

[Updated from the Babson-Equal Exchange Cooperative Curriculum; and excerpted mostly from Jessica Gordon Nembhard, *Collective Courage: A History of African American Cooperative Economic Thought and Practice*. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014.]

African American Cooperatives Curriculum

Excerpts with Study Guide including Learning Objectives, Required Reading, Optional Readings, Learning Activities (Assignments)

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Learning Objectives:

- *To learn about the various attempts at and successes of African American cooperative ownership throughout US history*
- *To understand the opportunities and challenges offered by cooperative ownership for African Americans and consider the circumstances under which cooperative ownership has been beneficial to African American communities, Black women and/or Black youth*
- *To analyze the barriers and challenges to cooperative ownership among African Americans, and to recognize the role played by unfair competition, racism and white supremacist terrorism in undermining Black cooperatives.*
- *To identify the leaders of and explore the contours of the African American Cooperative Movement, its development, periods of strength, and relationship to the Civil Rights Movement*

African American Cooperatives: Overview

Cooperatives have played an important role in forwarding the rights and prospects of African Americans. Cooperatives are examples of democratic economic enterprises that provide a mechanism for pooling resources, increasing benefits, and sharing profits. Cooperative ownership can contribute to anti-poverty strategies and community building strategies, especially when market activities do not provide for the needs of a community. Throughout history, among all groups and people in every country, cooperatives have facilitated economic development, stabilization, and independence, often for those who have been economically marginalized. African Americans have a long but hidden history of cooperative economic thought and practice Gordon Nembhard (2004).

A larger proportion of Blacks, Latinos, Native Americans, and some Asian American groups compared with Whites in the U.S. are poor and unemployed, have lower wealth levels and lower business ownership, poorer health, and higher incarceration levels, in good times as well as bad. Marginalization forces subaltern groups such as African Americans to find alternative economic solutions. Forced segregation made it imperative that African Americans join together economically, because the mainstream economy was exploitative, discriminatory, and exclusionary. Voluntary segregation was often the way to maintain economic independence and control. Self-help efforts – mutual aid societies, maroons, communal societies, for example – provide a chance to design and manage needed services in culturally, racially, and geographically sensitive ways. In the early centuries in the US, enslaved as well as free African Americans pooled their money to buy their own and their family members’ freedom. “Freedmen” established mutual societies to pool meager resources to help cover costs of illness and death for example. They created communities, enclaves, Black businesses and other economic activity insulated from racial discrimination and neglect (see Gordon Nembhard 2014).

African Americans, as well as other people of color and low-income people, have benefitted greatly from cooperative ownership and democratic economic governance throughout the history of the U.S., similar to their counterparts around the world. Cooperatives contribute to community economic development because they anchor economic activity and recirculate money and other resources within the community/neighborhood, facilitate joint ownership and asset building, practice democratic economic participation, and provide jobs and meaningful work to community members. As such they address market failure, marginalization and discrimination. Also cooperatives provide education and training to members and the community, usually with some continuity, develop leadership among members, and usually promote environmental sustainability (Gordon Nembhard 2015, and 2014).

Cooperative economic development solves many problems created by market failure, economic discrimination, and under development. Cooperative businesses are group-centered, needs-based, and asset building local development models based on pooling of resources, democratic economic participation, and profit sharing. They are locally controlled, internally driven democratic institutions that promote group learning, economic interdependence, consolidation of resources, development of assets and protection of people and the environment. Cooperatives stabilize their communities - increasing economic activity, creating good jobs, increasing benefits and wages, and encouraging civic participation. Community-based, cooperatively-owned enterprises are characterized by greater community input and participation in the planning, development and governance of commercially-viable socially-responsible businesses. Cooperatives provide a mechanism for low-resourced people with few traditional opportunities, to create new economic opportunities for themselves and their co-workers and/or neighbors (Gordon Nembhard 2015, 2014; Fairbairn, Bold, Fulton, Hammond Ketilson, Ish 1991).

In many cases African Americans chose cooperative ownership when cooperation made sense, was a rational strategy to pursue, but also when all other avenues for economic activity were closed. It was often risky politically as well as economically to try a different path - especially one that was considered a way to circumvent white monopolies, and to be anti-capitalistic, if not outright socialist or communist. It took courage to shop at the cooperative exchange or the co-op store when white land owners and store owners would do anything to crush the competition (Gordon Nembhard 2018). Yet African Americans did just that over and over again throughout history.

Telling this Black cooperative history is also a retelling of African American civil rights history – a reconstructing of African American history and civil rights activity using as lens the Black cooperative movement (Gordon Nembhard 2011). Many of the players are the same. Many of the great (even famous) African American thinkers, movers, and shakers were also leaders in the Black cooperative movement – including W.E.B. Du Bois, Ella Jo Baker, A Philip Randolph, George Schuyler, Marcus Garvey (and his Universal Negro Improvement Association), Nannie Helen Burroughs, and the Black Panther Party, The Student National Coordinating Committee, and at times the Nation of Islam (Gordon Nembhard 2014, 2004; and Shipp 2000). That part of their history and thought, however, has been mostly left out or ignored - until my research on the history of African American cooperatives. Adding information from the Black cooperative movement revitalizes the telling of the African American experience and increases our understanding of African American agency and political economic organizing (Gordon Nembhard 2011).

Early African American Cooperatives

In the search for solutions to bring long term and meaningful economic development to urban and rural communities around the world, and to increase asset ownership and civic engagement, Black scholar W.E.B. Du Bois was one of several African Americans to view cooperative economics as a promising antidote to persistent racial economic inequality (Gordon Nembhard 2004). In 1907 W.E. B. Du Bois wrote a monograph as part of his Atlanta University series on the Negro entitled, *Economic Cooperation among Negro Americans* (Du Bois 1907), after first exploring some of these issues in his 1898 volume, *Some Efforts of American Negroes for their Own Social Betterment*. Du Bois (1907) notes that the African American “spirit of revolt” used cooperation in the form of insurrection to establish “widespread organization for the rescue of fugitive slaves” (26). Blacks pooled money in order to help each other buy themselves out of enslavement. In addition, runaway slaves formed their own communities, often isolated Maroons, where they eluded and/or fought off bounty hunters, and lived collective existence in relative isolation. Immediately after the Civil War, some Blacks organized themselves (or were organized) into intentional communities and communes, where they could live and develop under their own leadership, creating their own economy (Pease and Pease 1963; DeFilippis 2004). This in turn developed, in both the North and the South, into “various co-operative efforts toward economic emancipation and land buying”; and those

efforts led to cooperative businesses, building and loan associations, and trade unions (Du Bois 1907: 26).

Du Bois’ 1907 monograph is a comprehensive study of cooperative activities among African Americans from the 1800s to 1907. It is less a theoretical study of cooperative economic development and more an analysis of a variety of ways African Americans cooperate economically, and a listing of Black-owned cooperative businesses, organizations and projects. He explains that Blacks have pooled resources through churches, mutual aid societies, fraternal organizations, and jointly owned businesses. Du Bois (1907) documented hundreds of mutual aid societies and cooperative projects through religious and benevolence institutions, beneficial and insurance societies, secret societies, schools, and financial institutions. Mutual Aid Societies and Beneficial Societies provided joint purchasing and marketing, revolving loan funds, and sickness, widow & orphan, and death benefits. They often operated informally through Black religious organizations and Black independent schools. Many were founded and headed by Black women. These were the precursors to the African American owned cooperatives.

Black capitalism was also a strategy of racial economic solidarity/cooperation and used widely. Early Negro joint stock ownership companies include: the Chesapeake Marine Railway and Dry Dock Company shipyard in Baltimore (1865-1883), Coleman Manufacturing Company in Concord, NC (1897) both mentioned by Du Bois (1907); and the United Negro Improvement Association’s “Black Star Line” and “Negro Factories” (1920s) (see Gordon Nembhard 2014).

The first organized cooperatives were farm cooperatives and cooperative marketing boards, consumer cooperative grocery stores, cooperative schools, and credit unions. While efforts at collective economic action were often thwarted by racial discrimination, white supremacist sabotage and terrorism, efforts persisted throughout the centuries. In the 19th century, African Americans were involved in early populist movements for grassroots empowerment, particularly in rural areas in the U.S. after the Civil War. Blacks were involved in various activities and struggles particularly for agricultural independence from sharecropping through cooperative ownership (Gordon Nembhard 2014). A major organization in the late 1880s was the Colored Farmer’s Alliance and Cooperative Union, that grew out of efforts with organized labor (such as the Knights of Labor) and other populist organizations of that period. The Knights of Labor organized integrated cooperatives and labor unions in the mid to late 1800s and early 1900s. According to Curl (2009: 4) there were 200 industrial co-ops organized by the Knights of Labor (KoL) between 1886 and 1888. Some southern KoL chapters were all Black – by 1887 between 60 and 90 thousand African Americans were members. The Black members did established cooperatives, but there are few records of this, particularly because it was so dangerous for them. Curl records a Black cooperative cotton gin in Stewart’s Station, Alabama, and Black cooperative villages near Birmingham (Curl 2009: 101). This cooperative activity among the

KoL was very controversial – there was opposition within and outside the trade union movement; and strong opposition to these efforts.

Similarly, the Colored Farmer’s Alliance and Cooperative Union (CFACU), which formed to establish African American leadership and control over racial agrarian reform in the south in the 1880s (see Reynolds 2002 and Ali 2003), operated under fear and harassment by the white “Plantation bloc” (Woods’ (1998) term; see Holmes 1973), but managed to operate several cooperatives in the late 19th century before having to disband (also see Gordon Nembhard 2014). Members of the CFACU shared agricultural techniques and innovations, and coordinated cooperative efforts for planting and harvesting (Ali 2003: 77). The Union promoted alliances between farmers and laborers, was active in local and regional politics – to maintain rights for African Americans after Reconstruction. Best estimates are that the CFACU had over 1 million members and was the largest Black organization of its time. Branches established cooperative stores/exchanges in the ports of Norfolk, Charleston, Mobile, New Orleans, Houston (Ali 2003: 89; Holmes 1973). Members could buy goods at reduced prices and secure loans to pay off their mortgages (Ali 2003: 89; Holmes 1973).

Mutual insurance companies were the earliest official nonagricultural cooperative businesses among Blacks and whites in the U.S. Starting in the late 19th century on into the 20th century, African Americans organized more formal cooperative businesses that followed the European “Rochdale Principles of Cooperation” (which became the international co-op principles of the International Cooperative Alliance) (see Hope 1940 and Gordon Nembhard 2014). Du Bois (1907) documented 154 African American-owned cooperative businesses: 14 “producer cooperatives”; 3 “transportation cooperatives”; 103 “distribution or consumer cooperatives,” and 34 “real estate and credit cooperatives.” There has been no official or national study of African American cooperatives since Du Bois’ early study, until Gordon Nembhard (2014). *Collective Courage* (Gordon Nembhard 2014) documents about 162 legally incorporated cooperative enterprises owned by African Americans in rural & urban areas North & South, from the mid-1800s to the present; in addition to examples of early mutual aid societies, Black communal towns, and formal and informal solidarity economy and collective economic activity from 1780 to 2013.

There have been several organizational attempts in the 20th century, on into the 21st century, to deliberately develop African American cooperative businesses. In 1918 Du Bois started the short-lived Negro Cooperative Guild which provided cooperative economics education and inspired Black leaders to start consumer cooperatives in their communities. In the 1930s, the Young Negroes’ Co-operative League, and the Eastern Carolina Council (of the Federation of North Carolinian Cooperatives) were established to promote cooperative economics among African Americans (more below), and many other African American organizations started promoting and developing cooperative businesses throughout the 20th century, including the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, The Black Panther Party, and the Nation of Islam (Gordon Nembhard 2014). Currently the only major African American cooperative

development organization is the regional Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund (more below), although there are local efforts directed at African American, people of color and low-income cooperative business development such as Green Worker Cooperatives in the Bronx, NY.

Two Examples of Early African American Consumer Cooperatives:

One of the early Black-owned co-op grocery stores in the 20th century that we have some details about is **The Mercantile Cooperative Company**, established in Ruthville, Virginia in 1901. The Odd Fellows Lodge helped to establish the Mercantile Cooperative Company, a Black-run cooperative store chartered by the state. Shares were sold at five dollars each (no one member could hold more than 20), and could be bought in installments (Craig 1987). Members bought a store outside of town and moved it to the main crossroads across from the County Training School. They raised \$1,300 to buy supplies in Richmond (Craig 1987: 135). By 1923 there were 28 shareholders of the store, and the cooperative bought trucks and hired three employees (136).

According to Craig (1987), Charles City County Virginia where Ruthville is located is a relatively prosperous county for African Americans. Until Craig's account (1987), however, most historians “ignored the role of the area's free black population” and “the degree to which community cooperation during the early years of the twentieth century helped move local farmers away from economic dependence on whites” (133-134). Craig highlights collective efforts in Ruthville and observes that “between 1900 and 1930 black farms achieved a level of economic independence that later aided in the struggle for political rights and racial justice” (134).

Citizens' Co-operative Stores of Memphis was established in direct response to the Negro Cooperative Guild meeting called by Du Bois in August 1918 (The Editor 1919). In February 1919, the Memphis group incorporated as the Citizens' Co-operative Stores to operate cooperative meat markets. According to the article in the *Crisis Magazine* (The Editor 1919), the cooperative sold double the amount of the original shares they offered (limit per person was 10 shares), and members could buy shares in installments. By August 1919, five stores were in operation in Memphis, serving about 75,000 people (The Editor 1919: 49). The members of the local guilds associated with each store met monthly to study cooperatives and discuss issues. The cooperative planned to own its own buildings and a cooperative warehouse (The Editor 1919).

From the details in the *Crisis* article we know that the citizens of Memphis eagerly joined the project, as evidenced by the large number of participants and the over achievement of the equity drive. The editor of the *Crisis Magazine* (presumably Du Bois himself) who reported this, notes that:

The good results of co-operation among colored people do not lie alone in the return of savings. They show, also, new opportunities for the earning of a livelihood and in the chance offered our colored youth to become acquainted with business methods. ... [They hire

members of the community.] Thus, in a larger and different sense, we have another form of co-operation. Colored people are furnishing their own with work and money for services received and the recipients are handing the money back for re-distribution to the original colored sources (The Editor 1919: 50).

This is an example of how advocacy, public education, and self-education work to promote cooperative development in the Black community that contributes to economic development and youth development.

African American Cooperatives in the 1930s

The most prolific period of African American cooperatives was during the Great Depression in the 1930s and 40s. The Young Negroes' Cooperative League, and The Eastern Carolina Council (Federation of North Carolinian Cooperatives), and the Ladies Auxiliary to the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters promoted consumer and cooperative education, and helped to establish Black-owned cooperative businesses and credit unions nationally and locally. Mostly consumer's cooperatives were established in cities such as Gary Indiana; New York, New York; Chicago, Illinois; Buffalo, New York; Baltimore, Maryland; Washington, DC; Memphis Tennessee; and Richmond, Virginia. Agricultural cooperatives also continued throughout the South. In addition, early on independent Black-owned grocery stores formed a marketing cooperative, the Colored Merchants Association.

Colored Merchants Association was founded by the National Negro Business League (NNBL), in Montgomery, AL, in 1927. The CMA was an association of independent grocers organized into a buying and advertising cooperative. The creation of the CMA was a way to support independent Black grocery stores with mutual support and collective marketing - in a harsh market during difficult times. Chapters were organized in cities with ten or more stores. Dues were \$5 per month per store (“Business: Negro Chain” 1930). By 1930 253 stores were part of the CMA network, including 32 stores in Tulsa, OK; 25 in Dallas, TX; 25 in New York City (Manhattan) and 10 in Omaha, NB, in addition to the associations already in existence in Montgomery Alabama and Winston-Salem North Carolina (Tolbert 2007). The National Negro Business League also included a couple of credit unions.

Young Negroes' Co-operative League (YNCL), a cooperative federation, was founded in December 1930 by about 25-30 African American youth in response to a call by George Schuyler (Schuyler 1932; Calvin 1931). Its goal was to form a coalition of local cooperatives and buying clubs loosely affiliated in a network of affiliate councils (Ransby, 2003). The Young Negroes' Co-operative League held their first national conference in Pittsburgh, PA, October 18, 1931. Thirty official delegates from member organizations and 600 participants attended. George Schuyler was elected President; and Ella J. Baker, National Director (Calvin 1931; Ransby, 2003). League leaders promoted education and the study of Rochdale consumers' cooperation.

The YNCL’s goal was to form a coalition of local cooperatives and buying clubs loosely affiliated in a network of affiliate regional councils that would be members of the League. It planned to start with 5,000 charter members, paying a \$1 initiation fee (Schuyler 1932). By 1932 the League had formed councils in New York, Philadelphia, Monessen (PA), Pittsburgh, Columbus (OH), Cleveland, Cincinnati, Phoenix, New Orleans, Columbia (SC), Portsmouth (VA), and Washington, DC, with a total membership of 400 (Schuyler, 1932). The Harlem Council of the Young Negroes’ Co-operative League, headed by Ella Baker, was particularly active. The League did not achieve all its plans, but did establish several co-op stores and credit unions around the country during its 3 years of existence, and held two national conferences on cooperative economics (Gordon Nembhard 2014).

Eastern Carolina Council federation of North Carolinian Cooperatives, an African American federation for the development of cooperatives, was established by two Black independent schools (Bricks and Tyrrell County) that taught cooperative economics to Black farm families, and established farmer’s cooperatives, credit unions, buyer’s clubs, and health insurance (Pitts 1950). The principal of the **Tyrrell County Training School**, and members of his staff, for example, held study groups on cooperative economics (Pitts 1950). By 1939 25 neighbors established a credit union. In the first year membership increased to 187, and the credit union started a student savings account program. Members of the Tyrrell group started a co-op store in 1940. In 1941, they established a cooperative health insurance program that guaranteed a member up to \$100 for hospitalization for a membership fee of \$1.00, monthly assessments of ten cents, and a twenty-five cent “co-payment” for each hospital visit (Pitts 1950, 27). They had plans to raise money to hire a doctor, but never proceeded with those plans. The credit union helped several families save their farms from foreclosure and/or to purchase a farm; and financed group purchases of farm equipment. Buying clubs and machinery cooperatives (purchasing coops) were established through 1945. (Pitts 1950, 27-30).

The Eastern Carolina Council worked with the Credit Union Division of the State Department of Agriculture and of the Extension Service of the North Carolina state vocational program to develop credit unions and cooperatives. In 1936 it had helped to establish three Black credit unions. In 1945 the Eastern Carolina Council helped to form the North Carolina Council for Credit Unions and Associates (shortened to the North Carolina Council). By 1948 the North Carolina Council had established 98 Black-owned credit unions, and 48 additional co-op enterprises (9 consumer stores, 32 machinery co-ops, 4 curb markets, 2 health associations and 1 housing project) owned by African Americans in the state of North Carolina (Pitts 1950). This was a huge accomplishment, and we have no other comparable state-level information. Pitts’ (1950) research is the only state-wide study of Black cooperatives that I found.

More Current Examples

Co-op development continued to be a strategy for African American economic development and independence particularly in the 1960s and 70s, again in agriculture, but also consumer’s cooperatives, credit unions, and housing cooperatives. More recently worker cooperatives are becoming increasingly common, and some are owned predominantly by African Americans and/or people of color, particularly Latinas and women immigrants from countries in Africa.

The Federation of Southern Cooperatives, a non-profit organization of state associations to support predominantly Black cooperatives in southern states, was founded in 1967 and later merged with the Land Emergency Fund to become the Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund. Member cooperatives engage in organic farming, marketing, agricultural processing, fishing, sewing, handicrafts, land buying, grocery cooperatives, and credit unions (Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund 2007; Gordon Nembhard 2004a). The organization established 6 state offices and a rural training and research center. It also is an advocacy group and technical assistance provider to protect Black-owned land and maintain Black land ownership, as well as to promote sustainable family farming and cooperative development among African Americans (“A Tribute to the Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund.” 2000); and provides emergency services to its members during times of natural disaster (Gordon Nembhard 2014).

In its 51-year history, the organization has helped to create and/or support more than 200 cooperatives and credit unions mostly in the 10 states where it operates (Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Missouri, Mississippi, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and the Virgin Islands) (“A Tribute to the Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund.” 2000). Examples of co-operatives in the Federation are: Freedom Quilting Bee (AL), North Bolivar County Farm Cooperative (MS), Panola Land Buyers Association Housing Development Corp. (AL), Southern Alternatives Cooperative (GA), Southwest Georgia Farmers Cooperatives (GA), Indian Springs Farmers Association Inc. (MS), Beat 4 Farms Cooperative (MS), South Plaquemine United Fisheries Cooperative (LA), South Carolina Sea Island Farmers Co-op (SC), People’s Cooperative (SC), 359 Services Cooperative (TX), Virgin Island Farmers Cooperative (Virgin Islands), Demopolis Citizens Federal Credit Union (AL), First Delta Federal Credit Union (MS), and Shreveport Federal Credit Union (MS) (Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund 2007). The Federation owns and runs a rural training and research center in Epes, AL, that showcases sustainable forestry, provides co-op education, and helps to develop Black youth-run co-ops (such as Sankofa Youth Cooperative) (Gordon Nembhard 2014). The FSC/LAF also engages in cooperative development in Africa and the Caribbean. The organization has an important reach throughout the south, is connected to the larger U.S. cooperative movement, and has successfully advocated for important measures in U.S. farm bills to support Black farmers, Black land ownership, and Black co-op development (Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund 2007; Gordon Nembhard 2014 and 2015). Its headquarters is in East Point, Georgia.

Mandela Foods Cooperative is a worker-owned and community-owned full service grocery store and nutritional education center in West Oakland, California. It is incorporated under California law as a for-profit cooperative. The co-op started in June 2009 with a group of local activist working on food security issues in Oakland (Mandela Foods Cooperative No Date). The store opened with eight worker-owners who operate in a non-hierarchical management structure, by committee. The co-op partners with local farmers to increase the financial sustainability of family farms, and access to fresh foods; and with its incubator Mandela Marketplace to support cooperative development in West Oakland (Mandela Foods Cooperative 2010). The co-op targets low-income residents in the neighborhood both to provide services, and to involve in the cooperative as worker owners (Gordon Nembhard 2014).

Black Women’s Roles

Black women’s roles in the cooperative movement are also notable. Black women were important players first in the mutual aid movement and then in the cooperative movement. The roles of women such as Ella Jo Baker (The Young Negroes’ Co-operative League), Nannie Helen Burroughs (Cooperative Industries of Washington, DC), Halena Wilson (the Ladies Auxiliary of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters), Estelle Witherspoon (Freedom Quilting Bee), and Fannie Lou Hamer (Freedom Farm) are examples of African American women’s leadership in promoting and running various cooperatives (see Gordon Nembhard 2017 and 2014).

Freedom Quilting Bee, a handicraft cooperative in Alberta, Alabama, and a charter member of the Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund, was established in 1966. It was founded by women in sharecropping families, looking to increase and stabilize their incomes (since sharecropping is essentially debt peonage, their families were very poor) (Gordon Nembhard 2004). The women began selling quilts to supplement their families’ farm incomes. The seed money for the cooperative came from an initial sale of 100 quilts, sold for them in New York by an Episcopalian minister (Rev. Francis Walters) who wanted to support the effort (“Freedom Quilting Bee of Alberta, Alabama” 1992). Co-founder Estelle Witherspoon was FQB’s first President. In 1968 the cooperative bought 23 acres of land. This was an important acquisition because it allowed them to build the sewing factory, and to increase Black land ownership (Freedom Quilting Bee No Date). They sold eight lots to families who had been evicted from their homes for registering to vote, and/or attending a speech by Martin Luther King (Freedom Quilting Bee No Date). The quilters also began using other entrepreneurial strategies to increase the economic activity under their control - making pot holders and conference canvass bags for example. Some of the quilters were highlighted in the Smithsonian Gees Bend Quilters exhibit. The cooperative continues to exist, but has suffered from the death or retirement of many of its original members, and lack of new members and resources (Gordon Nembhard 2014).

Dawson Workers-Owned Cooperative was formed on October 6, 1997 by workers from the abandoned Almark Mills fabric cutting and sewing plant, with help from a local business developer (Merlo 1998b). Marcus Lemacks, the President and General Manager of Almark Mills, worked with the mayor of Dawson and former employees of the Mill to create a worker-owned sewing factory. In December 1997, 70 members (former employees) started work at the old plant, now as worker-owners in a new cooperative. The majority (76 percent) of the mill's work force was female; a third of them, single mothers; and most were Black (Merlo 1998b). Almark Mills had been the largest employer of women in Terrell County, and there were no other textile jobs within 50 miles. The worker-owners used their union fund (from years of paying union dues, now available because the union had been dissolved with the closing of Almark Mills) as their equity investment in the new cooperative. Ownership shares were also paid in installments of weekly payroll deductions of \$7.16 over four years (Merlo 1998b).

The co-op was fortunate to be able to access targeted government funds. The Clinton Administration's Community Adjustment and Investment Program (CAIP) authorized (and funded) USDA to make loans to businesses in up to 50 rural communities adversely impacted by NAFTA - through the Business and Industry loan guarantee program operated by the Rural Business Cooperative Service of the USDA. Their county qualified. This enabled the co-op to pay off the bank debts, expand and hire one hundred more workers (total of 169 employees). DWOC sales in 1998 were almost \$5million and they expected to sell \$7.5million in 1999 (Merlo 1998a, 1998b).

The mayor of Dawson, Robert Albritten, told Merlo (1998b: 1) that "Persons in this community doubted that women and minorities could make this work where it hadn't succeeded before, but we've made believers out of them." Board chair Dianne Williams remarked that it changed the workers' lives, made them more optimistic and hopeful ("the future is bright"); and changed the way business was done in the factory - jobs were now more secure and communication was now more open/transparent (Merlo 1998b: 1, 5).

Black Youth and Cooperatives

Schools and education programs have been important to the cooperative movement in the African American community, sometimes through churches, but often in public and private high schools (see Gordon Nembhard 2014). During the 1930s and 40s some African American-run schools also experimented with cooperative business ventures and teaching cooperative economics (see Gordon Nembhard 2008). In 1933, the group that became the Consumer's Cooperative Trading Company in Gary Indiana, for example, began offering a cooperative economics course in the high school's evening school (Hope 1940). This course had the highest attendance of any course in the night school. In addition, the young people's branch of Consumers' Cooperative Trading Company operated its own ice-cream parlor and candy store in the 1930s (Hope 1940). We saw above the successes and influence on the cooperative movement of

two Black independent schools in North Carolina in the 1930s and 40s. Those schools had established co-operative economics training as well as developed co-ops.

The Commercial Department of the Bluefield Colored Institute in Bluefield, West Virginia, as another example, formed a student cooperative store probably in 1925 (Sims 1925). The store’s mission was to sell school supplies and books the students and school needed, and to be a “commercial laboratory for the application of business theory and practice” (Sims: 93). The co-op was able to pay patronage dividends of 10% back on purchases. The student members voted to use “profits” to pay for scholarships to the Secondary School and Junior College (Sims 1925).

In addition, the Young Negroes’ Co-operative League (discussed above) sponsored study groups, cooperative economics reading lists and conferences in the 1930s, particularly among Black youth. The Ladies Auxiliary to the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters also circulated a reading list on cooperative economics and sponsored study groups (Chateauvert 1998; and Gordon Nembhard 2014). Education in general was extremely important to all the African American cooperatives and most started with a study group on cooperative economics (see Gordon Nembhard, 2014).

“Food from the ‘Hood” student cooperative began in the Fall of 1992 after students from Crenshaw High School (South Central Los Angeles) revitalized the school garden to help rebuild their community after the 1992 uprising. They began by donating the food they grew to the homeless. After turning a profit selling in a farmer’s market, they decided to go into business and developed a business plan (Food From The ‘Hood 2005). “Food From the ‘Hood” began selling salad dressing made from the produce they grew in their school garden. Managed by the students and run similarly to a cooperative business, the students voted to save at least 50% of the profits for scholarships to college for their graduating members. During its first ten years, over \$180,000 was awarded in college scholarships to 77 graduated student managers (Food From The ‘Hood 2005).

Conclusions

The history of African American cooperatives that I have been able to put together is a snap shot view because there has been very little documentation of most of the cooperatives, and what documentation does exist is difficult to find and only gives a case study of a cooperative at a specific point in time. We do not have good records of when the cooperatives started and ended because most of the information comes from a news article or two. There are very few comprehensive studies and no continuous studies. Despite the difficulty of gaining a full picture of this history, the information that I have gathered provides enough evidence that there has been a long and significant history, even if it is little known. The fact that many of the leaders involved in forming and promoting cooperatives in the Black community are also leaders in other

important Black movements, especially the Civil Rights Movement, was at first surprising, but on second thought makes sense because these leaders were looking for strategies for social and economic equality and justice. Cooperatives are an important community economic development strategy that addresses market failure and economic marginalization. The history of racism in the U.S. has produced both those phenomena when applied to African Americans so that active, thoughtful leaders would turn towards a strategy that has been used by all populations around the world.

This essay provides a basic outline and discussion of the highlights of the history of African American cooperatives. There is much more information to read, and to be found for anyone interested in this topic. Gordon Nembhard (2004) provides additional information, as does the presentation I gave in February 2011 to the School of Social Transformation at Arizona State University (see video link in bibliography). I provide much more details and analysis in my book, *Collective Courage: A History of African American Cooperative Economic Thought and Practice* (published by the Pennsylvania State University Press in 2014). What we learn is that African Americans used economic cooperation from the time of enslavement until the present, particularly starting with Mutual Aid Societies and later developing official cooperative businesses. African American farmers and organized labor in the north and south used cooperatives to help increase access to and affordability of supplies, equipment, and financial and human services. African Americans in urban areas also used cooperatives for such access and to create decent jobs. They were often hampered and limited because of their economic and educational marginalization – so they did not always have enough capital or education to run a collective business. Yet they persisted, and developed organizations to help educate and train them so that they could succeed. On the other hand, most of the problems were because they were challenged and thwarted by competitors and white supremacists who did not want them to succeed, and used financial and other economic sabotage as well as physical threats and violence against them (Gordon Nembhard 2018). I name my full length book on this subject *Collective Courage* because it took personal and group courage to pursue and persist in the cooperative ventures. This history is thus a history of courage and fortitude as well as of economic and social grassroots organizing and cooperation among African Americans.

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Study Guide

Required reading

- Gordon Nembhard, Jessica. 2004. “Cooperative Ownership and the Struggle for African American Economic Empowerment.” *Humanity & Society* Vol. 28, No. 3 (August): 298-321.
- GritTV Interview with Laura Flanders. 2014. “African American Cooperatives and Civil Rights with Jessica Gordon Nembhard.” View this and other videos and interviews at <http://www.geo.coop/collectivecourage>.
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Additional Background reading: Short List: [Optional Reading List is at end, below]

- Gordon Nembhard, Jessica. 2014. *Collective Courage: A History of African American Cooperative Economic Thought and Practice*. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press.
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Exercises

Group Exercise 1:

Discussion Questions (in small groups and then report back to entire group; or for discussion with the entire class; can also be assigned as reflection questions to be answered as students do the readings):

1. Why was economic independence important to African American cooperators? Discuss the economic (and racial) challenges and needs that contributed to the decision of Black cooperators to form a cooperative. Provide two (2) examples of African American cooperatives that used cooperative ownership to gain economic independence that also offered some political and/or social independence.
2. Discuss major challenges and barriers to African American cooperative development. List three (3) to five (5), and explain the context in which each challenge/barrier operated. Provide at least three (3) examples of effective ways that the challenges/barriers were overcome or mitigated by African American cooperators.
3. What was the rationale and benefit of allowing co-op members to buy shares in installments? List the co-ops that used that policy. Discuss the pros and cons of the policy and why it may be necessary, particularly for low-income members. Discuss modern examples and situations where this is still a necessary policy/option.
4. Explore the ways in which involvement in cooperative economics and the development of cooperative businesses developed leadership among African Americans, Black women, and/or Black youth. What activities and expectations associated with cooperative business ownership helped to develop agency, human and social capital, and leadership skills in members and organizers? Give some examples.
5. Explore ways in which the African American Cooperative Movement ran almost parallel with the movements for Black liberation (the long Civil Rights Movement). Discuss similarities and differences between the two movements in terms of strategies to address racial discrimination and activities engaged in. Why were Black co-op leaders better known for their civil rights activities than their cooperative economic activities?

Group Exercise 2:

Activity: Research the history of cooperatives in your city, town, state or region. Use your local library, ask a reference librarian for help, use search terms such as cooperative, co-op store, housing cooperative online and in library; search local newspapers, magazines, and newsletters for information about co-ops; interview

elders in your community; interview local co-op members if you have any including housing co-ops or credit unions. Do this research in small groups or individually. You might want to hold a focus group with community elders and/or representatives from churches and other organizations that may have had mutual aid societies or co-ops in their history. Discuss what a co-op is and ask questions about solidarity economy activities, economic cooperation and any collectives that people remember or have been part of.

Depending on how much information you find, you may want to write a short report or article. Write a 2000–3000 word news article about this topic (submit it to *GEO Newsletter* (www.geo.coop) or other media that will cover such a topic). Create an oral presentation to present to your study group, and/or at the library or your place of worship. If you find a lot of information, you may want to write a paper or research report and share it with your public library and local newspaper. You could also create a pod cast and/or a set of interviews and submit them to *GEO Newsletter* or another media outlet. Find a way to share this information – you might learn even more, and you might start great conversations.

Group Exercise 3:

Scenario: A Black working class neighborhood in a major city. Members of a specific religious group come together to discuss how to create jobs in their community or connect jobless members of their congregation to jobs in their community.

Activity: Break into 3 groups. Group 1 follows the route of Black capitalism and works to create a business or attract a business or franchise to the neighborhood that would create 30 jobs in 2 years. Group 2 follows the route of developing a consumer cooperative or marketing cooperative in the neighborhood to help bring a particular service, or development a retail store or support existing retail stores in the neighborhood (to serve at least 1000 people in 2 years). Group 3 follows the route of creating a worker cooperative in the neighborhood (to employ 15 – 30 people in 2 years). Each group takes about 15-20 minutes to describe the specific issue or problem they will solve with their business model; to outline the strategy and the rationale of their strategy; and to answer questions such as: how does membership in the religious institution help this process; why would that strategy be the best strategy to address the problem; what would the group need to do or give to make this happen; what barriers will need to be addressed; what resources and strengths from the members and the community can they count on?

Report back: Each group then presents to the entire group their strategy, rationale and answers to the questions. After each presentation, the full group briefly discusses the strengths and weaknesses of the strategy.

Individual Exercise:

Become an expert on one of the following areas: Black women’s cooperatives in the U.S.; Black youth cooperatives in the U.S.; African American cooperatives in the 1930s; African American rural cooperative development; African American economic and political independence through cooperative business and/or agricultural ownership. Create a portfolio that includes a written overview of your specialty area (2-3 page description), 3 – 5 case studies (2 paragraphs – 2 pages each) that illustrate the topic, one or two interviews with a co-op member in one of the case studies or in a similar co-op (or a person with expertise on that area if you are studying a period from the past), and several pictures. Write a 2000 – 3000 word news article about this topic (submit it to *GEO Newsletter* (www.geo.coop) or other media that will cover such a topic), or an oral presentation.

Optional Reading List

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- Williamson, Anne O.H. 1939. “The Cooperative Way Out: A Challenge to the Negro College.” In “Section B: Rural Education – The Cooperative Movement (continued).” *The Journal of Negro Education* 8: 2(January): 240-242.
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