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# Colorful Gardens and Empowerment: Black Resistance and Self-Determination through Urban Farming

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**“Colorful Gardens and Empowerment”:  
Black Resistance and Self-determination through Urban Farming**

Presented to  
the Faculty of the Department of Environmental Studies

In partial fulfillment of the requirement for the

Degree of the Bachelor of Arts

Bates College  
Lewiston, Maine

By  
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April 9<sup>th</sup>, 2018

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## Introduction

The Industrial Food Complex has entered major scrutiny in the recent years. The effects of globalization and a worldly economy has created such high demands for a specific, pristine looking product that the production and transportation of food such as fruits and vegetables or meats has become highly unsustainable. The demand for pristine produce has made us use chemicals and pesticides that pose severe health problems, and in addition to this, the food industry is responsible for the creation of an abundant amount of unwarranted waste. Not only has our global food system affected our health, but it has also drastically impacted our environment (Union of Concerned Scientists, 2018). The clear cutting of forests and global implementation of monocultures has disrupted ecosystems around the world. The impacts of the global food industry on a macro scale are grand and more general. However, on a micro scale and specifically in the United States, the food industry is perpetuating a slow violence that is more discrete and less talked about but quite ravaging in our communities.

Importantly, the people being mostly affected by the slow violence of our food system are low income communities and people of color (Alkon and Agyeman, 2011). This slow violence follows a historical pattern of discrimination, neglect and structural racism towards Black<sup>1</sup> bodies that has dominated all institutions in America whether it be lower access to good education and employment, discrimination in the housing system and most obviously an unjust criminal system. Ultimately, these institutions are embedded in white supremacist structures that are meant to keep whiteness at the top while preventing and hindering the advancement of people of color.

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<sup>1</sup> I found it important to capitalize Black throughout this paper. Black is an identity, it refers to an ethnicity, a group of people and different cultures, whereas black is just a color.

This prevention is observed partly through the creation and appearance of food deserts around the country. Because I will be thoroughly discussing food deserts in this research paper, this term should be given a thorough definition. Food deserts are characterized by areas without grocery stores, where access to nutritious foods is very limited and where the primary sources for foods are corner stores and fast food outlets (Holt-Giménez et al, 2011). To take it one step further, I want to examine the term “desert” in an alternative perspective. In the Chicago Food Desert report, George Kaplan, examines the meaning of “desert” as a verb. When thinking of this term that way, to “desert” becomes to “abandon”. This is quite representative of the forces at work. Food deserts are not a random occurrence; in fact, it is quite the opposite. There are higher structural forces at work that in a way create these food deserts through neglect and misallocation of resources. I will further discuss this in detail later on. Through this neglect, we find that people of color are the primary targets and residents of these food deserts. Because of the severe lack of nutritious produce in food deserts, low income people of color become disproportionately affected by nutritional and cardiovascular diseases such as obesity, diabetes, heart problems, hypertension and other diseases that incapacitate individuals and drastically impacts their health. Furthermore, because of the lack of healthcare services provided in these low income areas, mortality rates increase, thus perpetuating the vicious cycle of negligence by an oppressive system that is seemingly trying to imprison and hold down Black bodies.

Solutions to this unsustainable and unjust food system are found in the appearance of food justice organizations and alternative food movements that ultimately work to redefine what and the manners in which we feed ourselves. Unfortunately, the environmental movement and alternative food movements appear to be predominantly affluent and white. Therefore, individual health and improving the environmental sustainability of food systems become the central

talking points and the larger and important conversation about the structural forces at work and systems of oppressions are neglected. Although the main voices that we hear when food movements are discussed are predominantly affluent and white, this does not mean that people of color have not been participating in environmental movements and alternative food movements. In fact, since access to food represents issues of survival, people of color have historically been taking action to fight and resist against these systems of oppression. This resistance and empowerment through food justice will be crucial points in my discussion, therefore I would like to address the following question: “How can urban community farming in low income communities of color promote empowerment and resistance against oppressive systems while helping to solve issues of food insecurity?”

My research is an exploration of how structural racism and white privilege have continually affected and hindered the self-sufficiency of African Americans and how people of color have and continued to resist oppression through self-determination. The racist structures of this country have placed Black bodies in strategic “food deserts” thus causing them to suffer disproportionately from malnutrition and food related illnesses. I will study three Black food justice organizations, *Acta Non Verba* in Oakland, California, the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network alongside its supplementary farm D-Town Farm in Detroit, Michigan. I will discuss how these organizations promote Black empowerment and self-determination through education about healthy foods and farming. Farming while Black becomes a way to encourage community building and revitalization that ultimately strives to uplift people of color and eliminate food insecurity in these communities. To make sure to provide a strong backbone for my research I examine the terms “food deserts”, “food justice”, “empowerment” and

“Resistance” as well as the tradition of Black agrarianism and environmentalism. I will explain how these terms are all part of the same discussion.

## **Literature review**

### **Food Justice**

Scholars such as Gottlieb and Joshi (2010) define Food Justice as a method of destabilizing the current food economy that is defined by its unsustainable practice and ensuring that the benefits of how food is grown produced and distributed is shared equally by everyone. The industrial food complex is increasingly becoming globalized and therefore the most practical and successful way to supply is through mass production. The Union of Concerned Scientists (2018) explains that mass production is seen through monocultures, excessive use of pesticides and chemicals to create a shiny, pristine product while excluding smaller or local farmers and only benefiting large scale single crop growers of soybeans and corn for example that are tied to major food corporations such as Monsanto. These practices are all but sustainable as they drastically affect the surrounding environment, depleting soil, reducing biodiversity and polluting water.

Food justice movements stress that returning to a local and community scale agriculture is crucial to create sustainable, fair and healthy food systems. Food justice actions take place at the community level but they also happen on an individual level. In addition, Eric Holt-Giménez and Yi Wang (2011) explain in their article that individual acts of consumption cannot successfully transform our current food system. In addition to this, efforts of destabilizing the food system through personal acts and changing the way one consumes is an idea embedded in an affluent, privileged point of view. Pollan (2008) expresses the importance of “voting with your fork” which emphasizes individual actions but ignores the racial and socioeconomic implications of such an action. The current food system that traps people of color and low income people in a cycle of malnutrition does not allow for nutritious autonomy when such

autonomy directly correlates with wealth and financial freedom. Therefore, because most wealth is found in the hands of white people in America, alternative food movements like eating organic or joining a Community Supported Agriculture plan are seen as intrinsically white acts (Guthman, 2008).

Actions such as lobbying, organizing, boycotts, mobilization or direct action have better chances of success. When a community is involved and a sense of collective identity is formed, implementing change and challenging the way a system operates becomes more attainable (Melucci, 1996). Furthermore, as we are discussing alternative food movements, agriculture and farming practices need to be examined as well.

There seems to be great disparities between the amount of Black farmers and white farmers in America. This disparity most likely stems from the racist policies found within the USDA which denied farmers of color access to the support for industrialization (Hope Alkon, 2007). Therefore, USDA loans were much more easily attainable for white farmers than farmers of color. In the early 1900's more than 900,000 black farmers owned over 15.5 million acres of land, and by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, 18,000 black farmers owned only two million acres (Reynolds, 2002). This institutionalized discrimination has definitely contributed to the development of a present day agricultural system that is predominantly white and male (Alkon, 2015). Throughout time, as African Americans continually lost their ties to farming and to the land through practices of dispossession, their awareness of healthy eating dissipated as well. Food is ultimately connected to one's identity and culture, therefore by denying access to food, a part of people's cultural heritage is stripped away (Alkon, Agyeman, 2011). This represents the havoc that food deserts wreak on low income African American communities in the United States. Our food system has become increasingly mechanized and all the power is in the hands of

corporate entities that discriminate and preserve whiteness by neglecting minority farmers and perpetuating social injustices (Guthman, 2008).

Food movements in America need to try to shift away from individualism and should prioritize becoming more focused on the lack of access to good food, social and distribution inequalities and how these issues are ultimately tied to institutionalized racism and classism (Giménez et al, 2011). The Community Food Security Coalition is a movement that is committed to reshaping the current unsustainable and unjust food system into a sustainable one that is accessible to everyone. To have a better understanding of the term food security, Hamm and Bellows (2003) explain that it represents the condition in which all community residents obtain a safe, culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet through a sustainable food system that maximizes community self-reliance and social justice (Hamm and Bellows, 2003). Through this definition, alternatives to the current food system can be seen with cooperative ownership of local grocery markets, community nutrition educational programs, community driven agricultural research and community urban farming.

Black urban community farming projects will be at the center of my discussion as they work to “liberate” African Americans from this unjust system through food sovereignty and different forms of empowerment that are tied with the reconnecting that needs to occur between African Americans and the land. In addition to this, in this next section I will explain that African Americans have been part of the environmental movement for quite some time, but have not been sufficiently spoken about.

## **Black Environmentalism/Agrarianism**

Through authors like Thoreau and Aldo Leopold, our common conception of environmentalism usually revolves around conservation and preservation of nature. It is defined by a fetishizing of the Wild, and a sense of duty to keep nature pristine and untouched by the human hand. The environmentalism that we come across when reading Aldo Leopold or Thoreau is one that seems to forget to address the social and racial implications of land and the natural landscape. Here it is imperative to insert this dimension of environmentalism when discussing African Americans relationship to the environment.

In her book *African American Environmental Thought* Kimberly Smith (2007) explains that environmental thought should not only just be defined by a set of ideas and arguments aimed at preserving the wilderness and maintaining a viable ecosystem and tending toward eccentric values. Smith pushes back against that definition as it excludes the black political thought. She defines environmental thought more broadly as a set of ideas concerning the relationship between humans and the natural environment including the norms that ought to govern that relationship. It is important to provide such a definition when discussing the emergence of black food justice movements across America as it clearly relates to African Americans' relationship to the land which has been continually transforming.

Black environmentalism and agrarian traditions have been present since before the Transatlantic slave trade. Africans had strong ties to the land which were seen through practices of farming in West African countries like Senegal for example where they would grow grains, legumes and tubers using traditional methods of growing produce to avoid environmental factors that would impact the growth of their foods (Glave, 2010). Africans were also known for practicing conservation and preservation of land through sustainable practices of farming to

avoid soil erosion. Practices such as intercropping, mixing grains and legumes and crop rotations were used to return nitrogen to the soil (Glave, 2010). As they were brought against their will across the Atlantic, Africans brought their knowledge and agrarian traditions with them. In fact, it is argued that slaves continued using their agricultural knowledge and applied it to the the fields they were forced to work (Davy, 2016). This knowledge which was completely foreign to white slave holders proved useful and such knowledge was later stolen by slaveholders (Glave, 2010). Glave speaks of one specific African tradition that was used during enslavement; “All plants bearing crops above ground such as wheat, corn, etc., must be seeded on the increase, while those underground like potatoes, etc., on the decrease of the moon (86).”

Scholars like Janet Fiskio uses the term “black agrarianism” to include the agricultural, botanical, and culinary knowledge and practices brought to the United States by enslaved Africans. It also includes the knowledge produced and skills created by enslaved Africans, and the knowledge and practices formed by African Americans since emancipation into the present (Fiskio, 2016). As agrarian knowledge was passed down, the significance of land started transforming as it would become a place of suffering and abuse but also one of refuge. Wilderness evoked both fear and comfort for African Americans. Wilderness was often a place where Black slaves would be hunted, abused and killed, but wilderness also evoked hope as it was a place of transition for runaway slaves between the plantation and freedom (Glave, 2016). Kimberly Smith explains that the slave system forced slaves into an intimate relationship with the natural environment but also tended to alienate them from it. Smith further explains how slavery corrupted Black agricultural traditions, “Oppressing agricultural labor, they concluded, impairs the physical integrity of the land, as well as its spiritual and moral value.” (Smith, 2007). Possessing land as an African American signified overcoming segregation, poverty and injustice

that would alienate the oppressed from their physical environment (Smith, 2007). African Americans strong attachment to the land was later seen through the mass efforts to obtain land rights between enslavement and early twentieth century. During the Reconstruction and Progressive eras, African Americans fought for ownership of land but as these efforts were mostly in vain, a lot of African Americans returned to farming as tenants and wage laborers where exploitation was still present.

Black environmentalism and agrarianism movements ultimately fight for recognition of Black agrarian knowledge in an oppressive system that has continuously silenced and omitted Black history, knowledge and activism around the environment.

Enslavement and practices of sharecropping have drastically impacted the way African Americans think about the environment and the land. Black environmental thought pushes back against the twentieth century environmental ideologies which are rooted in white supremacy and that ignored the African American cultures of environmentalism (Glave, 2016). It is therefore clear that Black environmentalism and agrarianism pushes against an oppressive structural system that promotes the erasure of past historical Black agrarian traditions. Modern Black environmentalism and agrarianism therefore implements a form of resistance against these oppressive structural forces.

## **Empowerment and Resistance**

For African Americans today, recreating a connection with the land proves a difficult task. Natasha Bowens in her book *The Color of Food: Stories of Race, Resilience and Farming* explains the complex relationship that Black bodies have with the land. Throughout her book she speaks of the histories of Black farmers in America and inequities of power of land and resources. “We might forget that someone else has control over our water, our food. We might not think about who the land belongs to or who it belonged to before us [...] Most importantly, we might forget that the land beneath our feet holds endless stories of struggle to claim it.” (Bowens, 2015). As a female Black writer, activist and urban farmer, Natasha Bowens explains the importance of going back to farming as a person of color and how it represents a clear act of self-empowerment.

I make use of the term “**empowerment**” in this paper to explain the importance and major role of food sovereignty to a person of color in this country. In addition, the issue of food sovereignty also ultimately comes down to land sovereignty. “Empowerment” can be seen in many different ways, however since I will be discussing how food justice movements can create self-empowerment for people of color in low income neighborhoods I want to explore empowerment as an act of resistance and will also define the term “resistance” its self. More specifically, I will primarily speak of empowerment in the Black community since my case study revolves around this. Therefore, empowerment can be seen as an act of resistance against the prevalent anti-Blackness found in the major institutions of the United States.

Historically, Black activism has been the main form of empowerment for people of color in America. Movements in the 20<sup>th</sup> century like the Civil Rights movement, the Black Panthers, Malcom X and Black nationalists preached for recognition in a country that denied their rights

for centuries. One ultimate goal of black activism is empowerment through political incorporation into social and economic realms as well as a rearranging social and economic systems to lift up the position of the poor and working class (Jennings, 1992). Black food justice movements create self-empowerment through the attainment of autonomy and creation of an alternate system that combats and fights against the current hegemonic system that protects white supremacy. For the sake of revealing the many different dimensions of empowerment found in Black food justice movements, I want to start off by stating that Black women have integral roles in the empowerment of their community. Traditionally, they are responsible for the mental and manual labor of food (Allen and Sachs, 2007). Culturally, women are seen as the providers and nurturers of their community. It therefore makes sense that African American women are strongly active in the resistance against unsustainable and oppressive food systems (White, 2011). A dimension of empowerment that should not be related to my discussion here is “empowerment” as a form of dominance over another group of people (Hill-Collins, 2000). This allows us to only focus on empowerment as a form of resistance and as a form of fight against injustice.

**Resistance** in the Black community has often been interpreted as acts of protests against injustices. To speak of resistance, one needs to mention the Gramscian idea of cultural hegemony which analyses systems of dominance and reveals a specific dichotomy (Seymour, 2006). Resistance usually appears within this structural hegemonic system of dominance and subordination. Resistance allows for a rupture of such dynamics, consequently disrupting the idea of dominance over another group of people. The goal of a resistance movement is to ultimately resist coercive institutions, therefore there is a huge cultural facet to the term. In her

article about resistance, Seymour (2006) defines resistance as intentional therefore conscious acts of defiance or opposition by a subordinate individual or group of individuals against a superior individual or individuals. She proceeds to say that these represent counter-hegemonic acts. The hegemony that Black resistance movements fight against are the societal structural systems that advance white supremacy and impedes on the development of minorities and specifically African Americans. The Black food justice movements are therefore a form of resistance in themselves because they fight against the unfairness of our current food system that continuously pushes aside and confines African Americans to detrimental environments such as food deserts and compromises the health of black bodies. Finally, as Black farmers and environmentalists such as Natasha Bowens and Kelly Carlisle fight to reclaim urban land and transform vacant lots into spaces for cultivating community, they embody a true form of resistance through the breaking of assumptions that only the rich and powerful can shape and transform cities (Baudry, 2012).

Empowerment in the Black food justice movements is in one aspect, a form of resistance against capitalist structures and racist oppression. Ultimately, Monica White (2011) connects food security with issues of housing discrimination towards African Americans, over policing of Black bodies, and implementation of poor schooling systems in low income minority communities. She explains, “In addition, food becomes a point of entry for discussing how African Americans might gain control over other aspects of their lives, including access to affordable housing, clean water, community policing, and decent public education.” (White, 2011, p11). The resistance is against the institutionalized racism embedded in these societal structures. At a higher level, the resistance is also against multinational corporations that are responsible for environmental degradation and ecological disasters. This is seen for example in

the case of Flint, Michigan, where the water supply has been contaminated with high levels of lead for a few years now. Interestingly enough, the ones most affected by this environmental disaster were low income African Americans. This therefore makes me wonder if such carelessness from the local government and environmental authorities would have occurred if a different population had been affected (Campbell et al 2016). The complete neglect of this community by the government and the corporations responsible has made it so that the community is trapped in a state of desolation and powerlessness. Overall, low income people of color end up being affected by environmental injustices at a much higher intensity than their wealthy white counterparts.

The continuous poisoning of black bodies through the water in Flint, Michigan can be related to the continuous poisoning of black bodies through food deserts that possess limited access to nutritious produce and that primarily only provides access to unhealthy foods and foods that provoke malnutrition and cardiovascular diseases (Adams et al, 2010). While African Americans are more affected by food related illnesses than whites in America, the health care system that is completely motivated by financial profit refuses to serve the low income families that suffer from these damaging institutions. This form of empowerment is thus also seen as resistance against pharmaceutical and insurance companies that benefit largely from disease and ill health (White, 2015). In this case, nutritional health and environmental issues that impact people of color are clearly issues of survival (Shiva, 1994, 2). The empowerment through urban farming also creates defiance against the system. This defiance is against the growing mechanization of agribusiness that serves highly processed foods and genetically modified produce. The defiance which is intrinsically a form of environmental justice is seen as well through the refusal of eating produce that is sprayed with harmful toxins that damage the

environment and the bodies of the people that consume these produce. Empowerment as resistance in food justice movements is a resistance against the social structures in America that perpetuate inequality in terms of healthy food access (White, 2011).

Another dimension of empowerment can be characterized with empowerment as self-determination and self-reliance. Autonomy becomes an important point of discussion when speaking of providing food security in African American communities through urban gardening and farming. The knowledge and capacity of growing your own food secures a sense of self-reliance and independence from the current unsustainable food systems. Furthermore, it secures a sense of control over the local food system and most importantly, control over your own body and health. This also greatly contrasts against the industrial food system that works through exploitation and exhaustion of resources because farming harnesses a relationship of collaboration and harmony with the environment as opposed to the domination of nature (White, 2011), (Holzapfel, 2013).

The act of self-determination as an African American is crucial in creating and owning your identity. This society tends to always predetermine and frame black bodies into certain categories, and because of the power of these institutions, it becomes difficult for people of color to deviate from these preconceptions and pre-assigned identities (Hill-Collins, 2000). One of the preconceived ideas for example is that African Americans alienate themselves from farming and the land. By thinking of this in a historical context, I can understand this idea when thinking of the trauma of slavery and sharecropping and the exploitation of blackness that came with that. However, Africans possess deep rooted agrarian roots (Smith, 2007), farming is in the history and genes of black people therefore it is necessary for African Americans to reconnect with the land through farming (Ruffin, 2010). Natasha Bowens explains her book that is is crucial to go

back to farming as it is an act of self-empowerment. She says it is important to “Claim our community’s agricultural legacy” (Bowens, 2015). Consequently, through the empowerment that farming and growing your own food creates, the act of being able to be self-reliant and determine your own health creates an overall empowerment that thwarts any preconceived ideas and frames of African Americans.

A further aspect of empowerment in urban community farming is a sense of empowerment of the community. Here, empowerment becomes less focused on the individual and adopts a communal point of view. Monica White explains it as “neighborhood beautification” (White, 2011. P17). The development of new green urban spaces in vacant lots allows a community to be built up and improved. Many urban farming organizations such as *Acta Non Verba* in Oakland, California, which I will be discussing alongside D-Town farm in Detroit and the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network build small farms and green spaces on abandon lots resulting in a revitalization of the neighborhood and community. By beautifying and restoring their own environments, a sense of agency and independence is created. In addition to this, the implementation and construction of community farms also creates employment opportunities for the residents and therefore contributing to the economic wellbeing of people in the community. To return to the point of control, Monica White (2011) suggests that this “neighborhood beautification” that is taken care of by members of the neighborhood strengthens the sense of community and identity while creating the sense of control over the progress and advancement of the people of color that are a part of the community.

Finally, to reiterate what I previously discussed in this section, the self-empowerment that urban community agriculture fosters in African American communities is quite multi-faceted. Firstly, it brings a sense of nutritional empowerment through education about healthy eating and

food production. Secondly it conveys a sense of economic empowerment through the employment opportunities that urban farming brings to those that participate in the projects. Thirdly, the empowerment can be seen as a form of self-reliance and self-determination in a system that profits on the dependence of low income African Americans. This form of empowerment allows for African Americans to have a sense of agency in choosing how they nourish themselves. Conclusively, the main form of empowerment that urban community farming brings to people of color is a form of resistance and defiance. Farming becomes a strategy of resistance against societal hegemonic structure, capitalism, the multinational corporations that control the food system, and agribusiness that promotes unsustainable food production through practices of extractivism and persecution that are completely detrimental to the environment and the health of people that have no agency and cannot afford to separate themselves from the system. In an interview, Beatriz Beckford who is co-founder of the National Black Food and Justice Alliance expresses that our modern food system can be characterized as a regime of food apartheid that undermines democratic and community control of local food systems. This happens through the privatization and corporatization which completely removes the wellbeing of the individual out of the equation. The movements that I will be discussing in the next section of this paper work against this oppressive anti-black system by efforts of building up and strengthening a community through the growing of healthy food and food sovereignty in areas that suffer from issues of food security.

## **Background**

### **Food Deserts**

Food deserts will play an important role in my discussion of food justice in African American culture, since it directly correlates to the African American struggle with lack of nutritional self-sustainability and accessibility of food in general. A report to Congress by the United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service defines food deserts as areas with limited access to nutritious and affordable food, particularly an area composed of predominantly low income neighborhoods and communities (USDA 2009). Adams et al. (2010) compare the term “food desert” with accessibility to food in a community. Multiple dimensions of these terms are revealed when defined. Adams et al. (2010) argue that these terms are conceptually unclear when characterizing the accessibility of food in a specific area. Giménez and Wang (2011) compare the difference in meaning of the words “accessibility” and “availability”. When it is said that low income neighborhoods have limited access to supermarkets therefore creating food deserts, this raises a few questions. Are food deserts and food accessibility the same construct, or is food accessibility a precursor to food deserts? In this paper I will examine both “accessibility” and “availability” for the sake of discussing the lack of healthy affordable produce in urban communities of color. Scholars like Samina Raja et al. (2008) and Eric Holt Giménez et al. (2011), argue that the words “Accessibility” and “Availability” are defined by location or spatial disposition, in addition to financial means of the ones living in the community. According to The National Black Environmental Network more than half of all black neighborhoods in the United States are reported without full service grocery stores or supermarkets (Raja et al. 2008). The low number of local grocery stores may be associated with an apparent decline in the construction of local grocery stores nationwide. This

decline is related to the growing and globalized food industry that has been promoting the consolidation in the grocery retail sector. This therefore means that supermarkets are becoming larger in size and fewer in numbers (Raja et al. 2008). These supermarkets however, are found in areas harder to access if one resides in a low income neighborhood. Of course, there are other factors that influence availability and accessibility. A low income community may be neighboring a wealthy white neighborhood that has great access to healthy produce and organic grocery stores, but this does not necessarily mean that the low income community has access to such produce. One may be able to access it by walking, but the disproportionate price range of produce in such stores automatically thwarts the availability for a low income family. In addition to inflated prices, difficult or no access to public transportation can mean the difference between nutritious food availability.

The main source of produce and foods in food deserts are found in small corner stores and “ethnic grocers” as Alkon and Agyeman (2011) explain in their book *Cultivating Food Justice: Race, Class, and Sustainability*. They further discuss the rarity of fresh and nutritious produce in these stores, and the type of food generally found in these stores tends to be of poorer quality and less healthy, high in sugars and saturated fats. This pattern is seen throughout the country in impoverished and most likely minority communities. I see this paradigm clearly in my brother’s neighborhood of Flatbush in Brooklyn, New York. Flatbush Ave is a very long avenue that passes through a few neighborhoods that differ in a variety of ways, whether it be with quality of infrastructure, cleanliness of the streets, racial and ethnic disposition and other factors. When Flatbush Ave passes through the small Caribbean area, some patterns of food deserts are clearly noticeable. Infrastructure is neglected, most street corners are marked by convenience stores and little clothing shops while the only popular restaurant are two fast food outlets. Further

down the street, the neighborhood changes into Ditmas Park, and suddenly, the red brick apartment complexes become single family homes and the barren streets become lush with vegetation. Additionally, sources for healthy and nutritious produce become more available. These healthy foods are found in the form of a Community Supported local organic grocery store and a Whole Foods. This contrast or dichotomy is kept in place by strategic allocation of resources in wealthy areas instead of poorer ones thus purposefully neglecting and alienating low income and minority communities. This creates a racial residential segregation that disproportionately places African Americans in these impoverished neighborhoods, consequently reducing access to supermarkets (Zenk et al. 2011).

Scholars such as Rothstein (2017) argue that this racial segregation is actually a product of laws and policy decisions passed by local, state and federal governments that promote discriminatory practices. Rothstein argues that cities' racial segregation is not actually a product of individual prejudice or income inequalities, although these factors have contributed to racial divide. Such practices of "*de jure* segregation" (Rothstein, 2017) which is defined by actions implemented by laws and policies started mainly after the Reconstruction era with Jim Crow laws in the South that denied African Americans the right to vote, segregated them in public transportation, schools and private accommodations and overall reduced Black bodies to being treated as less than human. In the turn of the twentieth century, the erasure of blackness would keep on happening through more discreet initiatives. There was a new dedication on the part of public officials to ensure that white families' homes would be removed from proximity to African Americans in large urban areas:

"Government policies to isolate white families in all-white urban neighborhoods began at the local level. As African Americans were being driven out of smaller Midwestern and western

communities like those in Montana, many other cities, particularly in southern and border states, already had large black populations that couldn't be expelled. Instead, many cities adopted zoning rules decreeing separate living areas for black and white families (Rothstein, 2017, p44).”

In Baltimore for instance, an ordinance was put in place that prohibited African Americans from buying homes on blocks where whites were a majority and vice versa. In addition to promoting segregation, zoning decisions in the mid twentieth century contributed to the gradual degradation of African American neighborhoods. Rothstein (2017) uses the example of St. Louis where not only were these neighborhoods zoned to permit polluting industrial activities, they permitted liquor stores, nightclubs and prostitution establishment to open in these Black neighborhoods but strictly prohibited such places from opening in neighborhoods where whites lived and marked those as zoning violations (50). By the end of the twentieth century, legislatures such as the Fair Housing Act of 1968 were put in place to make sure that future discrimination were prevented, but these laws did nothing to reverse the patterns that had been rooted in American society since the late nineteenth century. Now, the clear segregation and disinvestment towards people of color today clearly shows the legacy of these previous racist laws that shaped how American cities and neighborhoods were formed.

We notice such prevailing discriminatory practices when examining an area like Oakland, California. As the city is divided between flatlands and hills, this spatial demarcation respectively follows the boundaries between poverty and affluence. While most wealthy residents live in the hills of Oakland, African Americans are situated in the flatlands and it is there that low income neighborhoods and the city's food deserts are found (Alkon, Agyeman,

2011). I am examining Oakland's spatial and socioeconomic demarcation because I will discuss a food justice organization and urban farm that is located in East Oakland.

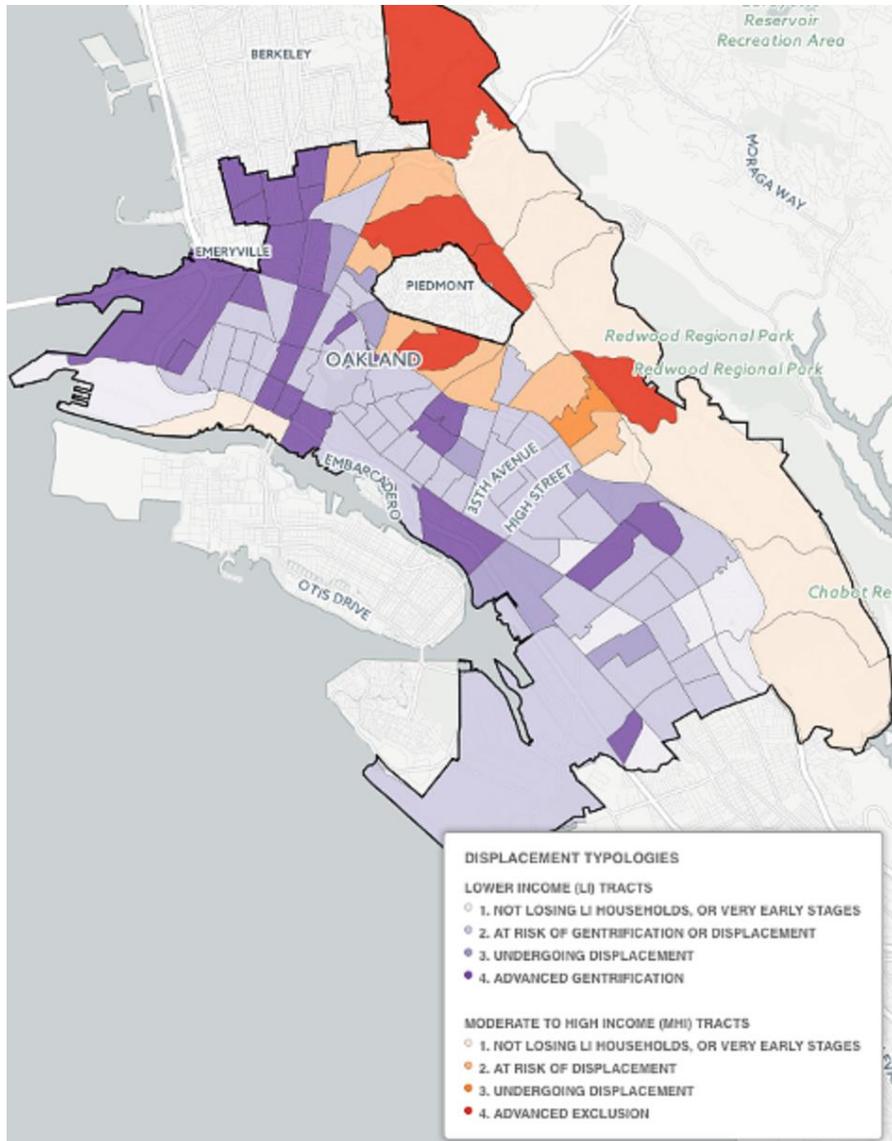
As I stated previously in my introduction, neglect and racial discrimination as well as racial zoning laws are a fundamental part of the formation of food deserts. When closely examining the term "desert", the verb to "abandon" can be related to "desert" and captures a different dimension of this issue. The dimension captured is one that I address throughout this paper and it is the issue of structural racism in the major institutions of the United States. This structural racism has historically blocked the advancement of African Americans in social and economic ways.

The food movement however, ultimately wants to bridge the gap between availability and accessibility and redefine and recreate a system that allows both availability and accessibility for low income communities thus making sure that these people attain a sense of self sufficiency that may result in self-empowerment while resolving in addition, issues of food security.

## **Oakland**

Oakland is known as the nation's second most dangerous city as it suffers from economic depression, high crime rates, poor education and high schools with low rates of graduation. (Oakland Unified School District). These issues ultimately come down to the historical institutional neglect that has been going on in this city for years. Only now, instead of improving life for the many people of color that live there, there have been more and more efforts to gentrify the neighborhoods and push out the people of color even further (Gin, 2007). This pattern is a continuation of the trend that began in the neighboring city of San Francisco (Wyly and Hammel, 2004).

Although the city of Oakland is becoming more and more gentrified, Oakland is still an extremely diverse city that has a high population of African Americans and other people of color. According to an SFGate article, Oakland has lost nearly a quarter of its Black population over the last ten years, however, Oakland still has the second largest African American community in the state of California. Given the fact that the city is in majority populated by people of color, it is quite clear that Oakland has historically suffered from issues of racism, discrimination, and displacement which is still happening and is caused partly by the increasingly expensive housing market that are forcing lower income residents outside of the city while wealthier people are populating the Oakland hills. These issues have created a city in which Black and Brown bodies suffer from systemic neglect. This neglect is seen through the prevalent food desert of West Oakland which has been without a big grocery store for quite some time and where fresh healthy and nutritious produce is non-existent (Field, Bell, 2013). This historical neglect also formed a city with high rates of poverty and vacant homes marked by the displacement of Black people (Self, 2003). There is a strong correlation between wealth and the appearance of food deserts.



This map above created by researchers at UC Berkeley depicts the average household income in the different areas of Oakland as well as gentrification and displacement trends. First, there is a clear segregation between low income and high income households. The low income households depicted in purple are found in the city near the water whereas higher income households in red are primarily found in the Oakland Hills. Interestingly enough, the low income areas in both West and East Oakland are characterized as food deserts or areas with limited access to grocery stores.

From the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the city of Oakland was an important place for Black social justice movements such as the Civil Rights movement. Oakland was also the birth place of the Black Panther Party. This next quotation by Paul Cobb who was one of the city's leading community organizers in the late 1960's during a very important time for the Black civil rights movement is quite important as it reflects the difficult political atmosphere of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and the hardship that Black and brown Bodies faced during that time.

“The time has come for a declaration of independence in West Oakland [...] We live on an urban plantation. We have to plan our liberation (217).”

Here, Cobb uses a colonial metaphor and slavery vocabulary to explain the exploitation and neglect of black bodies in West Oakland. Here, the urban ghetto is an exploited colony that seeks liberation from persistent racial segregation and white supremacy (Self, 2003).

In the late 60's, the Black Panther party instituted various community social programs to help with issues of poverty, combat police brutality which was at an all-time high and overall improve health in black communities. Today, one way that these issues are addressed and combatted is through initiatives of community urban farming and educational programs to ultimately empower people of color as well as create in them a real sense of self-reliance and autonomy.

## “Acta Non Verba”

The first food justice organization that I will speak about in the paper is *Acta Non Verba* (ANV), a Youth Urban Farm Project located in a neighborhood of East Oakland, California.

*Acta Non Verba* is located on a quarter acre farm in Tassafaronga Recreation Center and works to educate Black youth about the power of food and self-reliance. The mission of the organization is to “elevate life in the inner city by challenging oppressive dynamics and environments through urban farming” (ANV, 2018). The organization was founded in 2011 by Kelly Carlisle, a Black navy veteran who became passionate with farming and discovered that it could be a useful skill for people of color to learn. As this organization is mainly led by women of color, this helps us understand the community organizing power of African American women. According to Monica White (2015) and Patricia Hill Collins (2000), African American women are seen as the providers and nurturers of their community, they are the ones that build and create cohesion within a community. This Youth Urban Farm Project is a clear example of the role women play in their community and in Black food justice organizations. I will proceed to discuss the strong organizing and educating power of Black women later on in this paper.

The overall goal then of this organization as explained in their mission statement quoted above is to challenge and resist an oppressive system that promotes the displacement of Black bodies. The organization seeks to educate youth and influence them positively so that they can impact their community in helpful and constructive ways. This project also strives to create a harmonious community that does not have to fall victim to environmental and health pollution as well as prevalent crime. *Acta Non Verba* engages and deepens youth’s understanding of nutrition, food production, and healthy living as well as strengthens their ties to the community (ANV, 2018). The youth that are involved in the farm all learn the skills necessary to grow food

and take care of a farm. ANV also provides programs that allow for the inclusion of the parents as volunteers or field trip leaders so that they too can learn about the important significance of food. The organization promotes economic empowerment through the selling of their produce at a farm stand, and through a Community Supported Agriculture program that furnishes on a monthly schedule fresh organically grown produce to families that sign up for a monthly fee. This money is collected and deposited into a savings account assigned to the youth that participate and work on the farm. As many as 70 kids per day attend the farms summer program and over 300 of the neighborhoods youth come to its afterschool programs. Depending on their age, the participating youth are assigned with different tasks that range from weeding and planting, to learning how to build greenhouses and managing the produce stand (ANV, 2018). The programs teach the kids real life skills such as important practices of care that they will carry into adulthood.

The purpose of the project is to offer a safe space for at risk low income minority youth of the community. As we find ourselves in a regime that is determined to cut funding of afterschool and educational programs that would benefit minority youth and keep them off the streets, it is fundamental that community leaders resist and empower themselves and others to liberate themselves and break free from a controlling system. Farming becomes extremely helpful in educating youth and making sure that youth become active citizens in their community. Learning to grow food, taking care and watching your own food grow instills in a person a sense of satisfaction and independence that is crucial to the development of youth in underserved communities in cities like Oakland. In addition to this and as I have already stated in a previous section of this paper, food has a great cultural significance, as it is strongly related to a person's identity and traditions. A person that is trapped in a cycle of unhealthy food is a person

whose identity has been taken away by this oppressive structural system. *Acta Non Verba* provides the opportunity to reclaim an identity, to fight against structural violence and oppression. *Acta Non Verba* which translates to “actions not words” is a call to action for black and brown people in America, it is a call to determine your own health and not be controlled by an outside system. It is a call to empower a group of people of that has been historically neglected and persecuted by the very institutions that they are a part of. It represents the emancipation of black people.

## **Detroit**

According to the Census Reporter, the city of Detroit is mainly populated by African Americans who represent 80 percent of the general population. With this fact in mind it is important to discuss the historical unrest that the city went through in terms of racial discrimination and segregation. The city of Detroit has long been a place for Black people to create systems of resistance and self-determination. Detroit represented a place of refuge for many African American fugitives who fled from bondage in the South. While there were many attempts to capture the runaways and bring them back into slavery, those were met with extreme resistance (Boyd, 2017). This trend of Black resistance and rebellion was constant throughout time. The 1967 civil disorder in Detroit was a major historical event that is still relevant today. During this rebellion, 33 blacks and 10 whites were killed, almost 5000 were left homeless, most of them black, and more than a thousand buildings had burned to the ground (Tarden & Thomas, 2013). This civil unrest was one the bloodiest and the costliest in U.S history. Joe T. Tarden and Richard W. Thomas explain that this rebellion was fueled by the prevailing “white institutionalized racism in the forms of urban renewal, expressways, and white suburban

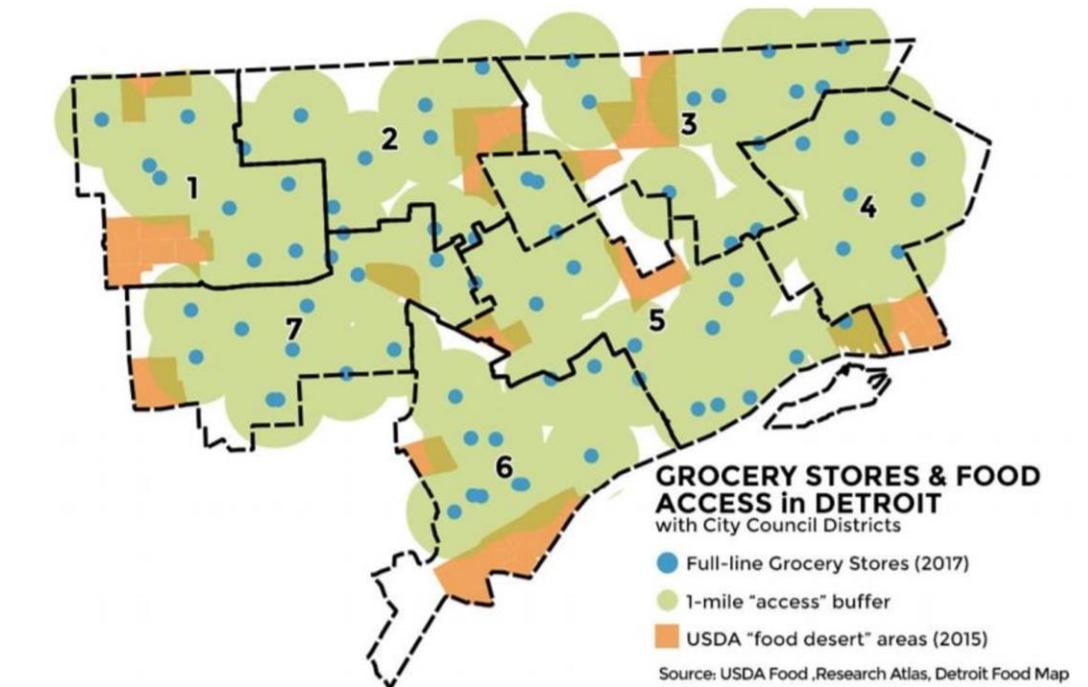
resistance” (3). This event sparked discussions about race relations not just in Detroit but in all of the United States as well, and this discussion is still relevant today.

Currently, the city of Detroit is finding itself in a state of economic depression and is still suffering from racial inequalities. Scholars argue that the current economic decline of the city is partly due to housing discrimination and racial segregation as well as the flight of businesses, taxes and capital to the more affluent suburbs (White, 2011). In her article *Sisters of the Soil: Urban Gardening as Resistance in Detroit*, Monica White explains the challenges that the city of Detroit is facing:

“The recent transformation of the automobile industry, along with the subsequent shrinking of the working and middle classes, have left Detroiters mired in poverty-induced challenges, including reduced city services, poor quality education, high rates of unemployment, crime, housing foreclosures, and little or no access to healthy food.” (14)

Access to good healthy food in Detroit is one of the main issues for the low income inhabitants of the city. Studies show that there are clear racial and economic disparities in having access to food outlets in cities. According to these studies, lower income and African American neighborhoods have fewer supermarkets and higher access to liquor stores and convenience stores. African American communities are on average 1.1 miles farther from a supermarket than are predominantly white neighborhoods (Zenk et al, 2015). This forces them to shop at these convenience stores that sell lower quality foods and often charge higher prices for these poorer quality foods than their counterparts in the suburbs.

This illustration below maps the the different grocery stores with their one mile radius as well as the USDA reported food deserts in the city of Detroit.



The strong prevalence of the orange and white spots in this map affirm the fact that many communities in this city suffer from food insecurity and are stuck in food deserts. Food justice movements like the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network (DBCFSN) and urban agriculture projects like D-Town farms are initiatives that are at the forefront in terms of promoting black self-determination by reducing food insecurity and revitalizing the neighborhoods of Detroit.

## **D-Town Farm & Detroit Black Community Food Security Network**

The D-Town farm website describes The Detroit Black Community Food Security Network as:

“a coalition of organizations and individuals working together to build food security in Detroit’s Black community by: 1) influencing public policy; 2) promoting urban agriculture; 3) encouraging co-operative buying; 4) promoting healthy eating habits; 5) facilitating mutual support and collective action among members; and 6) encouraging young people to pursue careers in agriculture, aquaculture, animal husbandry, bee-keeping and other food related fields.”

This coalition was founded in 2006 by Malik Yakini, a Black activist and educator committed to alleviate the impact of racism and white supremacy in the food system. The Detroit Black Community Food Security Network was founded as a way to work towards achieving community food security in the city of Detroit. Additionally, Yakini is dedicated to the development of an international food sovereignty movement that embraces Black farmers in America and works towards equality and the freedom of people of color. One of the main activities of this organization is to influence public policy and to advocate for food justice and urban agriculture as an alternative to the current food system. As new alternative food system movements are mostly led by young well-intentioned white people, the DBCFSN stresses that it is important for Black leaders within the Detroit community to take action to solve the issues that concern them.

The DBCFSN is ultimately a coalition of Black farmers and activists who use urban farming as a way to revitalize the Black communities of Detroit. One important project that was born from this organization is D-Town Farm. This farm started off in 2007 as a half-acre lot

owned by the Pan African Orthodox Christian Church in Detroit's West side. It started out as a small operation with beds, walkways, an irrigation system and a team of crew leaders who worked daily on the farm. They sold produce on sight and at the Eastern Market in the city. In the Summer of 2008, they acquired two acres in the city's Rouge Park which became the permanent home of the D-Town farm. Today, they occupy seven acres in Rouge park.

The purpose of this farm echoes the mission of the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network. Their aim is to alleviate food insecurity and establish food sovereignty for Black communities in Detroit. Farming as a black person then becomes a strategy to exercise political agency and bring about community transformation while in the process, alleviating the food crisis and demonstrating social and political change (White, 2011).

## **DISCUSSION**

*Acta Non Verba*, The Detroit Black Community Food Security Network and D-Town farm are Black alternative food justice organizations that work to empower the communities of color that they serve. They also work as an example and a driving force for communities of color to gain control of their own health and defy the white privilege ideas that our current conventional food system works to protect. These Black organizations promote the self-determination of people of color and the preservation of black agrarian traditions and traditions of nurturing.

### **Farming as empowerment and self-determination**

Our current food system and our industrial agriculture practices compromise the health of our environments and our bodies. This compromise however is much more distinct in low income communities and communities of color. The structural discrimination that these communities face place them in food deserts and in states of dependency and insecurity. People of color in the food deserts that I previously mention in Oakland and Detroit rely mainly (not by choice) on convenience stores and liquor stores to feed themselves. However, these outlets provide no nutritious and healthy produce resulting in the degrading health of people of color in those communities. Organizations such as *Acta Non Verba* and The Detroit Black Community Food Security Network work to give communities of color that suffer from food insecurity an opportunity to reclaim agency and be in control of their own health.

## **DBCFSN and D-Town Farm**

The DBCFSN puts paramount importance on the idea of self-determination for communities of color. We see this clearly through Detroit Black Community Food Security Network's mission statement: "DBCFSN uses mobilization, education, policy advocacy, and physical improvements in neighborhoods to increase the food supply and prevent hunger, thereby enhancing the health of residents, revitalizing neighborhoods through shared activities that also improve and strengthen the community's local economy, and building a sense of justice, equity, and self-determination." (DBCFSN, 2018)

Actual transformation of a community struggles to occur if those actions are led by people who are not actually suffering from these issues or do not reflect the appearance of those that are impacted by such injustices. Ideas such as farmers market and Community Supported Agriculture address the general issues of our unsustainable food system but most of the time fail to address the racial and socio-economic aspects of this unjust system since many low income households cannot afford to pay a monthly subscription to a CSA or cannot afford to pay premium prices for healthy foods at farmers' markets. Farming as a person of color breaks expectations and helps frame people of color as protagonists and leaders of change. Monica White explains furthermore that "Successful community change should be led by leaders from within its own community" (White, 2011). The Detroit Black Community Food Security Network alongside D-Town farm which are inherently black organizations work to transform and elevate the communities of color in Detroit to reach a state of community food security. Hamm and Bellows (2003) define community food security as "a condition in which all community residents obtain a safe, culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet through a sustainable food system that maximizes community self-reliance and social justice." This

definition allows us to see that D-Town farm and DBCFSN directly advance communities of color towards a state of self-determination. Ultimately, because it is difficult to image that one organization can render a whole city food secure, these organizations strive to increase awareness and motivate people to be a part of these changes and take back control from the poisonous system that feeds them. This self-determination can also be seen differently as empowerment. One aspect of empowerment that these organizations promote is empowerment through “neighborhood beautification” (White, 2011) and economic empowerment. As a collective of Black farmers, the DBCFSN uses urban farming as a strategy to bring about community transformation. This organization plans to transform the many vacant lots around the city of Detroit into green spaces where fresh fruits and vegetables could be grown. A study conducted by Colasanti, Litjens and Hamm (2010) shows that Detroit has the capacity to provide 31% and 17% of the seasonally available vegetables and fruits by utilizing the approximately 7.6 square miles of vacant lots around the city. This initiative would not only improve the health of the residents by providing the healthy locally grown produce, but it would also provide employment opportunities, hence economic empowerment.

### *Acta Non Verba*

*Acta Non Verba* translates directly to “Actions not words”. This motto represents the call to action that is necessary to fight against food insecurity in communities of color. Written on the home page of the ANV website is a quote from Josephine Radbill, one of the board members that reads:

“Acta Non Verba works tirelessly to address issues of food justice in East Oakland. Whether it’s educating children about healthy eating, teaching community gardeners how to grow their

own food or hosting engaging workshops and field trips at the farm, *Acta Non Verba* empowers the East Oakland community to be healthier and happier.”

A big component of what they do at ANV involves education about healthy food choices, nutrition and farming. The afterschool programs are designed so that “youth experience nature in a safe place playing, learning, creating, and accessing healthy, nature-based experiences that will empower them to be educated, well-rounded stewards.” The kind of empowerment that *Acta Non Verba* exemplifies is seen through the education of young children. Learning about nutrition and the power of growing your own food as a young person of color instills a sense of self determination that will keep growing. By teaching these skills, ANV creates in the community a sense of awareness of the ills of the conventional food system and the negative consequences of the food desert that they find themselves in. In addition to this, such an organization provides the initial drive for these low income communities to break away from cycles of malnutrition and reliance on the unhealthy packaged foods offered at corner stores, to lead them to self-empowerment and self-reliance through knowledge about farming and access to wholesome and healthy foods that they wouldn’t have access to previously.

### **Farming as Resistance**

One critical aspect to think about related to urban farming as a person of color is how it brings about community transformation through forms of resistance to the structural systems and institutions that trap low income people of color in positions of food insecurity and dependence. To speak about how *Acta Non Verba*, the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network and D-Town farm represent resistance to institutions imbedded in white supremacy, it is important to

talk about the institutionalized segregation that has forced people of color to lose their connection to farming and food. Generally speaking, today it has become significantly difficult for small farmers to make a living because of the overwhelming influence and monopoly of the industrial food system. This struggle however was much more pronounced for African American farmers. Throughout the twentieth century, black farmers lost their lands at a rate three or four times higher than white farmers (Hope Alkon, 2007). The few remaining black farmers suffered extensive discrimination from federal agencies like the USDA that claims to support farmers through loans and subsidies.

“In 1997 the United States Department of Agriculture (usda) settled a class-action lawsuit filed on behalf of fifteen thousand African American farmers, who claimed that they had been fed false information about government programs and were either denied or given insufficient or arbitrarily reduced loans” (Hope Alkon, 2007, p94). In addition to this, loan applications filed by Black farmers were reviewed at much slower paces than that of white farmers and that Black farmers were treated with “bias, hostility, greed, ruthlessness and indifference” (Ficara, 2002, xii). Today, in addition to the low number of African American farmers, low income communities of color are disproportionately struck by food insecurity due partly to trends of supermarket flight to the suburbs which is often described by scholars as “supermarket redlining”. D’Rozario (2005) defines this redlining as “A spatially discriminatory practice among retailers, of not serving certain areas, based on their ethnici-minority composition, rather than on economic criteria, such as the potential profitability of operating in those area” (p.175). Although this definition highlights the racial discrimination aspect of redlining, a lot of the times supermarkets decide to relocate because low income neighborhoods do not provide these stores with sufficient profit margins.

From these discriminatory and marginalizing trends, organizations like *Acta Non Verba*, DBCFSN and D-Town farm are created to lift up their communities and resist against these racist and discriminatory institutions.

It is important to understand that urban farming becomes a strategy of resistance and community agency for people of color. Foucault describes the origin of agency as that which secures a subject's subordination but also paradoxically provides the climate for producing a resistant identity. Through this definition one realizes that agency becomes a product of power structures. Scholars argue that agency becomes a strategy, additionally, strategy is typically conceptualized as revolutionary which is defined as an "action that is the antithesis of existing behavioral norms" (Hamel, 1996, p.70) (White, 2011)

DBCFSN and D-Town farm are reactive strategies in response to deprivation and the injustice that low income communities of color face. Access to healthy and nutritious food is a matter of race and class privilege (DBCFSN). Therefore, the first form of resistance that DBCFSN and D-Town farm represent is resistance to the conventional food system that through their practices of privilege, confine Black bodies into positions of food insecurity and malnutrition. Childhood obesity is among the highest in communities of color. The odds of obesity in these communities are more than two times higher than in affluent white communities. In addition to this, as familial income decreases, the chance of childhood obesity and nutrition and diet related illnesses increases (Singh et al, 2008). This shows the clear correlation between race and class when talking about access to healthy and nutritious foods. DBCFSN and D-Town farm clearly resist against these tendencies. They take matters into their own hands as to promote self-determination. The DBCFSN's website "about page" describes the mission statement of the organization:

“The Detroit Black Community Food Security Network (DBCFSN) was formed in February 2006 to address food insecurity in Detroit’s Black community, and to organize members of that community to play a more active leadership role in the local food security movement [...] It was and is our view that the most effective movements grow organically from the people whom they are designed to serve. Representatives of Detroit’s majority African-American population must be in the leadership of efforts to foster food justice and food security in Detroit. While our specific focus is on Detroit’s African-American community, we realize that improved policy and an improved localized food system is a benefit to all Detroit residents.”

Ultimately, through initiatives such as the D-Town farm project, the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network provides low income communities of color in Detroit with the ability to become knowledgeable about growing their own food and educates its own community about the importance of healthy food choices. It facilitates accessibility to these nutritious foods and therefore diminishes the amount of low income people of color that would have to purchase their foods at gas stations, corner stores or fast food outlets that only sell unhealthy food stuffs at high prices.

Secondly, both D-Town farm and *Acta Non Verba* stress that their farms are mainly regarded as a safe place, a place to begin healing and build up a community. This is in fact a crucial resistance strategy against the oppression and discrimination that Black bodies face in everyday life. The DBCFSN puts emphasis on claiming political agency for communities of color in Detroit. This organization is a strong voice in policy advocacy. On their website, it states that the organization has developed a Detroit Food Policy counsel and has passed resolutions to develop a food security policy for the city of Detroit to develop awareness about how to achieve

community food security. The DBCFSN is therefore a resistance strategy against the prominent trends of political and economic disinvestment that occur in the city of Detroit.

Finally, the ultimate act of resistance for people of color is seen through uplifting the Black communities in order to fight all forms of oppression.

*Acta Non Verba's* Kelly Carlisle says in an interview with pbs: "We're trying to create the next generation of voters, the next generation of activists." Through farming and educating young children about the power and influence of food, it allows them to develop personal knowledge about our current food systems and healthy food choices.

### **Role of Women and Resistance**

An ecofeminist theoretical perspective can be observed when discussing the role and impact of Black women in food justice organizations. In both these organizations, women and primarily women of color are in positions of power. Kelly Carlisle, a Black navy veteran founded *Acta Non Verba*, and 80 percent of farmers and members of the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network are women, predominantly women of color. Not only do they direct the daily activities of the organizations, the women are at the forefront of decision making processes that influence the advancement of these projects. The role of women of color in food justice organizations is crucial to this discussion as it fuels the conversation around farming, which is seen as a predominantly white male act. In addition to breaking expectations, black women's strong involvement in food justice organization is in itself a form of resistance to the dominant patriarchal institutions.

## **Ecofeminism**

In speaking of the impact and role of Black women in urban farming practices, the term “ecofeminism” needs to be defined. Ecofeminism which is a term coined by French feminist Françoise d’Eaubonne is a philosophy that examines feminism in relation to the natural environment and lobbies for women’s ability to engage with the earth, respond to, and solve ecological crises (White, 2011). Black women in *Acta Non Verba* and the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network actively work to transform their environment by revitalizing it and improving and cultivating the communities that they are a part of. Scholars like Allen and Sachs (2007) argue that given traditional and contemporary gender roles, women continue to be largely responsible for the mental and manual labor of food. Although this idea has a limited and dichotomized portrayal of gender roles, it is in fact true in these cases that women play an integral role in the nurturing of black bodies.

In ANV, Carlisle takes on the role of teacher and community mothering through the education that ANV provides for the children that volunteer at the farm. ANV teaches youth grades K-8 about nutritional healthy eating as well as how to grow, maintain and harvest food from the farm (ANV, 2018). The DBCFSN has similar goals as they run several educational children’s programs through other urban farms where children learn and participate in the development of a community food system including production, marketing, sales, and value added products (DBCFSN, 2018), (White, 2011).

The role of black women in an ecofeminism perspective is highlighted as an act of resistance against the increasingly globalized food system and the multinational corporations that exploit the environment and are responsible for ongoing ecological degradation. For these

women, urban farming offers as well an opportunity to resist against the systems and structures that have oppressed them (White, 2011). The strategies of sustainable and ecofriendly local agriculture are therefore acts of defiance against genetically modified and highly processed foods that continue to damage the health of people of color through diet related illnesses that impact most significantly Black women. Black women farmers become the food providers of their communities and endorse collaboration and symbiosis with nature and their environment as opposed to the domination of nature. White (2011) argues therefore:

“Black women, in this case, engage the environment and transform vacant land into urban/community gardens, and in doing so, these spaces operate as a safe space where they are able to define their behavior as a form of resistance, one in which their resistance is against the social structures that have perpetuated inequality in terms of healthy food access, and one where they are able to create outdoor, living, learning, and healing spaces for themselves and for members of the community.” (18)

### **Healing & Safe Space**

Black women farmers engage in community gardening as a strategy for healing their community through food security, meaning increasing access to healthy and culturally appropriate healthy foods. The healing that occurs in these community farms is one that also heals the earth and the surrounding environment by creating beautiful green spaces in the middle of urban landscapes. The Black women of these organizations transform these gardens into learning and living spaces. These gardens become places of refuge for communities that experience racial and economic discrimination in everyday life. Scholars such as Hill-Collins

(2000) discuss the importance of safe places for Black women as spaces allowing Black women to speak freely and where safe discourse can occur. Thus, further fostering a sense of self-definition. Furthermore, as systematic marginalization, overpolicing and erasure of blackness has forced Black people to express violence against each other, these gardens represent a safe place to strengthen community and keep children off the streets by teaching them independence and practices of care and nurturing through growing their own food.

Physical healing of the body and of the earth are not the only forms of healing that are exercised in these places. Kelly Carlisle, *Acta Non Verba* and D-Town farm heal the minds of youth and offer safe spaces to break apart the assumptions that African Americans avoid farming as a result of the historical memory of slavery and sharecropping. Instead, the women farmers create a space for conversation that represents a form of liberation from past historical wounds.

### **Preservation of Traditions**

The healing that occurs through these organizations also allows for the creation of spaces dedicated to the preservation of Black cultural and spiritual traditions while also building or reclaiming a sense of communal identity. In 1920, 14 percent of all land-owning US farms were Black. As a result of continuous dispossession and discrimination, today less than 2 percent of farms are controlled by Black people (Penniman, 2018). Farming while Black becomes a way to reclaim a past identity and resist against the white supremacist ideas and institutions that have historically worked to erase Black cultural traditions and that have constantly tried to perpetuate this narrative that people of color are disconnected to land and their environment by personal choice. Importantly, farming for Black people is a reminder of the strong African agrarian

traditions that happened long before the transatlantic slave trade. Being involved in farming aspires people of color to reconnect with these past traditions of the African diaspora and reclaim their dignity as agriculturists. Owning the African agrarian traditions of ancestors is a way to promote healing from the trauma associated with slavery, economic exploitation of the land and the sharecropping practices that occurred as well as the practices of discrimination and marginalization that are still occurring.

## CONCLUSION

The increasingly globalized industrial food systems have become completely unsustainable in regards to the environment and to the people they serve. The food industry is failing to provide healthy and nutritious produce to low income communities in America, but also worldwide in countries that suffer from issues of malnutrition and starvation. When examining the huge mass production of produce and unwarranted waste produced by the global food industry, issues of starvation should not exist, especially in first world countries such as the United States. Strategic allocation of resources influenced by financial profit creates food deserts and areas of food insecurity while revitalizing and improving wealthy districts. About 2.3 million people in America live more than a mile away from a supermarket and do not own a car (Gallagher, 2006). This reveals once more the issues of accessibility and availability regarding what constitute a food desert. The socio-economic factor in food deserts creates a huge gap between low income neighborhoods that are predominantly minority communities and wealthy districts that are mostly white. Studies have found that white neighborhoods contain an average of four times as many supermarkets as predominantly black ones do, and that grocery stores in African-American communities are usually smaller with less variety of produce (Morland and Wing, 2002).

Meaningful change and community transformation can only occur if leaders of the communities step up and take charge. This is where the Black food justice organizations come in to foster a sense of self-determination in people of color and create empowerment as to solve issues of food insecurity in these neglected communities of color in America. Food is power, it determines ones traditions and culture as well as one health, therefore “whoever controls the food, controls the people, controls everything.” (White, 2015). This powerful quote reveals the

true strength and benefit of urban farming in Black communities as ways to resist the larger structural injustices that have marginalized people of color in America. The empowerment that it creates is a sense of self-determination, and self-reliance. It is the ability to control your own body and health instead of being trapped with the limited and unhealthy options of produce served in food insecure areas. Farming while Black is firstly a way to reconnect with the past African agrarian traditions, as well as a way to resist against a system that profits on the suffering of Black people and that is constantly exercising acts of slow violence against people of color in this country. Throughout this paper I have explored how Black organizations and urban farming projects such as *Acta Non Verba*, the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network and D-Town farms strive to empower, promote agency and create food sovereignty for people that are in need of reclaiming their liberty and identity. Food sovereignty and urban community farming have therefore become ways to liberate and empower people of color.

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