

Racialized Rhetorics of Food Politics: Black Farmers, the Case of Shirley Sherrod, and Struggle for Land Equity and Access

Eileen Schell *Syracuse University*



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 License.

Recommended Citation

Schell, Eileen. "Racialized Rhetorics of Food Politics: Black Farmers, the Case of Shirley Sherrod, and Struggle for Land Equity and Access." *Poroi* 11, Iss. 1 (2015): p. 1-22.
Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.13008/2151-2957.1214>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in Poroi by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact lib-ir@uiowa.edu.

Racialized Rhetorics of Food Politics

Black Farmers, the Case of Shirley Sherrod, and Struggle for Land Equity and Access

Eileen E. Schell

*Syracuse University
Syracuse, NY*

Poroi 11,1 (May 2015)



Keywords: Race relations, social media, rhetorical tropes, USDA

Over here you have a policy, which, with Reagan and me as speaker, created millions of jobs—it's called paychecks. Over [t]here you have the most successful food stamp president in American history, Barack Obama.

—Newt Gingrich, quoted in Elliott, 2012.

Newt Gingrich, Republican primary hopeful and Former Speaker of the House, made this comment about President Barack Obama at a January 2012 rally in South Carolina. Not surprisingly, Gingrich's comments drew fire. In a National Public Radio interview, South Carolina Representative James Clyburn referred to Gingrich's depiction of Obama as a "food stamp president" as a reprise of former President Ronald Reagan's campaign remarks about "welfare queens," racially coded comments targeting black women on welfare for being frauds and "bilking the system." The trope of the black "entitlement seeker" was thus used in doubly racially coded ways. First, it implied that our nation's first black president would take money "away" from "hard-working" (implied white) Americans and "pass it on" to black Americans who are falsely perceived to "benefit disproportionately from the food stamps program, even though blacks are not the majority of food stamp recipients." Second, it capitalized upon an "us and them" racially coded rhetoric of the "makers" and "takers" perpetuated by the Republican Party (Elliott, 2012). Meanwhile, few politicians or pundits during the 2012 election season were willing to go to bat for a system of benefits—the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) referred to as "food stamps"—that was keeping

literally millions (around 15% of the entire population) from going hungry every month, including the working poor and more recent recession casualties such as “recent veterans, college graduates, once-middle-class families in suburbia” (Wollan, N.d.).

I draw attention to Gingrich’s labeling of President Obama as the nation’s most successful “food stamp president” to highlight the ways that discourses about food and programs and policies related to food and agriculture carry complex racialized rhetorics and histories—ones that often escape the notice of the general public, the mainstream media, and academics. As a scholar and writing teacher who has been studying the rhetorics of agriculture for the past decade, I am interested in the ways that rhetorics of food and farming are part of what Michael Omi and Howard Winant call a “racial project”: “political and economic undertakings through which racial hierarchies are established and racialized subjectivities are created” and to which racialized rhetorics are targeted (qtd. in Alkon and Agyeman, 2011, 4-5). Food studies researchers Alyson Alkon and Julian Agyeman investigate in *Cultivating Food Justice: Race, Class, and Sustainability* how “race and class [are] enmeshed in the food system” (Alkon and Agyeman, 2011, 4). As the authors point out, “Communities of color and poor communities have time and again been denied access to the means of food production and due, to both price and store location, often cannot access the diet advocated by the food movement” (5). Alkon and Agyeman, along with others in their volume, examine how “low-income communities and communities of color “have deployed food justice activism “to create local food systems that meet their own food needs” (5). Their volume asks questions such as: How do low-income communities and people of color experience the food system? How are they included or excluded in that system? What are ways that the current “food movement” rhetorics and narratives—rhetorics and narratives advocating a movement away from industrialized agriculture to local, organic, and sustainable agriculture—address issues of race, class, and gender?

This work in the service of food justice is complicated by a long history of federal discrimination against black farmers, Hispanic farmers, and women farmers of all races. To begin to address the rhetorics surrounding this systematic discrimination, I analyze the historical patterns of federal and local discrimination that contributed to black farmers in the U.S. losing their farms and livelihood in agriculture. To demonstrate the racially coded complexities surrounding food and farming rhetorics, I examine the ways that racialized rhetorics permeate policy and popular media discourses through two specific and interrelated sites: 1) the U.S.

Department of Agriculture's (USDA) long-standing discrimination against black farmers and 2) the media firestorm surrounding Shirley Sherrod, a former farmer, black activist, and long-time employee of the USDA in Georgia. Sherrod achieved national notoriety when, as a USDA employee, she was baselessly accused of "reverse racism" by blogger/Right-wing pundit Andrew Breitbart. Before I begin my analysis of the situation of black farmers and the Sherrod case, though, I analyze how racialized rhetorics operate through the deployment of specific tropes. My analysis is drawn from Victor Villaneuva's remaking of Kenneth Burke's four master tropes.

RACIALIZED RHETORICAL TROPES: THE FOUR MASTER TROPS OF THE NEW RACISM

In rhetoric and writing studies, scholars have examined how rhetorics of race and racism play out in writing pedagogies and in the scholarship in the field (Clary Lemon, 2009, W2). At the same time that we critique, analyze, and work to change our racialized rhetorics, assumptions, and practices in the classroom, in scholarly journals/conferences, and in our research, it's equally important that rhetoricians analyze how racialized discourses are perpetuated through political discourse, the media, and policy making. To understand the use of racialized rhetorics in food policies and popular media discourses on food and farming, we need a framework that exposes the way racist tropes are currently circulating often under new guises and terms. As Victor Villaneuva argues in "The Rhetorics of the New Racism or The Master's Four Tropes," "Let's look to the language. Behind it there is a material reality—the reality of racism, still present, and not all that new after all" (Villaneuva, 2005, 18). As Villaneuva puts it, one way to understand how racism operates in the so-called space of "post-racial" politics is to understand how it is being "sold rhetorically," as it always has been, but through "a tropic shift in the *topos* of racism" (Villaneuva, 2005, 10). In a time when racism may "no longer [be] founded on the presumption of white supremacy, and no longer functions under the rhetoric of biological determinism, no longer even takes race as a given," we need to understand how racialized tropes are being adopted/adapted to elide/hide racism and allow it to emerge under new terms and in new contexts (Villaneuva, 2005, 10).

To provide a framework for investigating such racialized tropes, Villanueva offers a reconsideration of Burke's four master tropes—metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony—in light of the ways that these tropes might reveal and conceal racist rhetorics.

Villaneuva argues that Burke's tropes allow us to see how "we are affected, often not consciously, by the language we receive and use" (Villaneuva, 2005, 3). We also are "affected by the language we don't use," the ways that tropes can be used to ignore, mask, and hide specific realities (Villaneuva, 2005, 3).

The first of the Burke's master tropes is metaphor, which involves a comparison between two unlike objects. In the case of racialized metaphors, Villaneuva argues that the new metaphors for race are "ethnicity, identity, culture" (Villaneuva, 2005, 4). As race seemingly drops away, it is possible to make all kinds of claims about what an ethnic group or culture does or doesn't do or contribute to mainstream culture. It is also possible to "twist" metaphors associated with race and turn them back on themselves, which is what has happened with the metaphor of "reverse racism." This term acts as a metaphor when used to brand any sort of attention to a set of practices intended to correct racial bias against underrepresented minority groups. Through the hurled metaphor of "reverse racism," any work to correct or open the way for expanded diversity and inclusion—whether through college admissions processes, correcting biased curricula or workplace inequities, or supporting people of color as underserved populations—is immediately invalidated or dismissed. Indeed, the metaphor of reverse racism is often used as a defense for racist actions or words by individuals or groups who, when critiqued for racism, rush to point out how an individual or group, by pointing to race as an issue or trying to correct a race bias, is actually practicing reverse racism. This is a trope heavily invoked by right-wing pundit Andrew Breitbart in the case of USDA employee Shirley Sherrod—an incident especially complex (as will be described), considering that Sherrod herself, her husband, and others who cultivated their cooperative farm were denied disaster relief loans by the USDA, which resulted in their farm being foreclosed upon.

The second master trope of metonymy, as we learn from Burke, is a substitution of terms where the substitution is suggested by some material or logical relationship. Villaneuva argues that the new racialized metonymy is individualism, the ultimate reductionism: "If everything is reduced to individual will, work, and responsibility, there's no need to consider group exclusion. 'Identity' plays into this one quite well, because then it becomes an individual assertion of a group affiliation, the individual taking precedent" (Villaneuva, 2005, 5). This kind of relationship can be found in the reference at the start of this essay to the entitlement "taker" and the job creator or "maker." The point lost in this use of a metonym is the fact that the makers—corporations and wealthy

individuals—are more heavily subsidized by the tax code and the system of corporate entitlements (tax breaks and incentives) than the so-called takers. While members of the Right decry government programs such as food stamps for poor and low-income individuals, the corporations that fund their campaigns happily line up to receive their own form of corporate welfare.

Synecdoche is a kind of metonymy whereby a part stands in for a whole. Villaneuva warns that we need to watch for national identity and civilizations as the synecdochal tropes that replace race (Villaneuva, 2005, 8). In the case of analyzing racialized food politics, a synecdochal relationship is formed around the USDA's treatment of black farmers. The USDA, the main agency of the federal government that addresses agriculture operates as a stand-in for the U.S. government and its attitudes toward black farmers. USDA employee's disrespect, dismissal, and discriminatory practices against black farmers becomes a matter of *national* disrespect and scandal, one worthy of a class action lawsuit whereby the injured parties sue for redress, as I discuss at a later point in this essay. At the same time, the synecdochal relationship around the loss of black farms is much larger. The land these farmers owned stands in for all the hopes, dreams, and possibilities of freedom, of being able to own one's land and make decisions about one's destiny and livelihood. Indeed, being a black landowner and farmer is a reversal of decades of slavery and sharecropping. To lose a family farm is a form of death and the loss of a dream for any farm owner, but for black farmers discriminated against in USDA farm loan and aid programs, there are other historical resonances—a continuation of Jim Crow practices—and a loss of hope for freedom and self-determination.

The fourth master trope is irony: The chief ironic master trope of racialized rhetoric is colorblindness, the ability to say that one does not notice or see race (Villaneuva, 2005, 6). Of course, who is saying they don't notice or see race matters—who has the luxury and privilege of “not seeing” race and under what conditions? In relation to food system rhetorics, colorblindness is frequently applied to food systems where officials often argue that they do not “see” or notice race when they are considering loan applications from black farmers or when setting up food-related programs for low-income people even as their practices and actions may clearly indicate that they, indeed, do *see race* and are taking discriminatory actions.

These racialized tropes interanimate each other, “bleed into each other,” as Villaneuva acknowledges (Villaneuva, 2005, 4). Taken together they provide a way to “decode” the racialized

rhetorics that are currently being perpetuated in food policy and popular media discourses on food. Analyzing these tropes also allows us to see historical patterns and systematic discrimination practices and understand how these traces are still present in contemporary food rhetorics and policies. To begin to understand those historical patterns and systematic discrimination practices, the following observations trace racial discrimination practiced against black farmers by the USDA.

BLACK FARMERS: THE LONG TRAIL OF RACIAL DISCRIMINATION

- In 1920, one in every seven farmers was black; in 1982, one in every 67 farmers was black.
- In 1910, black farmers owned 15 million acres of farmland; in 1982, black farmers owned 3.1 million acres of farmland.
- By the late 1980s, there were fewer than 2000 African-American farmers under the age of 25. Today [2000, at the release of the documentary *Homecoming...*] there are fewer than 18,000 black farmers, representing less than one percent of all farms in America (“Black Farming,” N.d., 6).

These statistics, proffered in a PBS documentary on black farmers entitled *Homecoming... Sometimes I Am Haunted by Memories of Red Dirt*, and in historical resources on black farming on the PBS website, provide the rough outlines of a demographic and institutional pattern among black farmers’ landownership, and land loss in the U.S. in the twentieth century. Black farmers experienced a 98 percent loss of farm operations whereas white farmers had a 66 percent loss between 1990-97 (Wood and Gilbert, qtd. in Green *et al.*, 2011, 55). Thus while white farmers experienced a form of agricide in their own right, in comparison, black farmers proportionally experienced a much greater loss.

Several interconnected forces conspired to effect black farm loss. Corporate concentration and consolidation were primary factors. Small and medium-scale farmers of all races in the latter half of the twentieth century increasingly faced competition from large-scale corporate production units, which drew and continue to draw more upon capital-intensive forms of mechanization/equipment and can take advantage of laws, tax codes, and commodity subsidies that disproportionately benefit large farms and commodity production (Wood and Gilbert, qtd. in Green *et al.*, 2011, 55-56). These large units also focused on

economies of scale, producing large commodity crops with increasing efficiencies, thus pricing smaller operations out of competition. These forces affected all small and medium-sized farms across the nation. Black farmers, however, have faced a more specific set of problems surrounding land ownership, property acquisition, financing, and property secession. After slavery, “[c]ontrol over labor switched to sharecropping, tenant farming and the crop lien system” (Green *et al.*, 2011, 52). The tenancy, sharecropping, and crop liens systems were more than just economic arrangements, though; they were strategies for domination. As John Green, Eleanor Green, and Anna Kleiner note, this tripartite system of domination “provided the basis for social control by elite whites over black and poor white producers” (Green *et al.*, 2011, 53). As a result, black farmers lost control over their land and farming-related decisions such as what, where, and when to plant; the purchase of supplies; and future-oriented decisions about farm expansion or modification.

Another factor in the reduction of black-owned farms included farm secession—the process of the farm being passed from one generation to the next—a challenge in many farm families where thorny family relations and intergenerational differences make such transfer of land difficult. Farm succession, though, has historically been a much larger problem for black family farms where many landowners did not routinely draw up wills. When land was owned by a family member and no will was left, the heirs were subject to regulations that forced them to sell the property, thus resulting in the family farm not being passed on to the next generation.

By far the most blatant form of discrimination has been “inequality in access to and outcomes from existing agricultural programs” (Green *et al.*, 2011, 56). A 1964 study of discrimination in the USDA commissioned by the Johnson Administration found that “USDA loan agencies, such as the Farmer’s Home Administration (FHA), denied black farmers ownership and operating loans, disaster relief and other aid” (“Black Farming,” N.d., 5). There was also active credit discrimination against black farmers “who assisted Civil Rights activists, joined the NAACP, registered to vote, or simply signed a petition” (N.d., 5). This was a retaliatory move in reaction to the fact that black landownership often meant stability, autonomy, and political power in black communities. A 1964 study on federal programs and the state of black farms commissioned by the Johnson Administration also indicated that black farmers and citizens were not being represented at all in the USDA’s county agricultural committees (5),

which were involved in local control of USDA administered programs and funds.

Many might see such acts of discrimination as prevailing only in the Jim Crow era, but these acts continued long afterward. A 1982 report from the USDA Civil Rights Commission found that the USDA played a direct role in “the decline of the black farmer,” finding that black farmers received only “1% of all farm ownership loans, only 2.5% of all farm operating loans, and only 1% of all soil and water conservation loans” (“Black Farming” N.d. 6). That same year, President Reagan shuttered the USDA’s Civil Rights Office, effectively silencing the very branch of the organization that was in charge of investigating issues of racial discrimination. This act further solidified the USDA’s problems with racial discrimination. Even as farmers across the U.S. were urged by the federal government to increase their size of operations in order to capitalize on economies of scale, black farmers were largely unable to obtain low interest federal loans to expand or improve their operations.

Not only were black farmers with existing land affected, but those striving to buy land were unable to obtain sufficient loans to purchase farms: “In 1984 and 1985, the USDA lent \$1.3 billion to farmers nationwide to buy land. Of the almost 16,000 farmers who received those funds, only 209 were black” (“Black Farming”, N.d., 6). To give an example of how this was affecting farmers on a state-wide basis, we may want to consider the situation in the state of North Carolina where in 1992 “the number of black farms had fallen to 2,498, a 64% drop since 1978” (“Black Farming”, N.d., 6).

Far more telling than mere statistics are the stories of black farmers denied loans on the basis of USDA officials seeing farmers through the lens of racist stereotypes or black families unable to keep the property in the family due to discrimination. John Boyd, President of the National Black Farmers Alliance, a Virginia farmer and Ph.D. in agricultural economics, tells of an investigation of a loan application denied by a USDA official:

Boyd: “...and when they [government officials] came out to investigate [the USDA official who denied the loan, t]hey said - Did you throw Mr. Boyd’s application in the trashcan Mr. Garnet? Guess what he said. Well, yeah[.] I threw it in the trashcan. They said - Well ah, you only made two farm loans [to black farmers] out of one hundred fifty-seven loans in your office. Do you have trouble making loans to Black Farmers? [He replied,] Well, yeah. I think they’re lazy and want a paycheck on

Friday, but that has nothing [to do] with me doing my job. That's just the way I feel personally. [The official] wasn't fired. He wasn't terminated. He was moved to assist a county nearby and he was allowed to retire. (qtd. in Batt, 2008)

Embedded in this story of loan denial and racial discrimination is the metonym that all black farmers are entitlement seekers, out for a “paycheck on Friday,” that they are “lazy” and therefore not worthy of a loan. Also, key to this USDA agent’s thinking is that his view about black farmers is just his “personal feeling” and that this “personal feeling” didn’t affect his ability to consider the merits of a loan application—a blatant lie when he affirmed that he threw Dr. Boyd’s application in the trash.

Another story, posted anonymously on “Your Stories” link on the website for the documentary *Homecoming*..., tells of a hard-won black family farm lost due to discriminatory USDA lending and disclosure processes:

Years later, the farm was passed on to my father and uncle. As a little girl, I would go with my father and the people would never lend him enough money to operate the farm. (All six of the children was born and raised on this farm in the family house.) They would lend him a small amount and send him down the road to borrow from someone else at a higher rate. Farmer's Home Loan told my father that he did not have to take out insurance on the land (so the loan would be paid for [,] if he died) so when daddy died Farmers Home Loan tried to take everything including the house. They said that daddy owed \$75,000 on the 26 acre farm. They sold it on the court house step AND WOULD NOT ALLOW THE CHILDREN TO BUY IT. A REAL ESTATE PERSON BROUGHT IT AND SOLD IT TO A DEVELOPER WHO SOLD TRAILER LOTS IN THE AMOUNT OF \$12,500 each [emphasis original]. It hurts us to see the farm turned into a trailer park. My sister refuses to come home any more. My brother had to buy the family home back and pay for the house another 20 years. My white lawyer in told me that Farmer's Home Loan might still come and take it. I told him, “No Way!” Some developer has made over \$500,000 off our land that should have gone to us. Thanks to USDA.

We are a part of the Black Farmer's Lawsuit, but \$50,000 will never compensate for the hurt, shame and

lost of income that we suffered. As we walked into the stores in that small town the White people would point us out and say, “There’s his kids. Are y’all going to farm this year?” and laugh. We were humiliated. We were in our 20’s and 30’s (N.d.).

Stories like Boyd’s and this anonymous story of farm loss posted on the PBS site abound. To combat this discrimination, the Land Loss Prevention Project in 1994 “filed a Freedom of Information Act lawsuit on behalf of black farmers, turning key information over to Congress to investigate discriminatory practices.... [during the] the 1980s and early 90s” (“Black Farming,” N.d., 7). Meanwhile, the USDA hired a consulting firm to undertake a study to examine how women and minorities were being treated in Farm Service Agency (FSA) programs and payments (namely crop and disaster payment programs, and Commodity Credit Corporation [CCC] loans) (Cowan and Feder, 2013, 2). The study found that black male farmers received an average of “\$4,000 (or 25%) less than those given to white males” (Cowan and Feder, 2013, 2). Likewise, “97% of disaster payments went to white farmers, while less than 1% went to black farmers” (Cowan and Feder, 2013, 2). The report also found that it was difficult to determine the reason for differences in treatment between black and white farmers because of “gross deficiencies’ in USDA data collection and handling” (Cowan and Feder, 2013, 2). Not surprisingly, the consulting firm’s report found that minority complainants had little faith in the processes of the USDA due to the “slowness of the process, the lack of confidence in the decision makers, the lack of knowledge about the rules, and the significant bureaucracy involved in the process” (Cowan and Feder, 2013, 2).

After the report was filed, Secretary of Agriculture Dan Glickman suspended government farm foreclosures and appointed a USDA Civil Rights Task Force to investigate the discrimination complaints. The Civil Rights Task Force recommended 92 actions that the agency could undertake to address past wrongs and move forward. However, the report and recommendations did not satisfy complainants’ need for justice. In August 1997, Timothy Pigford (and later Cecil Brewington) as a chief complainant filed a class action suit against the USDA for discrimination in Washington, D.C. in the U.S. District Court. “The suit [which was eventually consolidated as “Pigford I”—there were two tracks within the settlement] alleged that the USDA had discriminated against black farmers from 1983 to 1997 when they applied for federal financial help and again by failing to investigate allegations of discrimination” (Cowan and Feder, 2013, 2). Pigford himself was

denied an ownership loan and given an operating loan to work a rental property. While he was told that he could eventually obtain an ownership loan to purchase farmland, he was denied, after eight years, both an operating loan and an ownership loan on the grounds that he lacked experience as a farmer (this after many years of farming). USDA official Shirley Sherrod, whom I discuss later in this chapter, also joined the Pigford case with her husband; the Sherrods and their farming partners at New Communities, their cooperative farm in Georgia, were denied emergency loans for a drought while white farmers around them received them (Sherrod, 2012, 122-23). As a result, Sherrod and her business partners were foreclosed upon, losing their land (Sherrod, 2012, 94-95).

Throughout this time period, the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) played a role in keeping discrimination complaints by black farmers against the USDA before the Congress; members of the CBC made the case in a 1999 Agriculture Appropriations Bill for waiving the two-year statute of limitations on the Equal Credit Opportunity Act, which would allow “farmers who tried to file discrimination complaints at the USDA from January 1981 to July 1997 (the period when the USDA’s civil rights investigative arm was closed)” to still do so (“Black Farming, N.d., 7”). On January 5, 1999, the USDA settled Pigford I and paid \$50,000 each to those who qualified (“Black Farming,” N.d., 7). The settlement came too late for many black farmers, as they were being strangled by debt from large commercial loans that had much higher interest rates; many were in foreclosures or were so far in debt that the \$50,000 settlement was a drop in the bucket. One black farmer from Oklahoma, George Roberts, was one of the complainants to receive a \$50,000 settlement in Pigford I; however, the settlement did not begin to make up for years of high interest commercial loans he was forced to take out in lieu of the USDA loans he was denied. He remarked, “I’ve told my kids not to get into farming... there’s no money in it. And after what USDA has done over the years... why would ya?” (qtd. in Batt, 2013).

With a provision in the 2008 Farm Bill sponsored by then-Senator Barack Obama and Senator Chuck Grassley, a second case emerged (Pigford II) on behalf of all the farmers who lacked sufficient notice in the original case to file (Sherrod, 2012, 126). Pigford II resulted in a promised payout of \$1.25 billion after much political debate over how many black farmers there were in the nation and whether or not there were fraudulent claims, which I will address in further detail with respect to the claims made about Sherrod by right-wing pundit Andrew Breitbart.

While some might be tempted to see the Pigford I and II cases as making up for the years of discrimination and land loss faced by black farmers and while there are some hopeful signs that prospects are improving for black farmers (see “Demographics” in Cowan and Feder, 2013, 1), the losses to black farmers were devastating and continue to be so. As Congresswoman Eva Clayton put it, “Land has been lost, income has been lost, livelihoods have been lost, families have been lost” (“Black Farming,” N.d., 9). Landownership and the freedom dreams associated with it have not been realized for black farmers; a form of black agricide has occurred that is sweeping and devastating.

Against this long-standing historical background of black agricide and the struggle for equity and access, it is, indeed, ironic that accusations of reverse racism were made against USDA employee Shirley Sherrod, a long-time employee and activist in the struggle for black farmers’—and all farmers’ rights—in the state of Georgia. Even as the media spotlight was trained on the right-wing attack on Sherrod, the issue of black farm loss and USDA discrimination—the most important story outside of Sherrod’s struggle to defend herself and bring forward the truth—hardly broke the surface. A larger opportunity to reflect on the true historical legacy of discrimination and racism by the USDA was largely lost in the mainstream media—a point I address next.

THE RIGHT’S ATTACK ON USDA EMPLOYEE SHIRLEY SHERROD

On March 27th, 2010 while speaking at the NAACP Freedom Fund Banquet, Ms. Sherrod admits that in her federally appointed position overseeing billions of dollars she discriminates against people due to their race (Breitbart, qtd. in King, 2010).

In 2010, Shirley Sherrod, the Georgia State Director of Rural Development for the USDA, was pressured by her boss in Washington, D.C. to resign her post for giving what was construed to be discriminatory remarks to the Coffee County branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The sound-byte excerpt of the speech, which went viral on the web via right-wing pundit Andrew Breitbart, *appeared* to indicate that Sherrod had discriminated against a white farmer over twenty years ago when he came to her asking for help. Breitbart posted the following clip drawn from her speech to the NAACP:

What he didn't know while he was taking all that time trying to show me he was superior to me was I was trying to decide just how much help I was going to give him. I was struggling with the fact that so many black people had lost their farmland. And here I was faced with having to help a white person save their land. So I didn't give him the full force of what I could do (qtd. in King, 2010).

In actuality, the speech that Sherrod gave in its entirety revealed the precise opposite of what Breitbart claimed about Sherrod's "reverse racism." In her official capacity working at the Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund, which was designed expressly to help black farmers, Sherrod had actually helped Roger Spooner, the white farmer in question, rescue *his* farm from being sold at auction at the county courthouse. In her speech to the Coffee County NAACP, Sherrod noted that her decision to help Spooner was a pivotal, life-changing one—a moment of racial healing and rhetorical identification with *all* farmers who needed help, all struggling working class and poor people who were working the land, no matter what their race. Indeed, she referred to her encounter with Spooner as an "emotional breakthrough" where she was able to move past the hurt and pain of a childhood and young adulthood wracked with racial discrimination: "God helped me see that it's not just about black people—it's about poor people. And I've come a long way. I knew that I couldn't live with hate, you know. As my mother had said so many times, 'If we had tried to live with hate in our hearts, we'd probably be dead by now'" (Sherrod, 2012, 3-4).

As a child, Sherrod had grown up in a hard-working black farm family under the racist regime of Jim Crow and under the tyranny of a sinister white sheriff in her hometown known as the "Gator." In her memoir, Sherrod notes that the "Gator" made sure that black families in the area were "kept in line." Indeed, Sherrod's own father had been murdered by a neighbor in a dispute over livestock. His murderer was a white farmer who was not convicted of the crime (Sherrod, 2012, 53-60).

In addition, as mentioned earlier, Sherrod and her husband and farming partners had endured racism from the USDA, which denied loans to them. Against this longstanding backdrop of enduring historical racism, Sherrod notes that when Roger Spooner came to see her and asked for help, she had at first thought he was talking down to her. He spoke loudly, which she eventually learned was due to him being hard of hearing. As she listened to his story,

she was able to set aside her negative experiences with racism and see the person in front of her:

I looked at the worried man sitting across from me, and my heart just opened wide. I had a revelation. I said, “I can help you.” And I did. It took plenty of maneuvering, but my efforts succeeded, and the Spooners and I ended up being solid friends (Sherrod, 2012, 3).

Breitbart’s excerpted sound-byte, however, handily omitted any reference to the entire context of the speech, Spooner’s rescued farm, and Sherrod’s larger message of racial healing. Instead, he tweeted the following: “Will Eric Holder’s DOJ hold accountable fed[eral] appointee Shirley Sherrod for admitting practicing racist discrimination” (qtd. in Sherrod, 4,).

Instead of defending Sherrod, the USDA leadership and the Obama Administration capitulated to the reverse racist rhetoric of the Breitbart accusations (as initially did the NAACP and its President Benjamin Jealous), asked Sherrod to immediately resign in spite of her entreaties to the USDA to watch the entire tape and understand the full context of her remarks. The phrase “context is everything,” a key tenet for rhetoricians, became a media mantra in the days following her forced resignation. Over the ensuing days as the full tape was released and reviewed by the press as well as by chagrined members of the federal government and the general public, Breitbart defended himself by shifting the responsibility from Sherrod to the NAACP audience members who heard her speech.¹ He claimed they were reverse racists as they had the temerity to clap and cheer when they thought Sherrod was saying that she had discriminated against Spooner.

As Villaneuva notes, the new metaphors of racism are ones that flip the script on traditional racist narratives (2005, 3-4). Instead of pointing to the typical racist tropes of inferiority and incompetency that are levied against black people, Breitbart chose to attack

¹For more on the Breitbart smear campaign media sequence, see the two-day press timeline constructed by Jencks *et al.* for the organization Media Matters. The timeline reveals how quickly the Breitbart story ignited and was taken up in right-wing media as well as mainstream media before significant fact-checking, modification, and retraction occurred. While Sherrod was eventually offered a different job in the USDA, in the office of Advocacy and Outreach (Sherrod, 2012, 143), and President Obama and Agriculture Secretary Vilsack reached out to her to welcome her back to the fold, she refused to be bought out or bought back into the USDA.

Sherrod and the NAACP through levying a charge of reverse racism—it was a “black person” and a “black organization” who were exercising inappropriate power and keeping white people out.

After the initial media frenzy over the decontextualized speech excerpt, the motive for Breitbart’s attack on Sherrod and the NAACP moved front and center in the news and the blogosphere. Commentators speculated that Breitbart was out to collect evidence of the NAACP exercising reverse racism so that he could deflect attention away from overt racism being exhibited by the Tea Party. Also, commentators speculated about why USDA officials and the Obama Administration called for Sherrod’s resignation before reviewing the full tape of the speech. CNN Anchor John King offered the following line of interrogation of the motivation for the attacks on Sherrod in his July 20, 2010 broadcast:

Did some conservatives mad at the NAACP for labeling the Tea Party racist launch a misleading attack against an African-American federal official and label her a racist? Did the [A]dministration, one led by the country’s first African-American president, panic when it became aware of a video posted on the Internet and forced that African-American official to resign before hearing her side of the story and her remarks in full context? And did the NAACP in quickly applauding that decision to fire Shirley Sherrod also rush to judgment?

As the story continued to unfurl, commentators began to analyze in minute detail the tape of the Sherrod speech. In a point-by-point analysis of the tape in the light of Breitbart’s charges, William Saletan, a journalist for *Slate.com*, analyzed the NAACP audience’s response on the video, refuting Breitbart’s interpretation that the NAACP audience clapped in approval of Sherrod’s decontextualized comments that she wouldn’t help Roger Spooner (2010, N.p.). Other commentators, upon analysis of the video, reached the same conclusions as Saletan: Breitbart was trying to defend himself by trying to pin the label “reverse racist” on the NAACP audience.

In her memoir, Sherrod offers her own interpretation of the larger rhetorical situation that surrounded the USDA and the Obama Administration in asking her to step down from her post. She points out that President Obama was constantly dealing with claims of reverse racism and black favoritism. The climate was one of “political fear,” as Sherrod notes, in which “reverse racism” charges were being levied and circulated, especially in the wake of racial incidents and rhetorics associated with the Tea Party.

(Sherrod, 2012, 162-165). Sherrod's excerpted and decontextualized remarks became a political football that the Obama Administration had to punt as quickly as possible. Any hint of so-called "reverse racism," and the Administration was ready to disavow Sherrod's track record of faithful service and history as a civil rights activist.

Commentator Clarence LuSane, author of a book on the Obama White House, also saw this situation as one in which the White House reacted fearfully when confronted with race issues: "But many believe it was the fear of right-wing media that created the milieu in which there is a knee-jerk reaction to even the slightest threat of bad news, particularly on the issue of race, which drives the [A]dministration's actions" (LuSane, 2010, N.p.). As further evidence of this pattern of reaction, as soon as Breitbart began to circulate the decontextualized sound-byte, the *Los Angeles Times* through the Freedom of Information Act obtained many pages of emails that detail reactions from USDA and White House staff members. The emails tell a tale of fellow federal employees who couldn't wait to get rid of Sherrod (Sherrod, 2012, 148). The volatility of this situation was further compounded by the long history of USDA racial discrimination against black farmers described earlier—a history that Sherrod herself had been subjected to with the New Community farm.

The framing rhetorics driving the media coverage—of the Right attacking the Obama Administration and the USDA for having a "racist" employee—didn't account for the major backstory. Journalist Charles Ellison, commenting in the *Huffington Post*, writes that when the Sherrod story emerged, the "mainstream media's sensationalistic coverage" missed the "plight of the African American farmers waiting on a \$1.25 billion class action settlement from the federal government" (2010, N.p.). Ellison denounces the Sherrod-Breitbart media coverage as a failed opportunity for activists and the Obama Administration to highlight the Pigford cases in an era of political fear about race. He notes that Agriculture Secretary "Vilsack expressed fear in those initial moments of viewing the edited Biggovernment.com clip, shaken by the potential of the hoax [for] ... compromis[ing] [the USDA's] capacity to close the chapter on civil rights cases" (2010, N.p.) Rather than take the media opportunity as a chance to make amends to black farmers and to call for "immediate approval of funding for the [Pigford] settlement, Vilsack and the White House glossed over that detail, failing to bring it up in any public statements about the Sherrod incident" (Ellison, 2010, N.p.).

Sherrod had tried to raise the issue of USDA discrimination against black farmers on the TV program *Morning Joe*, but her references to discrimination were not taken up in any consequential way. That few media outlets, with the exception of *Politics 365.com* and *Black Enterprise*, addressed this significant backstory demonstrated “the larger problem of careless or deliberate ignorance in mainstream newsrooms” (Ellison, 2010, N.p.). The media’s framing rhetorics of the Sherrod-Breitbart debate made it possible to forget or simply ignore the longstanding track record of the USDA’s discrimination against black farmers.

Breitbart’s and the right’s attacks didn’t end at this point in spite of the sound drubbing they received in the media for their varied claims of “reverse racism.” Once the Pigford II settlement was in the works, Breitbart went after Sherrod yet again, this time to accuse her of defrauding the government as a complainant in the Pigford settlement. Breitbart and supporters circulated an email claiming that Sherrod and her husband defrauded the government and cooked up the Pigford II case in order to bilk the government and receive a large settlement. Thus, Breitbart fell back on the time-honored metonym that Sherrod was a defrauder of the government, a black entitlement seeker who was abusing the system, a reinvented circulation of the trope of the “welfare queen.” President Obama was also implicated in the email as someone giving fraudulent handouts in order to “buy” votes through so-called reparations (another variation on the “food stamp president” theme mentioned earlier). FactCheck.org, a website sponsored by the Annenberg Public Policy Center, posted the Breitbart email and also offered a fact check of false claims it was circulating. First, the email:

Pigford vs. Glickman.

But then on February 23, 2010, something shocking happened in relation to that original judgment [referring to the Pigford I case]: In total silence, the USDA agreed to release more funds to “Pigford.”

The amount was a staggering..... \$1.25 billion. This was because the original number of plaintiffs – 400 black farmers--had now swollen, in a class action suit, to include a total of 86,000 black farmers throughout America.

There was only one teensy problem:

The United States of America doesn’t have 86,000 black farmers!!!! According to accurate and totally verifiable

Official USDA 2007 Census data, the total number of black farmers throughout America is only 39,697.

Hmmm... by the Official USDA 1992 Census data the US had only 18,816 black farmers!!

Oops!!

Well, gosh – how on earth did 39,697 explode into the fraudulent 86,000 claims??

And how did \$50,000 explode into \$1.25 billion??

Well, folks, you'll just have to ask the woman who not only spearheaded this case because of her position in 1997 at the "Rural Development Leadership Network," but whose family received the highest single payout (approximately \$13 million) from that action – Shirley Sherrod.

Oops again!!

Yes, folks it appears that Ms. Sherrod had just unwittingly exposed herself as the perpetrator of one of the biggest fraud claims in the history of the United States--a fraud enabled solely because she screamed racism at the government and cowed them into submission.

And it gets even more interesting ...

Ms. Sherrod has also exposed the person who aided and abetted her in this race fraud.

As it turns out, the original judgment of "Pigford vs. Glickman" in 1999 only applied to a total of about 16,000 black farmers.

But in 2008, a junior U. S. Senator got a law passed to reopen the case and allow more black farmers to sue for funds.

The Senator was Barack Hussein Obama.

Because this law was passed in dead silence, and because the woman responsible for spearheading it was an obscure USDA official, American taxpayers did not realize that they had just been forced in the midst of a worldwide recession to pay out more than \$1.25 billion to settle a race claim.

But Andy Breitbart knew. And on Monday, July 22, 2010, he cleverly laid a trap which Sherrod--and Obama + his cronies--stumbled headfirst into which has now

resulted in the entire world discovering the existence of this corrupt financial judgment.

As for Ms. Sherrod?? Well, she's discovering too late that her cry of 'racism' to the media, which was intended to throw the spotlight on Breitbart has instead thrown that spotlight on herself and the huge corruption. Sherrod has vanished from public view.

But the perpetrator of that law passed in dead silence leading to unlawful claims & corruption..... is still trying to fool all of US ("Obama," 2011, N.p.).

Falling back on the racialized metonym of the "makers" and the "takers" and the black entitlement seeker, the email constructed President Obama and his "cronies" as defrauders of the nation and claimed that Sherrod "screamed racism at the government and cowed them into submission" while collecting a fraudulent \$13 million for herself and her family. Of course, the problem with the entitlement-seeking metonym is that it was simply untrue. The key item of dispute was the number of black farmers as reported in the census versus the numbers reported in the Pigford cases. As the Annenberg Foundation fact-check service reported, a *Congressional Research* report refutes what was said in the Breitbart email about the numbers of black farmers: "...Census data prior to 2002 counted farms, *not farmers*. Some farms had multiple farmers, so there were more black farmers than black-owned farms" ("Obama," 2011, N.p.). The claim that the USDA released funds in total silence was also incorrect, since the Senate on November 19, 2010 passed the Claims Resolution Act, "which provided \$1.15 billion in addition to the \$100 million already appropriated. The House passed the bill 256-152 on Nov. 20, 2010" ("Obama," 2011, N.p.). The email also claimed that Sherrod's family was awarded \$13 million, which was also inaccurate. The \$13 million settlement was awarded to New Communities, the cooperative farm that Sherrod and her husband along with others founded in 1969, a farm of "5,700 acres" that was once the "largest tract of black-owned land in the country" and the settlement was distributed among the dozen families that were involved in the farm ("Obama," 2011, N.p.). In addition to their share of the New Communities settlement, Sherrod and her husband were awarded \$150,000 for mental damages, that is, the considerable pain and suffering incurred upon losing their farm.

Also applicable to the "reverse racist" charges that were made against Sherrod is irony, one of the four master tropes. That Sherrod should be the persistent and repeated target of Andrew

Breitbart's claims of "reverse racism" and fraud is worth noting in terms of irony's rhetorical dimensions given Sherrod's history in black freedom struggle, particularly on behalf of black farmers and all farmers in her home state of Georgia, and given the fact that her family farm/cooperative was discriminated against by the USDA. Furthermore, Sherrod became the *only* employee of the USDA to be fired (in this case, wrongfully) on charges of civil rights violations whereas USDA officials who perpetuated years of systematic discrimination against black farmers and others were *not* fired. In what was perhaps a moment of poetic justice, Sherrod and her husband used their portion of the Pigford II settlement to purchase a Southern plantation, Cypress Ponds, where enslaved blacks had once worked, to continue their work to support black farmers, to farm the land with the families of their lost farm New Communities, and to found a Conference Center on Racial Reconciliation (Sherrod, 2012, 169-74). Sherrod also filed a slander suit against Breitbart, which is still pending in the courts even though Breitbart himself has since passed away of a heart attack (Sherrod, 2012, 160-61). At the same time, Sherrod has become an even more prominent spokesperson for racial justice and justice for black farmers and all farmers.

CONCLUDING LESSONS

One of the most important lessons that rhetoricians can take away from the plight of black farmers and the vilification of Sherrod is the need to fight back against racialized rhetorics and policies that seek to silence and censor those fighting battles to correct racialized injustices. In an atmosphere of fear where "reverse racism" charges are hurled in an attempt to control and silence activists like Sherrod and organizations like the NAACP, it's important that we seek to understand the operations of such new racialized rhetorics and take them on, insofar as the old racist rhetorics are, in some cases, still alive and well. As Sherrod herself notes, language does matter: "Even when racism is not overtly expressed, it is easily recognizable in the words that are used—everything from talking about affirmative action babies to calling First Lady Michelle Obama 'angry'" (Sherrod, 2012, 165). It's also important to refute the very existence of "reverse racism," for as Sherrod states, "Setting aside the fact that historically black and whites have no parity of experience and that whites were never enslaved or denied their rights as a population, in my opinion racism is racism. There's no 'reverse' in the equation" (Sherrod, 2012, 165).

REFERENCE LIST

- Alkon, A. H. and J. Agyeman. "Introduction: The Food Movement as Polyculture." *Cultivating Food Justice: Race, Class, and Sustainability*. (Pp. 1-20.). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011.
- (Eds.) *Cultivating Food Justice: Race, Class, and Sustainability*. Boston: MIT Press, 2011.
- Batt, A. "Black Farmers Still Looking for Justice." *Market to Market*. Iowa Public Television, 2008.
http://www.iptv.org/mtom/story.cfm/lead/4409/mtom_20090501_3435_lead1. Accessed 5 February 2013.
- "Black Farming and Land Loss: A History." Public Broadcast System and Independent Television Service. *Homecoming... Sometimes I Am Haunted by Red Dirt and Clay*. PDF. Web. (N.d.) Accessed 14 May 2015. 1-9.
- Cowan, T. and J. Feder. "The Pigford Cases: USDA Settlement of Discrimination Suits by Black Farmers." *Congressional Research Service* (2012): PDF. Web. Accessed 14 May 2015. 1-11.
- Clary Lemon, J. "The Racialization of Composition Studies: Scholarly Rhetoric of Race Since 1990." *College Composition and Communication* 61 (2009): PDF. Web. Accessed 14 May 2015. W1-W17.
- Elliott, D. "Food Stamp President: Race Code, or Just Politics." National Public Radio. Transcript (2012): Web. Accessed 11 February 2013.
- Ellison, C. D. "Shirley Sherrod, Black Farmers, and the 2010 Racial World Cup." Blog Huff Post. *The Huffington Post*. (2010): Web. Accessed 23 November 2012.
- Green, J. J., E. Green, and A. M. Kleiner. "From the Past to the Present: Agricultural Development and Black Farmers in the American South." (Pg. 47-64). In Alkon, A. H. and J. Agyeman (Eds.).
- Homecoming... Sometimes I Am Haunted by Red Dirt and Clay*. Documentary Film. Dir. Charlene Gilbert. Independent Television Service, 1999.
- Jencks, F., B. Obie, E. Schroek, and C. Schwen. "Timeline of Breitbart's Sherrod Smear." *Media Matters for America*. MediaMatters.org. Web. (2010) Accessed 14 February 2013.
- King, J. "Race to Judgment: Racism." *CNN Transcripts*. CNN. (2010): Web. Accessed 14 May 2015.

- LuSane, C. "Racism, Shirley Sherrod, and the Obama White House." *Z Space blogs*. Z Space Communications.org. (2010): Web. Accessed 14 May 2015.
- "Obama and the Pigford Cases." FactCheck.org. Annenberg Public Policy Center (2011). Web. Accessed 14 May 2015.
- Saletan, W. "Amen Canard: Breitbart Lied About Shirley Sherrod. Now He's Lying about the NAACP." *Slate.com*. (2010): Web. Accessed 14 May 2015.
- Sherrod, S. *The Courage to Hope: How I Stood Up to the Politics of Fear*. New York: Atria Books, 2012.
- Villanueva, V, Jr. "The Rhetorics of the New Racism and the Four Master Tropes." *First Year Honors Composition: An Online Journal* (2005): PDF. Web. Accessed 14 May 2015. 1-20.
- Wollan, M. "The Faces of Food Stamps." *MSN Money*. MSN.com. N.d. Web. Accessed 11 February 2013.
- "4/11/00." "Your Stories." Public Broadcast System and Independent Television Service. *Homecoming... Sometimes I Am Haunted by Red Dirt and Clay*. (2000): Web. Accessed 15 May 2015.