo Mississippi Delta"; Valerie Grim, "'Tryin' to Make Ends Meet': African American Women's Work on Brooks Farm, 1920–1970," in *Unrelated Kin: Race and Gender in Women's Personal Narratives*, ed. Gwen Etter-Lewis and Michele Foster (New York: Routledge, 1996), 123–38.

13. Karen V. Hansen and Samantha Leonard, "Homesteading and Land Purchase on Indian Reservations: Gender and Immigrant Generation, 1887–1934," unpublished manuscript, 2017.

14. See Edda L. Fields-Black, *Deep Roots: Rice Farmers in West Africa and the African Diaspora* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008).

15. Frederick E. Hoxie, *A Final Promise: The Campaign to Assimilate the Indians, 1880–1920* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984); Francis Paul Prucha, *The Great Father: The United States Government and the American Indians*, vol. 2 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984).

16. Hoxie, *Final Promise*; Colette A. Hyman, *Dakota Women's Work: Creativity, Culture, and Exile* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2012).

17. Hoxie, *Final Promise*. Some Dakota tribal members at Spirit Lake went through competency hearings and became citizens before 1924. This process was less a function of their gender than of their ethnicity, or "bloodedness," as assessed by the federal Indian agent.

18. Prucha, *Great Father*.

19. Hansen and Leonard, "Homesteading and Land Purchase on Indian Reservations."

20. Hansen, *Encounter on the Great Plains*; Hansen and Duffy, "Mapping the Dispossession."

21. For useful studies, see Emily Greenwald, *Reconfiguring the Reservation: The Nez Percés, Jicarilla Apaches, and the Dawes Act* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2002); Melissa L. Meyer, *The White Earth Tragedy: Ethnicity and Dispossession at a Minnesota Anishinaabe Reservation* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994). Tonia M. Compton, "Proper Women/Propertied Women: Federal Land Laws and the Gender Order(s) in the Nineteenth-Century Imperial American West" (PhD diss., University of Nebraska, 2009), finds relative parity of allotments between men and women on the Nez Perce Reservation in Idaho but does not trace the process of moving from allotment to landownership.

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23. Howard A. Turner, *The Ownership of Tenant Farms in the North Central States*, US Department of Agriculture Bulletin 1433 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1926).

24. Effland, Rogers, and Grim, "Women as Agricultural Landowners."

25. Hansen, *Encounter on the Great Plains*.

26. Bjerne Knudson, interview by Karen V. Hansen (audio recording), Devils Lake, ND, 1999.

27. Knudson, interview.

28. Grace Lambert, interview by Karen V. Hansen (audio recording), Fort Totten, ND, 1999.

29. Richard Edwards, Jacob K. Friefeld, and Rebecca S. Wingo, *Homesteading the Plains: Toward a New History* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017); Lindgren, *Land in Her Own Name*. Residency requirements changed over time.

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36. Carrie Young, *Nothing to Do but Stay* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1991).

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39. Hansen, *Encounter on the Great Plains*.

40. Gust Berg and Annie Berg, interview by Larry Sprunk (audio recording), State Historical Society of North Dakota, Bismarck, 1976.

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