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Master's Project: A Soilful Journey

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A Soilful Journey

A Masters Project Presented

by

Xavier Brown

to

The Faculty of the Graduate College

of

The University of Vermont

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Science
Specializing in Leadership for Sustainability

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ABSTRACT

This project involved the evolution and continued development of Soilful City, an organization in D.C. that uses food and farming as a social change agent. Soilful City views farming as a way to cultivate food and sovereignty for communities and to cultivate, heal, and rebuild our souls. The organization utilizes the agricultural and political principles of agroecology to work in solidarity with under-resourced communities to develop a collective consciousness about restoring bodies, families, communities, and the land. This project focused on three central components: 1) the clear articulation of Soilful's cosmology, 2) the development of a theory of change, and 3) a series of actions to increase organizational visibility and strengthen networks and relationships. Each of these initiatives required significant collaboration and community involvement and provided an opportunity for Soilful City to grow in ways that align with the organization's core values. These efforts have resulted in a stronger organization and has raised Soilful City's visibility in important ways that have allowed the organization to more effectively put its vision and mission into action.

Keywords: Food Justice, Agroecology, Afroecology

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SECTION 1: PROJECT OVERVIEW AND DESCRIPTION

Introduction

“We farm because it makes us more human.” -- Josue Pupe Lopez, Organización Boricúa de Agricultura Ecológica (2018)

Soilful is a word that describes the feeling when your mind, body, and soul are connected with the earth. Soilful City is a space dedicated to connecting humans and nature through information, ideas, and people in urban environments; creating leadership through the wisdom of nature. Soilful City partners with other grassroots organizations to create community led urban sustainable projects by using urban agriculture and the wisdom of nature to reconnect people back to the earth. Soilful City seeks to find the intersecting points between urban agriculture and other social justice issues.

Soilful is a term that captures a way of living, thinking, and being, the spirit of which is embodied by people all over the world who are living in harmonious relationship with the land. Soilful, as an organization, was created out of a need for justice and self-healing and with the goal of transforming and reshaping the sacred relationship between people of African descent and Mother Earth. Our vision is to use food and farming as social change agent. Soilful views farming not only as a way to cultivate food and sovereignty for communities but also as a way to cultivate, heal, and rebuild our souls. We utilize the agricultural and political principles of agroecology to work in solidarity with under-resourced communities to develop a collective consciousness about restoring bodies, families, communities, and the land. In doing so, Soilful seeks to create harmony amongst individuals, communities, and the natural world. We believe in the power of love and in the innate knowledge and wisdom of grassroots communities to transform the world.

Soilful is dedicated to working in communities located in wards 7 and 8 of Washington, D.C. These majority African-American communities, located east of the Anacostia River, have the worst health outcomes in the city. According to a report done by the Georgetown University School of Nursing and Health Studies, many long-term residents of these wards struggle to meet basic needs. The rate of poverty among African-Americans is higher than in all other racial groups in the city; 25% of adult Black residents are currently living below the poverty line. Low incomes, compounded by a loss of cultural identity and social cohesion in the wake of gentrification, have a detrimental effect on total health (Brown et al, 2017).

According to the Georgetown study, African-Americans are two times more likely to die from coronary heart disease when compared with White counterparts. When compared to other races, African-Americans in the District are more than two times more likely to report 15–30 days of poor mental health. When compared to Whites, African-Americans are more than six times more likely to die from diabetes-related complications (Brown et al, 2017).

In 2016, there are only three grocery stores for the over 150,000 residents that live in these southeastern communities. Wards 7 and 8 have been identified as *food deserts* because of poor accessibility to nutritious food. Almost 15% of D.C. residents experience food insecurity. Poor

access to healthy food results in irregular dietary habits, which leads to an increased risk for obesity and various chronic diseases (Brown et al, 2017).

At the beginning of this project our current work was focused on three central areas:

1) *Knowledge Sharing*

- Soilful manages a micro-farm in Ward 8 called Project Eden (Everyone Deserves to Eat Naturally). Soilful has turned Eden into an outdoor classroom that has become the host location for *Soilful Thursdays*, a weekly community gathering that uses gardening as a platform for bringing people together to share with and learn from one other. We believe in the value of knowledge that is gained from lived experiences, and *Soilful Thursdays* have created a space where people are free to share their ecological and social knowledge. At the end of each *Soilful Thursday*, vegetables are given out to everyone who participates.

2) *Community Building and Community Partnerships*

- Soilful has partners with the Richardson Dwelling Community (Clay Terrace) to create a healthy community space with a garden as its focal point. We hosted the first D.C. Afro-Ecology training series at the garden and facilitated a community discussion about how gardens can be used as tools for liberation. The garden has become a place for organizing and learning in the community
- The *Soul 2 Soil* community compost-training program is a new initiative that was created in partnership with the Institute for Local Self Reliance and members of the Clay Terrace community garden. Our collective goal is to create a composting training program that provides life and job skills.

3) *Economic opportunity*

- Soilful is in the process of creating value-added products from the produce growing in our community-based gardens and farms. These income-generating products create the opportunity for commercial enterprise and are a source of funding for our community programs. As Culture of Health Leader with the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Strategies, Methods, and Results

As Soilful City has grown, it was clear that the organization could benefit from strategic initiatives that would help us to grow in ways that would stay aligned with our core values. The strategies and methods outlined below are divided into four main initiatives and describe the aspects of my Masters Project that have allowed me to apply the learnings of the MSLS program to my organization in ways that allow Soilful to put our mission and vision into action.

Initiative #1: Further develop and articulate the Cosmology that underlies Soilful's work.

A cosmology is a way of knowing and understanding the world (Fu Kiau, 2001). Since our first online modules in the MSLS program, the idea of creating a cosmology was something that I

knew I wanted to create for Soilful. In order for Soilful to be an organization that is constantly learning, growing, and evolving, we needed to have a foundational story and understanding of where the organization was coming from. The Soilful cosmology represents the starting point in our methodologies.

Developing this cosmology involved in depth study of ancestral cosmologies which are influenced by my direct experiences by Afro-ecology, Indigenous wisdom from the global South, such as Buen Vivir from South America, and the teachings of Bunseki Fu-kiau from the Congo (Fu Kiau, 2001), and Sawubona (2017) from South Africa.

Buen Vivir is defined as “Harmony within yourself: physical, mental, and spiritual components. Harmony between communities: between yourself and your family, your community, your neighbors, your colleagues, institutions, and markets. Harmony with nature: mutual balance between human activities and environmental health” (Hicks, 2016).

Sawubona and Fu-kiau teach us the importance of our ancestors and our connections to them in our everyday lives. “Sawubona is one of the primal words, when people were still able to really see each other. In fact the word says: ‘We see you.’ So it’s not a single I person, but my eyes are connected to a dimension of reality we call ancestral, ancestors. So, my seeing includes my ancestors. My seeing also includes the divinities that are part of the celestial spheres of reality” (Sawubona, 2017).

These lineages and teachings have led to Soilful’s cosmology that we describe as Afroecology.

Afroecology is a form of art, movement, practice and a process of social and ecological transformation that involves the re-evaluation of our sacred relationships with land, water, air, seeds and food; (re) recognizes humans as co-creators that are an aspect of the planet’s life support systems; values the Afro-Indigenous experience of reality and ways of knowing; cherishes ancestral and communal forms of knowledge, experience and lifeways that began in Africa and continue throughout the Diaspora; and is rooted in the agrarian traditions, legacies and struggles of the Black experience in the Americas. The wisdom of these traditions are considered Soilful’s north star for creating economic and social transformation. Soilful’s cosmology operates along the boundaries of:

- Anti-patriarchy and gender equality
- Horizontal education and political education
- Leaderships skills and the economic principles of a solidarity economy
- The natural farming practices of agroecology
- Indigenous ways of knowing and Ancestral knowledge

This process has led to the articulation of our cosmology that is posted on Soilful’s blog and describes how Soilful’s cosmology grows from communities of African descent for the purpose of creating community power and working towards food sovereignty. Our cosmology language includes this excerpt (Soilful, 2018):

Soilful Cosmology

Soilful describes the ecology of relationships between self and the collective, in which mind, body and spirit connects with mother-Earth the original teacher and provider for us all. Every element and gift that nature provides carries with it lessons about life. Nature and the universe operate from abundance, thus there is always enough material and immaterial matter for all living things within the Universe.

The creativity of Soilful is rooted in the harmonies and vibration felt through the sound and movements of nature and the wisdom of our direct and collective ancestors. Creativity flows freely and naturally around us at all times and we can tap into that creativity by grounding ourselves in the positivity of the Universe releasing dormant creative energy within us all.

Soilful represents a way of life that is resilient & resistant to all forms of mental, spiritual, physical, emotional and environmental abuse, oppression violence and degradation. Soilful is a way of life; a way of being and seeing the world that recognizes our sacred relationship to our place in the natural living systems of mother-Earth.

Initiative #2: Creating an Organization-wide Theory of Change

Soilful's theory of change is rooted in creating community connections and leveraging the collective power of community to create transformation. My intention was to create something tangible that clearly articulates the process that Soilful utilizes to create social, emotional, and spiritual change with our community partners. This process was difficult for me at first because I was looking for all of my inspiration and ideas from outside of my work. I was in a mental space that did not recognize that a theory of change is not some cool graphic or diagram that will go up on my website. A theory of change is road map for people to follow and to understand why and how I do what I do. The best theory of change is one that people can see feel, touch and taste.

As a result, I decided to articulate our theory of change through a story of community-based collaboration that embodies our deepest values.

The story of Soilful's Theory of change starts back in 2016, when I purchased the Horace Pippin Fish Pepper seeds from Roughwood seeds located Philadelphia Pennsylvania. I read about the amazing story of the seeds (Weaver, 2009) and decided to grow them so that I could save them to keep the legacy alive. Towards the end of 2016 a friend of mine sent me an article about a hot sauce coming out of the Bronx that utilized a shared approach to grow all of the peppers that were used for the sauce. It was in that moment that I decide to create a sauce that pulled together all of the things that I had learned in the MSLS program.

I worked with community gardeners and farmers from all over the DC, Maryland, and Virginia area to grow the fish peppers. By working with black growers, I created a network of growers that are unified and focused on a common goal. I bought all of the peppers back from the

growers at 5 dollars a pound. Once I had all of the peppers, I created the Horace Pippin Fish Pepper Sauce collectively with another group of DC gardeners and cooks.

Soilful theory of change is based on tapping into the collective power of community by creating connections that can have powerful impacts by utilizing collective economics. Creating positive community connections that allow people to unify and move in unison is the foundation of the Soilful Theory Change. Rather than illustrate our theory of change using some fancy graphics, we decided to invest in telling this story which is available on our website and visible here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9ZtIromZD8A>.

Initiative #3: Increase Organizational Visibility and Strengthen Relationships/Network

This Project also focused on efforts to increase the visibility of Soilful, strengthen relationships and uplift stories of reciprocity that illuminate grassroots community partnerships that are connected to Soilful. Our work on this initiative took the form of networking efforts and fundraising. This included a variety of project deliverables described below:

Soilful Video

The vision for the Soilful video was to create the space for telling stories of our community partners. Soilful is a lifestyle that is represented by people working all over the city. This video acts as an overview of Soilful's work. I wanted to create a space that shares the vision of Soilful through other people's eyes and voices. All of the people and organization that I worked with are Grassroots groups based in Washington, DC. There is a diversity in the groups and individual that I worked with. I worked a church group that utilizes gardening as an educational and character development tool. A group of returning citizens are building out a garden that will be utilized as a healing and training space for men and women who are returning home. I partnered with a woman who runs a nonprofit that provides clothes for men and women who live in homeless shelters.

Robert Wood Johnson Fellowship

Over the past 2 years, I have become part of D.C. based Culture of Health Leaders Team. We have developed strategic initiatives to address multiple problems in the local D.C. ecosystem. The focus of our work is to create a hyper localized, interconnected food system that will be owned by community members as a worker-owned cooperative. Our ultimate focus is providing healthy food options that address the current barriers for Ward 7 & 8 residents. We are focused on working outside of the current non-profit food industrial complex. This current system is not designed for creating growth or transformative change. Our focus is to create a food ecosystem that connects communities, growers, small business owners and producers by creating an organized platform and database for everyone to access. We are stepping away from the model that just gives people raw vegetables. We have come to understand that just providing people with vegetables does not solve the problem if people do not know or have time to cook. As a result, we are also creating a service that provides/delivers gourmet meals and accepts EBT. All of the vegetables will be sourced locally and the meals will be created by local chefs. With the pilot project, we are also looking to create partnerships with foundation based on idea of trust based philanthropy and partnerships who will stick with us for the long haul.

Black Dirt Farm Collective

As a representative of the Black Dirt Farm Collective I was invited to be part of a delegation from the United States that participated in an Agroecology encounter on the Island of Puerto Rico. This encounter was hosted by Organization Boricua de Agricultura Ecological de Puerto Rico. This trip broadened my understanding of the strategies and work that other similar organizations are undertaking in different places and conditions. Boricua is a very organized and diverse group that includes farmers, lawyers academics and activists. Their movement for food sovereignty in is an anti-colonial independence movement as well. The delegation camped on the land, worked on the farm, and took time the lay the seed for relationships to grow. This encounter set the foundation for my Second trip to Puerto Rico that took place post Hurricane Maria as a part of a brigade. Our mission for this second trip was to be extra labor for Puerto Rican Farmers in the rebuilding process.

In addition to relationship-building in Puerto Rico, I represented Soilful and the Black Dirt Farm Collective in Cuba for an Agroecology training that takes place every other year that was held by the National Association of Small Farmers (ANAP). ANAP is a farmer cooperative that was started by Fidel Castro during the special period when the Soviet Union collapsed (<http://www.revista.anap.cu/>). I had the opportunity to visit farms deep in the mountains of Cuba in a province called Artemisa. I learned about land and the food system in Cuba and how things are organized. There were farmers, organizers, and academics there from all over Latin America and the Caribbean. Agroecology is the political and ecological voice of the people who are on the ground. This gathering stressed the importance that Agroecology is not coopted and the move stay rooted in grass roots brilliance People truly believe in the power of Agroecology.

Second International Symposium on Agroecology

In April of this year I was a delegate to the Second International Symposium on Agroecology; this event was hosted by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). This was my first time in Europe and my first time participating in a dialogue about Agroecology that was not grounded in grass roots social, cultural and political theory. This conference was for people who work on policy, run major foundation and large international non-governmental organizations. This was an eye-opening experience for me to insure that Black Dirt Farm Collective and Soilful are moving in step with the rest of the world as we promote Agroecology. It was important that I continue to deepen my understanding of Agroecology and how it can be utilized as one of the most transformative tools that we have to save the planet.

YES Magazine

In May, 2018, I was featured in an article in Yes Magazine that featured some of Soilful's community composting work. I am always grateful & humbled to be featured in any article big or small and for the opportunity to speak from the heart and to share some of my visions with others.

All of these relationship-building and learning experiences have given me the opportunity to see more clearly the possibilities of what the future can be.

Personal Learnings, Evaluation, and Assessment

This project's evaluation and tracking progress methodology included three core components:

- 1. Regular meetings with community partners aimed at deepening relationships and sharing ongoing feedback on our collective work.** Over the course of this project, I convened groups of our partners 10 times (by phone or in person) to discuss our process and provide feedback about the projects. The key learnings for me and Soilful included:
 - The need for more clear communication and more time needed for planning; Effective communication is the key to any type of intersectional success, listening from a place of non-judgment and understanding and sharing your thoughts with others are the corner stones of effective communication. These are skills that I am constantly working on and growing into. I had my hands involved in so many different projects in addition to working full time, that taking time to communicate with partners fell by the wayside at times. I had lapses in communication on my end because I was trying to move things forward at a faster pace that others were not able to sustain.
 - The importance of committing time to step back, do less, focus on internal systems that support the external work is the goal for Soilful in 2018. I have stepped away on many projects that I was loosely involved with back in 2017. When I started this program back in 2015, I told myself that I would be doing Soilful full time by the time that I finish. The finish line is within my grasp and 2017 gave me a glimpse of what I can manifest and create in the future. Reflecting on the different Agroecology and land-based trainings that I have been a part of in the past two years it as altered the way that I view the D.C. Urban Agriculture scene.
 - Avoiding pitfalls of overextending ourselves. I over extended myself in the process of trying to push Soilful forward and complete multiple projects. I feel like this was something that I was finally able to get control of towards the end of 2017. I speaking with people who I respect and value, I was given insight on how to slow down and how to practice self-care by saying no. This is something that I am still growing into. The success of Soilful depends on balance and sustainability of the way I mange Soilful and myself.
- 2. Ongoing reflection and journaling.** There is tremendous value in journaling and the physical process of reflecting and writing things down. As I focused on the process of trying to move forward, I occasionally lost sight of value of regular journaling. As someone who wants to be a part of the vanguard of this movement, I am committed to focus more time on journaling. I have gained a deeper understating of the journaling reflection process and how it shapes and cultivates inner and outer growth. The most important realization that I have come to about journaling is that I want to be one of the main people who tells the story of Soilful. I want my journal to also be a window and record of the journey that I am on.

- 3. External Feedback:** Over the last year and half, I have met regularly with members of my studies committee for external support and feedback that has shaped this project. In addition to my committee, I have been going through a process of developing a project with my Robert Wood Johnson Foundation team. This process has allowed me to get an enormous amount of feedback from the staff at the foundation and has helped me answer some deep questions about what Soilful is and how I can manifest the vision. In addition, I have a business coach from the Latino Economic Development Center who has been giving me feedback on the business model for Soilful. This has been tremendously important because in order for Soilful to be transformative, the organization cannot operate on the same standard capitalistic business principles that are considered the standard.

Recommendations and Next Steps

The process of completing my final project has been a beautiful struggle. It has involved so much personal learning and growing. As the profile of Soilful grows, it has required me to grow and elevate as a leader as well. I put so much pressure on myself to create something new, that I did not realize I had been putting my theory of change in action the entire time. I was thinking and reading so much about cosmologies from around the world that I was forgetting that Soilful's cosmology is based on how I see and move in the world. I was overthinking the entire process. Once I slowed down and relaxed, everything began to come to me. I realized that everything that I needed to complete my project was already inside of me. I want Soilful to move beyond just being a basic organization that does community work. I want Soilful to be a lifestyle that people around the world can connect to and feel a part of. I want teachers, thinkers, mothers, activists and farmers to use the term Soilful as a term of agro-environmental celebration and love.

Traveling has broadened my thoughts and ideas, I have been thinking more about my role as a global citizen and Soilful's role in this global movement. I am finding a balance between the rapid learning journey that I am on while operating in a city that is entrenched with nonprofits who operate from a differently methodology.

This season I am going to use some creativity and technology to further the idea of Soilful Videos. I am going to place a scan able link on the back of each Pippin Sauce bottle. When the link is scanned it will take you directly to a video that connects you to the growers of the peppers that were used to make that individual bottle of sauce. This will allow me to take the idea of the Soilful video to the next level. My plan is to utilize the platform of Soilful to share the stories of all of the community wisdom and strategies for self-determination, empowerment, transformation, and healing. The work that Soilful is a part of is transformational work on every level.

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SECTION 2: PROJECT SYNTHESIS AND NEW LEARNINGS

This project was the culmination of the many lessons that I learned from the MSLS program and outside of the program. There is a difference between reading about different leadership styles, writing about your own leadership style, and putting your leadership style into practice. I've learned many things about my leadership skills and capacity.

- **Communication written and verbal:** My interpersonal communication skills were tested and strengthened during this process. Speaking and articulating myself verbally is one of my strengths and it is something that I constantly work on. I was able to get so many people around the city involved into this project by being able to explain my vision. My written communication skills are something that I need to improve. I am constantly working on this. I needed to have things in writing so that I was able to create an understanding between the growers and myself. The Soilful website is the main medium that I used to articulate the story of the Pippin Sauce and the process of the sauce, the history and inspiration behind the movement. As time moves forward I want to be able to reach more people who may not have access to technology. I need to create a printed document that is more accessible.
- **Deep Listening:** Before speaking and asking questions it was important for me to listen and to take time to learn from everyone around me but most of all, listen to myself. This was a brand-new project that required every aspect of myself so that it would be a success. On a regular basis I received feedback from my community partners and local growers.
- **Collaborations and connections:** This entire process was made possible through community collaborations and connections that were interconnected but separate from each other. The ability to form honest and authentic partnerships was rewarding. On the flipside, partnership and work and require a certain amount of honesty and transparency. It is also important to be honest with yourself during this process and be clear about expectations.
- **Storytelling:** Soilful is a word that describes a universal feeling that everyone feels when your-work is connected to the earth. I wanted to utilize the stories as a tool to show how everyone around the city is Soilful. The story of Horace Pippin Fish pepper and how we collectively created the sauce was a story I wanted to share and pass down. I have come to realize that there are many ways to create and share stories. Story telling is an art and that is something that I want to continually work on and expand.
- **Growth in uncomfortable space:** This was a very stressful process. In hindsight I can honestly say that I spread myself too thin last year. By doing that I learned through trial and error how to operate under tight deadlines. Being able to deal with making mistakes and making sure that I understand these are not failures but opportunities to learn were a key part of my growth. I learned how to tap into my creativity during periods of pressure. I realized that nature requires a certain amount of pressure for things to evolve and grow. Seeds are the perfect example of this. We plant our seeds in the soil, into a dark place, and seeds have to absorb a certain amount of water before they emerge from the darkness of the soil.
- **Allowing myself to be led:** This process has taught me that being a leader is not always about being in the front, it is important to allow the people you are working with to lead

and teach you as well. There is so much growth in allowing others to lead; it takes growth to put your ego aside. Being able to put my ego aside was a huge growth edge for me. Wisdom and understanding can be gained from everyone you come in contact with and the most important revelation that I gained from this is that people are more than willing to share their knowledge.

- **Saying No:** Historically I have been a very disorganized person, but in order for me to complete the goals I set for myself I had to grow through this personal challenge. This is something that I am continuing to grow into. The more honest “No’s” that I give the more empowered that I feel. I have begun to view saying no as a step towards self-care.
- **Time management:** For the last 6 years I have been balancing a full-time job with following my passion. I have been learning the hard way how to balance and slow down, so that I can take time to be present. Often, I am thinking about my next move. So many people that I consider mentors advised me to slow down and utilize my time better by keeping track of everything that I do. By tracking how I utilize my time I have realized that I have so much more time than I ever imagined. Slowing down has made it possible for me to manage my time and more importantly manage myself better.
- **Patience with myself and others:** I learned that when trying something new that the person that you need to have the most patience with is yourself, before anyone else.
- **Theory Practice Theory:** So much of what I have done with Soilful at this point has been based around theories that I have come up with or I have read about or brainstormed with my friends. It is important to move from the ideation phase to the action phase. I am a huge fan of rapid innovation and starting something where you are and being able to adjust as you fail forward.
- **Systems thinking:** I have come to learn the value and importance of system thinking. I have such a deep appreciation for wholistic systems with positive feedback loops that are able to bend, adjust and adapt to everyday circumstances. Systems thinking, designing and creativity are skills that I need to improve upon, but I am proud and excited at the realization that I am able to identify systems that are in place. I am able to see how things are connected. The solutions that I began to come up with collectively and individually have all been geared towards creating or dismantling systems.

Leaving Room For Emergence - New and unexpected things will always manifest. I have learned that the hard way. Going forward I know not to over commit myself or become too fixed on one idea in order for new things to emerge. Emergence represents the growth of new and beautiful things. Spreading myself too thin and overloading my schedule cancels out room for emergent possibilities.

As I have reached the end of this chapter of my Soilful Journey, I have come out on the other side a better man. I have had the rare opportunity to meet so many amazing people along this journey and I have seen where I want my life to go. The last 2.5 years have been amazing for me. The universe has guided me on this journey all the way from my first time visiting Shelburne farms all way to typing my final sentence on my final paper. I pray that I can continue to grow deeper into the lessons that I learned from completing this final project. I pray that I can pass on the things that I have learned during this process and in the program overall. Much love, gratitude, and respect to Matt, TwoTrees, and Emil for being my guides along the way.

