Leah Penniman started Soul Fire Farm in Grafton, NY, 12 years ago with the goal of providing fresh produce to her underserved community. Since then, the former Fulbright scholar has begun offering workshops aimed at eradicating racism within the food system. Penniman closes her e-mails with the Malcolm X quote on the opposite page.

“REVOLUTION IS BASED ON LAND. LAND IS THE BASIS OF ALL INDEPENDENCE. LAND IS THE BASIS OF FREEDOM, JUSTICE, AND EQUALITY.”

—MALCOLM X, 1963
LEAH PENNIMAN IS AN AMERICAN ANOMALY: black, female, and a farmer. In 2016, Penniman hit the streets of Albany, New York, to protest the police brutality that killed Donald “Donny” Ivy, 39, an unarmed local man. But her primary focus involves fighting what she considers a far more common, yet more subtly brutal, form of oppression. “Corporations, and white folks in particular, control the food system,” explains the 37-year-old. “If the means of production are in the hands of people outside our community, we are dependent on those who might not have our best interests in mind.”

An alarming series of stats bears out her logic: Heart disease, type 2 diabetes, and other potentially fatal diet-related illnesses afflict African Americans at nearly twice the rate they do Caucasians. Black people are four times less likely than white ones to live within a mile or two of a supermarket, while predominantly black neighborhoods boast 13 times as many fast-food billboards. The polite euphemism for this specific facet of institutionalized racism is “food desert.” Penniman prefers the term “food apartheid.” “I’ve experienced firsthand how difficult it is to live in a place where you have to hustle for vegetables,” says the mother of two.

Twelve years ago, Penniman was working as a biology teacher at Harriet Tubman Democratic High School in Albany’s low-income South End district when she and her husband, Jonah Vitale-Wolff, 38, acquired 72 acres in nearby Grafton. From the get-go, the couple’s Soul Fire Farm has operated on a sliding-scale CSA model that encourages affluent customers to subsidize boxes of organically grown produce and pastured chickens for less fortunate capital-region residents. The initial goal, as Penniman defines it: “We wanted, straight up, to deliver fresh, high-quality food to our people at prices they could afford.”

Since then, the farm’s mission has expanded to include the cultivation of fellow entrepreneurs of color. In 2012, Soul Fire hosted its inaugural Black-Latino Farmers Immersion, an intensive weeklong course that consists of lessons devoted to amending soil and slaughtering chickens, plus yoga and drum circles. “This is a culturally relevant celebratory space. There is movement and singing. We have mad fun,” Penniman says. “Still, the endgame remains land and food sovereignty for disenfranchised populations.”

So far, the course claims 347 graduates, 83 percent of whom are currently farming, involved in other food-related businesses and organizations, or growing their own food. A total of 180 new acolytes will attend five sessions scheduled for this summer and fall.

In 2013, Penniman struck a deal with the Albany County District Attorney’s office, allowing area youth to abbreviate their juvenile detention sentences, and earn food for their families, by logging time at Soul Fire. “Black and brown children, many arrested as young as 11 for skipping school or petty theft, find themselves trapped in a downward spiral of incarceration,” she laments. “We’re countering that narrative with hope.” Beyond the oft-cited “healing power of the soil,” this arrangement grants kids access to hip role models who represent an alternative path.

And three years ago, Penniman launched “Uprooting Racism in the Food System,” a four-day workshop she describes as “training to de-program white people in positions of power or influence—who might hold public office or direct a nonprofit.” Or, perhaps, write for a national magazine. This is the point at which I should admit to being a white man, albeit one steeped in issues of class and race since birth. I grew up in a poor, black part of Atlanta, the son of civil rights activists and the grandson of...
A former member of the USDA’s Minority Farmers Advisory Committee and the proprietor of Vanguard Ranch near Charlottesville, VA, Renard “Azibo” Turner believes that slavery permanently soured many African Americans on agriculture.

“When I went to buy my first tractor, the gentleman behind the counter said, ‘What the hell are you going to do with a tractor?’” recalls Renard “Azibo” Turner. “The structural racism was so deep in him that he couldn’t take me seriously as a black farmer.”

Although Turner considers the proliferation of black-run urban farms a positive trend, he notes that these growers rarely hold the deed to the land they work. “I support the efforts to turn vacant lots into community gardens,” he explains, “but that’s not going to create an inheritance for generations to come. The way to achieve parity in this country is by owning a piece of the rock.”

A century ago, the demographics looked much different. In 1920, before the Great Migration drew some 6 million African...
Americans to cities such as Chicago and New York, 14 percent of the farm owners in this country were black, at a time when only 10 percent of the population was. Collectively, those 1 million individuals owned 15 million acres of land. Over the ensuing decades, however, these farmers left agriculture at a rate three times faster than their Caucasian counterparts, and by 1992, the percentage of U.S. farms owned by African Americans had dwindled to less than 1 percent.

Obviously, black farming families had plenty of life-threatening motivation to flee the Jim Crow–era South, but subtler forces also conspired to diminish the black land base. The county-level USDA offices that farmers relied on were notorious for giving African Americans the runaround, routinely denying or delaying loan applications for dubious reasons. A 1965 report by the Georgia State Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights cited multiple incidents of USDA agents addressing black farmers as “boy” and ultimately concluded that “ negro farmers in Georgia ... feel they are being phased out.” A federal office established to field, if not address, such complaints closed in 1983 because of funding cuts under President Reagan. And as recently as 1987, one of the USDA’s few African American supervisors told The Washington Post the agency was “a good-old-boy buddy system.”

Adding insult to these injuries, increasing agricultural consolidation put the squeeze on black farmers unable to access the capital necessary to scale up. By 1982, the average farm operated by a white American spanned 440 acres, more than four times the size of an average black-owned one. Black farmers couldn’t get big, so they got out—typically via foreclosure notice.

Finally, in December 1996, John W. Boyd Jr., founder of the National Black Farmers Association, and approximately 50 of the organization’s members marched to the gates of the White House, protesting the USDA’s discriminatory lending practices and demanding to speak with President Clinton. Though a meeting was not forthcoming, Clinton’s secretary of agriculture, Dan Glickman, immediately suspended foreclosures on all unpaid USDA loans, pending an investigation. A year later, one of the protesters, Timothy Pigford, a corn and soybean farmer from Cumberland County, North Carolina, initiated a class action lawsuit against the USDA. Pigford v. Glickman resulted in the largest civil rights

By owning her farm, and being her own boss, Fannie Lou Hamer became impervious to the scare tactics of white employers. “She and others like her were able to take a role in the front lines of voter registration drives, were the first to sign petitions, and didn’t hesitate to speak up at NAACP meetings,” says Leah Penniman.
settlement in U.S. history at the time, awarding more than $1 billion to almost 16,000 African American farmers. A subsequent suit, known as Pigford II, awarded an additional $1.25 billion to 18,000 farmers in 2010.

Over the past few decades, the expanding organic sector has offered a lifeline to small farms, given that organic crops are, on average, 30 percent more profitable than conventionally grown ones. Unfortunately, Penniman and Turner are among the few African American farmers taking advantage of this fact. “People of color have been woefully underrepresented in the organic arena,” says Owusu Bandele, a professor emeritus of plant and soil sciences at Southern University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, who established Food For Thought Farm, the first black-owned certified-organic operation in the state.

In 2007, Bandele, 75, co-founded the Southeastern African American Farmers’ Organic Network, which helps black farmers in the region navigate the organic certification process and grants minor loans, as well as other forms of assistance. The organization, headquartered in Atlanta, currently counts 50-plus black-owned certified-organic farms among its ranks. “The possibilities, both ecologically and economically, are truly exciting,” he says.

This tendency of African American farmers to empower one another has deep historical underpinnings, says Penniman, pointing to the example of famed civil rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer. A sharecropper evicted for registering to vote in 1962, Hamer raised enough capital to gradually establish the 680-acre Freedom Farm Cooperative in Sunflower County, Mississippi, a refuge of sorts for evicted tenant farmers. By owning the land, and being her own boss, Hamer became impervious to the scare tactics of white employers: “She and others like her were able to take a role in the front lines of voter registration drives, were the first to sign petitions, and didn’t hesitate to speak up at NAACP meetings.”

Penniman is adding her own line to that proud story, providing a place where farmers of color won’t be regarded with suspicion in rural upstate New York. “Sometimes, there’s a shoot-first, ask-later mentality around here,” she admits, “but we’re working hard to build relationships with our white neighbors.” Meanwhile, Soul Fire’s “Uprooting Racism in the Food System” course is already yielding fruit. A white graduate recently called to say he’d decided to deed property to an African American group interested in farming. “Reparations,” Penniman says. “Now that’s powerful.”