“Land is Revolution”:
Unearthing the Transformative Power of Black Gardening in Washington, DC

Camille Samuels
Haverford College

May 17, 2021

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Bachelor of Arts
with an independent major in Health, Science, and Societies

Primary advisor: Professor Anna West
Second reader: Professor Juli Grigsby
Abstract

Black Americans have long been practicing geographies of self-reliance as a method for procuring food and establishing community in Washington, D.C. Because public policy and public health initiatives fall short, food apartheid often undergirds Black narratives of food access in the nation's capital. As Washington, D.C. continues to transition into a post chocolate-city, Black-led urban agriculture remains a pivotal component of equitable access in the regional food system. Drawing on scholarship within Black geographies, public health, and environmental justice, this thesis leverages Black feminist ecological frameworks as a method of exploring the intersections of race (Blackness), placemaking, and health in the DC metropolitan region. Using a mixed-methods approach, I conducted qualitative interviews with young Black food justice advocates coupled with autoethnographic reflections to examine the importance of Black-led urban farming projects. In this paper I argue that Black-led urban agriculture demonstrates (1) land reclamation as a subversive practice, (2) radical political education as a site for collective resilience, and (3) produce production as a means for health equity. This project highlights the ways in which young Black folks in the DC area are reconnecting with farming, navigating racist food systems, and sustaining Black health and Black futures.

Keywords: Food Justice, Black, Washington DC, Urban Agriculture, Health.
# Table of Contents

Abstract .......................................................................................................................... ii
Acknowledgements ......................................................................................................... v
List of abbreviations and acronyms ................................................................................ vii
List of illustrations .......................................................................................................... viii
Introduction ..................................................................................................................... 2
  Chapter overview .......................................................................................................... 7

Chapter 1. “God bless the Chocolate City and its Vanilla Suburbs” ......................... 8
  Land acknowledgement ................................................................................................. 9
  What “vanilla suburbs”? ............................................................................................... 10
  Geography and barriers of division ............................................................................. 15
  Chapter closing ............................................................................................................. 16

Chapter 2. Putting Food Justice and Public Health in Conversation ....................... 18
  Moral judgements on healthy food .............................................................................. 20
  Diet as an individual choice ......................................................................................... 22
  Beyond food deserts .................................................................................................... 23
  Converging public health and food justice ................................................................. 25
  Review of current interventions .................................................................................. 27
  Blackness and relationships to land ........................................................................... 32

Chapter 3. “Impact your world, don’t worry about impacting the whole world”: Exploring our Farming Journeys .............................................................. 34
  Introduction ................................................................................................................. 34
Acknowledgements

Since I was younger, my mom always referred to me as an old soul, as someone who had experienced this life before. For much of my life I believed it because I moved through milestones with relative ease despite the challenges that were placed in front of me. But these past four years at Haverford have certainly tested my patience.

The past year especially has challenged me in ways that nothing could prepare me for – not even a degree in Health, Science, and Societies. Writing a thesis during a global pandemic on top of the multitude of ongoing racial, social, and economic crises is not something I thought I would be prepared to accomplish – but here I am. I was constantly struck by the contradiction that as I was attempting to write about health, justice, and Black life, that 600,000 people and counting have died of COVID-19 in the United States alone. And that a disproportionate number of those deaths were Black people. Through the pain and silent grieving of the last year, I remind myself that is okay to pause, to mourn, and to rest, the work will be there when you get back. These are not normal times, and I am indebted to the people who saw me through them, because I quite literally would not have made it without y’all.

First and foremost, thank you to my parents for your unrelenting support of my ambitions. Thank you, Mom, for always showering me with love and affection. Thank you, Dad, for being in my corner no matter what and teaching me how to meet challenges head on. Thank you to my siblings, but especially Miles for always being my right-hand man. And of course, thank you to my nephew Shawn for teaching me how to see the world anew from the curious eyes of a two-year-old.

To my professors, my intellectual journey would not have been possible without your reverent care and support. Thank you to Professor Helen White for keeping me at Haverford after the first year, none of the subsequent accomplishments could’ve happened if it weren’t for you. Even when I decided not to pursue chemistry, you always fought to ensure I could make my own path.

Thank you to Professor Anna West for being my advisor and mentor in countless ways. Thank you for your leadership in shaping the Health Studies program to be a place that I wanted to call my academic home. Thank you for keeping up with my ever-changing life plans and at times overly ambitious goals. From applying for my independent major to graduate school, none of this could have been done without you and for that I am beyond grateful.

Thank you to Professor Juli Grigsby for challenging my thinking and modeling ways to navigate this institution. Thank you for taking me under your wing and showing me how cool Black feminist anthropologists can be – I cannot wait to join your ranks.

And thank you to Professor Elena Guzman. Thank you for being my cheerleader and helping me navigate my next steps. Thank you especially our Black Feminist Borderlands class. I am privileged to have experienced such care, comfort, and community in a classroom setting. I hope to find (or create) a space as special as this one again.

And last but not least thank you to each and every one of my friends because I literally would not have made it through Haverford if it weren’t for you all. Especially Lourdes, Hasibe, Mayra, Aszana, Zakiyyah, Jasmine, Betelhem, Luigie, Erica and Nameera; your genius astounds me, and your friendship makes me better.

To Lourdes, Jasmine, and Zakiyyah, aka the Black Girl Magic Household, thank you for endless nights laughter, binge watching reality TV, and helping to cook gourmet meals. Your
friendships have sustained me through this challenging semester. You’re all amazing beyond belief and you are coming for everything you deserve in life.

Lourdes: Thank you for being my forever roommate and partner in crime. Our countless hours studying late in the BCC, on zoom, and in the apartment finally paid off, we’re done! Even when we’re just joking around, we’re really on to something… I can’t wait to see all of our plans come to fruition.

Luigie: Don’t ever let anyone tell you that a Florida man didn’t do anything good. Thank you for encouraging me to build my own relationship to the land. This whole project could not have happened if it weren’t for your friendship, and my life wouldn’t be the same.

I know now that I have been able to accomplish what I have, not just because I am an old soul, but because I am supported by a strong community and ancestors guiding me along this journey. Ashe.
**List of abbreviations and acronyms**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CDC</td>
<td>Centers for Disease Control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DMV</td>
<td>DC, Maryland, and Virginia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EJ</td>
<td>Environmental Justice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EPA</td>
<td>Environmental Protection Agency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FJ</td>
<td>Food Justice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FQHC</td>
<td>Federally Qualified Health Center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NIH</td>
<td>National Institute of Health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PG</td>
<td>Prince George’s (County)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SDOH</td>
<td>Social Determinants of Health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UA</td>
<td>Urban Agriculture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USDA</td>
<td>United States Department of Agriculture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WHO</td>
<td>World Health Organization</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of illustrations

Figure 1 Outdoor Artwork at the PG County African American Heritage Museum. Photo by the Author .................................................................................................................................................. 8

Figure 2 Racial Dot Map of the Greater Washington area in 1970 ......................................................... 14

Figure 3 Racial Dot Map of the Greater Washington Area in 2017 .......................................................... 14

Figure 4 Map of Washington DC Highlighting Natural Boundaries ......................................................... 15

Figure 5 Food for the people. Photograph by the author ........................................................................ 18

Figure 6 Harvard's Healthy Eating Plate .................................................................................................. 22

Figure 7 USDA's My Plate ....................................................................................................................... 22

Figure 8 DC Food Policy Council's 2020 Priorities List ....................................................................... 26

Figure 9 DC Food Policy Council's 2021 Priorities List ....................................................................... 27
“it had gotten so bad
that they hated
sugarcane, though
they needed a good crop
to get them thru the winter
(hating that which gave some prayer to life.

the young ones hated
the most. they blamed the land for what was not the land’s fault.

they hated the church
for not giving them hope
in this life

o hope, blessed hope
now now now

until they discovered
that their hatred
was hopeless”
- Ahmos Zu-Bolton II, “By the Fifth Generation”

“I buried my body
Gave up this flesh
A seed bearing fruit with roots that run deep down in southern soil
Arms stretched wide underground
Birthing tree trunks with limbs strong enough to hold strange fruit
without weeping
Weeping willows
Head bowed down to worship
To hang low
And bow thy head
For the sun is out
Let us not offer our silence as sacrifice
Even the leaves rustle loud in this wind
When was the last time you thanked the dirt you came from
Dug your fingernails in the ground colored melanin
Ground your knuckles into the womb that birthed you
If you dig deep enough you can still see grandma's hands
Beckoning you to come home with her left
She writes new psalms on your palms every time they are open
This body broken
Perishing plant planted in black soil
Still grows”
- Millicent Campbell, “Body Still Grows”
Introduction

On a cool October day in the fall semester of my junior year I boarded the train from Bryn Mawr’s campus into Philadelphia as I did every Wednesday for my Tri-co Philly course, “Environmental Justice: Theory and Action”. Coming from Bryn Mawr, it was more convenient to take the SEPTA regional rail, the local commuter line that carries passengers from the wealthy suburbs known as the Main Line into Center City, Philadelphia. This train was very different from the subway that I usually took: it is large and clunky—what my friends and I would jokingly refer to as the polar express. The typical passengers are significantly older, whiter, and richer than the people I am used to spending time around. A one-way ticket from Bryn Mawr to Suburban Station is $5 -- more expensive than the $3.75 fare to go the same distance on the regular train. In many ways, the regional rail serves as a transportation bubble. It whisks me off from Bryn Mawr making frequent stops at other colleges, universities, and otherwise upper-class neighborhoods on the Mainline. Once we get to Overbrook, the last stop before City Line Ave (delineating the suburbs from the city), the train forgoes its frequent stops, speeding through the entirety of West Philadelphia to arrive at 30th St station, the city's main transportation hub.

I often used these rides to relax between classes, listen to music, and observe the built environment around me, always subconsciously comparing it to home and noticing the different geographies that build the space. Whereas the socio-economic makeup of the DC suburbs usually reflects that of the section of the city they border, the suburban/urban divide of Philadelphia is much more stark.

While I would normally get off the train at Suburban Station to go to the Friends Center for my city-engaged learning course, on that day I travelled further into North Philadelphia than I ever had during my time in the area. My classmates and I were taking a field trip to the
Philadelphia Urban Creators Life Do Grow Farm in North Central Philadelphia. Travelling in the transportation bubble that is the regional rail, I got off at the Temple University station before walking off of their campus to the formerly vacant lot where Life Do Grow has developed into a vibrant multi-purpose urban farm and community space. On the tour of the farm, we listened to one of the founding members and farmhands tell us about the history of the farm and the impact their work has had on the community. Our guide spoke passionately about land-use politics in the city, water access, and food sovereignty, all of which were far over my head and political ideologies at the time.

It is always a strange experience to participate in these sorts of community-engaged learning projects as a Black student. The awkwardness of travelling in a large, noisy, primarily white group often stunts the sort of reflection and engagement that I might have otherwise gleaned from the situation. But at the same time, as a non-Philadelphia resident and a student representative of an elite liberal arts college, I had to come to the realization that my Blackness wasn’t enough to connect in this setting either—there is still a lot of effort required on my part to be in community and show solidarity with unfamiliar communities. As one of two Black students in the class, myself and the other Black student hung back from the group during the tour, critically engaging with the dialogue while also processing this trip in a way that made sense to us.

Before this trip, I had never thought too much about where my food came from or who produced it. While I was fascinated by the work the Philadelphia Urban Creators were doing from my then public health-oriented mindset, I was not drawn to the physical work of farming. “Farming” in my mind was not something that Black people do. Instead, it was associated with rurality and whiteness. When invited to try weeding some of the garden beds, my Black
classmate and I commented between ourselves that “this isn’t slavery why would we work in the dirt?” We both grew up in major metropolitan areas and were unfamiliar with practices of land-based work.

When our tour ended that day, I left, getting back on the train to Haverford without giving the experience too much thought. But this experience would hang in the back of my mind as I continued to learn, grow, and develop my own politics around food justice and food sovereignty.

**Honoring those that came before**

In Black American communities, food justice has a long and storied history of community organization and mutual aid, what anthropologist Ashanté Reese has called “geographies of self-reliance” (Reese 2019). Geographies of self-reliance, as a framework, helps render legible the various ways that Black people navigate and supplement inadequate food systems on practical and communal terms (Reese 2019, 8). The “self” in self-reliance is less a representation of the individual in Black communities than it is of the groups and community organizations that practice these geographies as well (Reese 2019, 26).

Food justice work has a long history in Black communities. The Black Panther Party (of self-defense) and their free breakfast programs were a catalyst for the US food justice movement as we recognize it today. For the Black Panthers, food was always entirely political—“food was a medium to politicize Black communities about the limits and failures of capitalism and the merit and praxis of revolution” (Hassberg 2020, 88). To the Black Panthers, food and health were essential—they believed that food as a basic human right was a necessary precedent for political organizing (Nelson 2011). As one of the United States’ first and foremost food justice organizations, the Black Panther Party practiced geographies of self-reliance by tending to the
material needs of Black communities across the country. In many ways, “the Black Panthers were among the first to frame the peculiar relationship between race, advanced capitalism, food access, and health outcomes in the urban core” (Hassberg 2020, 84). My desire to understand the intersections of Blackness, food justice, and health in the greater Washington area is deeply indebted to and rooted in the work and legacy of the Black Panther Party.

In the wake of the Black Panther Party’s legacy, there have been attempts to distance food justice from its original goals. In some ways, the movement has been embraced and co-opted, greenwashed and whitewashed by the mainstream environmentalism movement. So-called “alternative” food movements often reify the same racial and economic marginalization that results from the dominant food system (Ramirez 2015). Food justice has also been embraced and folded into the neoliberal arms of government agencies. For example, now that the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) has appropriated the term “food desert,” they exercise the power to define the metrics that qualify a place as food insecure. This is dangerous because they subsequently also determine which communities are worthy of support, “thereby legitimizing the claims of some and discounting others who do not meet the state’s criteria” (Agyeman and McEntee 2014, 214-215). In this project, I am interested in further teasing out this dialectic between food justice and the state and learning more about how young Black people work within the legacy of food justice activism to navigate these systems.

**Why this project?**

After abruptly returning home in the middle of the semester due to COVID-19, I found myself, like so many others, stuck in place. During the first three months of the pandemic, I did not travel beyond a two-mile radius of my house. As I was learning to cope with the anxieties of
navigating life during a global pandemic, I was similarly learning to navigate my micro-
geography in intimate new ways. Whereas the fragmented routine of online school became yet 
another stressor, I sought out meaningful ways to fill my time. I often found myself reminiscing 
on the lessons learned during an economic botany field study I had just returned from and 
decided that I would start a small 4x6 garden bed in my front yard. And that garden quickly 
became a (healthy) obsession. What I did not anticipate, however, were the ways in which this 
newfound hobby would forge connections far beyond my front yard.

This project is in large part inspired by geographer Naya Jones’ call to “feeling in 
Black”—a practice that “acknowledges the existence of Black food geographies whether they are 
dominantly ‘knowable’ or not, while situating Black affect as somatic epistemology, felt and 
embodied ways of thinking through and knowing” (2019, 1081). Voluntarily learning to garden 
during a period of physical distancing and social isolation pushed me to look inward and reflect 
on how these practices felt to me. To trace the histories and legacies of slavery, migration, and 
displacement that brought my own family to DC, and subsequently out to the suburbs. To 
acknowledge that there are many reasons that I wasn’t brought up in the tradition of land-based 
work that my ancestors were so skilled at doing. To recognize that there are reasons that I wasn't 
born in the Deep South, in Alabama like my grandmother was. Again, heeding the call to 
“feeling in black”, I recognized that the feelings I associated with land-based work and 
agriculture were not always pleasant. In fact, they are often extremely painful and carry with 
them generations of historical trauma. (Un)doing the work of those aversions and that 
unpleasant-ness opens up an array of questions, the answers to which can provide a beautiful 
mapping of Black life outside of trauma. In the face of intergenerational trauma related to the
land, I find that young Black people seem to keep finding our way back to it. We are building relationships with the land on our own terms that provide nourishment, community, and healing.

**Chapter overview**

In the first chapter of this thesis, I offer a repositioning of DC’s history to account for the connected Black histories and Black geographies of Washington DC and its suburbs. This chapter establishes the “place” and context of this place-based project. In chapter two, I explore the confluence and divergence between food justice and public health. I trace their ideological similarities and highlight examples of organizations that are doing food justice work in the region. I also explore the historical tensions in relationships between Black people and the land. In the third and final chapter, I interpret and analyze data collected from my interviews to parse out themes about how young Black food activists are navigating food justice in the DMV.
Chapter 1. “God bless the Chocolate City and its Vanilla Suburbs”

To understand the historical context and contemporary importance of food justice in Washington DC first requires an understanding that Washington DC is a city of contradictions. It is the seat of governmental power—the nation’s capital—yet city residents lack political representation. It is under the Mason-Dixon line, but is not culturally situated as a southern or northern space. It is known as the Chocolate City, but now has a declining population of Black residents.

To local residents, there are two distinct entities that make up the city. A discursive divide delineates “Washington,” the transient political face of the city, from “DC,” the multi-generational, predominantly Black middle class of the city and surrounding suburbs (Peterson 2013). As journalist and DC native Latoya Peterson penned in her 2013 op-ed, “which city you live in depends on who you are” and by which histories are told (2013). As Washington encroaches on DC, so too does the erasure of the multiple histories that frame the city(ies) we recognize today. Within DC, the central identity I focus on is Blackness – a key aim of this thesis is to understand how Blackness as an identity serves as a common platform from which young people organize for land and food justice in the city.
Land acknowledgement

While the focus of this thesis is on Black residents’ experiences of and relationships to land, urban agriculture, and wellbeing, I would be remiss not to acknowledge the original caretakers of the very land I write about. Since time immemorial the Piscataway Indians have, do, and will continue to care for their unceded ancestral homelands now known to most as Washington DC, Maryland, and Virginia. More specifically, I acknowledge that the land that I live on, garden, and tend to is unceded Nacotchtank territory in what is now known as Montgomery and Prince George’s counties.

As a descendant of Black people who were involuntarily captured, trafficked, and enslaved in the United States, I recognize that my identity exists within a fraught settler-native-slave triad (Tuck and Yang 2012, 7). Although my ancestors did not choose to steal this land, I still benefit from this settler-colonial violence that brought them here. My relationship to this land is presupposed by the dispossession and genocide of Indigenous peoples. While I will continue to respect and care for this land in the present, I also commit to providing land-based reparations so long as I inhabit this space.²

I acknowledge that the land known today as Washington DC has a long and rich history prior to colonization, and that that history is beyond the scope of this project. Here, I seek to briefly establish the framing of Washington DC as a settler-colonial city. By examining the spatio-temporal impact of settler colonialism on constructing narratives of identities in the city, I

---

¹ I adopt this temporal horizon to characterize Indigenous presence in the Americas in keeping with work by Indigenous scholars Kyle Whyte, Chris Caldwell, and Marie Schaeffer.
² To learn more about The Cedarville Band of Piscataway Indians’ ongoing Land Back Project and to pay reparation through the land tax see their website here: https://www.piscatawayindians.com/projects.
hope to deepen my understanding of the impact of food justice work on those identities in the present day.

Indigenous scholars Kyle Whyte, Chris Caldwell, and Marie Schaeffer define settler colonialism as “a form of oppression in which settlers permanently and ecologically inscribe homelands of their own onto Indigenous homelands… [that] establishes the needed land base for U.S. food security, manufacturing, military development, and metropolitanism” (2018, 158). Settler colonialism relies on the palimpsestic dispossession of Indigenous lands by rendering spaces “uninhabitable” (McClintock 2018, 4) and thus prime for the inscription of new “social identities and attachments to the land in relation to settler agricultural, industrial, cultural, and recreational activities” (Whyte et al 2018, 158). These “settler ecologies” (Whyte et al 2018, 158) are then repeatedly inscribed onto land even by seemingly positive food justice activities such as urban agriculture (McClintock 2018). Again, while it is beyond the scope of this thesis, I want to acknowledge that Black-led food justice projects are no exception to the ongoing harms of settler colonialism, as we too participate in the reinscription of settler identities onto native lands.

What “vanilla suburbs”?

In 1975, the funk band Parliament released their third studio album *Chocolate City* as a tribute to their rapidly growing fanbase in Washington DC. In their single of the same name, Parliament popularized the term Chocolate City to describe US cities that were predominantly Black:

Hey, uh, we didn’t get our forty acres and a mule
But we did get you CC, heh, yeah
Gainin’ on ya / Movin’ in and around ya
God bless Chocolate City and its vanilla suburbs
Keeping in line with the group’s Afro-futurist songs and performances, “Chocolate City” imagined a future for DC in which Black people had political control. And in 1975, that reality didn't seem so far-fetched.

During the 1970s, the same decade in which Chocolate City was released, the Black population of Washington DC peaked at 71.1 percent. However, as DC-based poet E. Ethelbert Miller stated, “well, chocolate melts” (Capehart 2011). Today, Black DC residents no longer make up a majority of the district’s 700,000 inhabitants. DC’s population is now roughly 46.3 percent Black—just a small margin above the 41.3 percent of the district’s residents who are white (US Census Bureau 2019). For the purposes of this thesis, I am situating my research and analysis within Washington DC and the Maryland suburbs that immediately border the city. Incorporating the Washington DC metropolitan area into my analysis further complicates the historical narrative of the “Chocolate City and its vanilla suburbs” (Parliament 1975).

When studying the history of DC and especially of Blackness and the city, it is crucial to consider these transregional circuits of Blackness that exist in the greater metropolitan area—what Brandi Thompson Summers refers to as the “sprawling DC metro’s Black diaspora” (2019, 171). Peterson includes in her definition of “DC” the Black contingents of the suburbs as well. In 1975, the starkly racialized urban/suburban divide was generally an accurate representation of DC and the surrounding areas in Maryland and Virginia. However, the same cannot be said for the region today. According to the most recent census, Black people comprise 13.4 percent of the United States population, but they make up 64.4 and 20.1 percent of the population of Prince

---

George’s and Montgomery Counties respectively, sitting well over the national average (US Census Bureau 2019).

Both Prince George’s and Montgomery Counties have rich histories of Blackness that define the socio-cultural geographies of the region. The population of Black residents is composed of a particularly diverse amalgamation of backgrounds and represents a wide array of Black cultures. One contingent of the regional Black population is composed of families with multi-generational claims to place mediated through legacies of regional enslavement and/or marronage (Fields 1985; Winston 2019). In the first half of the twentieth century, DC and Maryland were a central destination for Black families fleeing anti-black violence in the south, including my own. Families migrated predominantly from Alabama, Georgia, and the Carolinas up to the Mid-Atlantic region to escape Jim Crow laws and find stable government jobs (Wilkerson 2010). A 2019 Black History month exhibit in PG County illustrates these population movements through connecting the DC performing arts scene to the larger Harlem Renaissance movement. More recently, immigration has further added to the complex portrait of Black life in the region. While immigration to the region has grown in general, the population of Black African, Afro-Caribbean and Afro-Latinx immigrants adds to the complex and multilayered cultural identities of the city and its suburbs.

Today, PG county’s reputation is based on its status as the wealthiest predominantly Black county in the country. Though its history is complicated in its own right, its relationship is intimately and contentiously tied to that of Washington, DC—so much so that the county is sometimes referred to as DC’s “9th ward” (Lacy 2007; Summers 2019). On the other side of DC

4 PG County exhibit on Black migration: https://wtop.com/prince-georges-county/2019/02/great-migration-musical-impacts-include-local-twist/
5 Breakdown of demographics in the foreign-born population circa 2008: https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/partnerships/resources/files/Montgomery_County_Foreign_Born_Data.pdf
in Montgomery County, several smaller cities are consistently ranked among the most culturally diverse regions in the country, a rapid shift from the demographic make-up just over 50 years ago (Figures 2 and 3).

A recent analysis of data from the US Census Bureau by WalletHub revealed that four of the top ten “Most Ethnically Diverse Cities” are located in Montgomery County. Montgomery County embraces its reputation of neoliberal multiculturalism to “repurpose and reassemble race” (Summers 2019, 168) and position itself as geographically and economically distinct from the ailments of the neighboring and predominantly Black PG County. Through complicating the imaginary of who and what the suburbs represent, I hope to better illustrate the mosaic of food justice projects that shape and reflect the region.

---

Figure 2 Racial Dot Map of the Greater Washington area in 1970
Source: https://www.dcpolicycenter.org/publications/regional-demographic-shifts/

Figure 3 Racial Dot Map of the Greater Washington Area in 2017
Source: https://www.dcpolicycenter.org/publications/regional-demographic-shifts/
Geography and barriers of division

As in the majority of urban centers in the United States, spatial segregation undergirds the experiences of Black residents in the DC metropolitan area. Developers and city planners have used both the built and natural environments of the city as geographic barriers to enact and sustain racial segregation. Up to the 1970s, the city's population was largely segregated via Rock Creek Park, one of the largest urban parks in DC (figure 4). In response to the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968, city residents expressed their disdain through riots. These uprisings would go on to drastically restructure the social geography of the city. Many predominantly Black and middle-class neighborhoods were either seized and gentrified or never recovered (Kirkpatrick and Mettler 2018). Following the 1968 riots, the informal spatial barrier shifted east, and 16th street became the predominant demarcation between “Washington” and
“DC” (figure 4). Development and recovery were largely stalled due to the confluence of economic and political corruption through much of the 1980s and 90s.

As the population began to grow again in the 2000s, Black DC residents were pushed even farther east. Today, the Anacostia River “effectively splits DC into two separate but unequal parts” (Asch and Musgrove 2017, 5). The name of the river, “Anacostia”, is the anglicized version of “Nacotchtank”, the name of one native tribe that originally inhabited the region. There is a distinct and violent white supremacist irony in naming the river in the likeness of the people they killed and then weaponizing the physical geography of that same river to isolate and segregate the city’s predominantly lower-income and Black populations. Communities east of the river continue to be subjected to geographical reinscriptions of anti-black violence at the hands of the state. In a rapidly gentrifying city, there is a legacy and ever-present threat of displacement⁷ – particularly in predominantly Black neighborhoods that are not yet deemed desirable.⁸

Chapter closing

Speaking in a 2021 webinar on Black ecologies in a discussion series hosted by Arizona State University, Dr. Mako Fitts Ward argues that “placemaking is a product of arrangements and relationships... we know that space is understood as the result of various trajectories that come together.” This conceptualization of placemaking is central to my understanding of how Black residents in the DC metropolitan area create life in the face of state violence and political neglect. It is necessary to outline the complex and multi-faceted histories that have given rise to

---

⁷ For more, see the Anacostia Community Museum’s “Right to the City” exhibit: [https://storymaps.arcgis.com/collections/34d99cccb2c5454da7b4f08e482c1987](https://storymaps.arcgis.com/collections/34d99cccb2c5454da7b4f08e482c1987)

⁸ See the film *Residue*, on Netflix.
the city that we know today because how Black people navigate life in the wake of the post-Chocolate City⁹ is shaped by the histories that have brought us there.

In their ethnographic work on Blackness and DC both Reese and Summers emphasize the role of nostalgia in the community imaginary (Reese 2019; Summers 2019). Oftentimes, nostalgia is utilized as a socio-emotional tool against the threat of anti-black erasure; "Chocolate City was not just about numbers. It was a feeling, a state of mind, a taste and tempo unique to a place and time… If you’re a black person accustomed to a way of life, that way of life is coming to an end" (Modan and Wells 2016, 322). This begs the question: for DC area residents of my generation, who lack the memory to effectively use nostalgia as a primary placemaking tool, how do we use food justice and urban farming to fulfill that role?

---

⁹ The terminology of the post-chocolate city is particularly important as opposed to mocha, cappuccino, chocolate chip etc. as it still locates the Blackness as being a central part of the city. It may no longer be the majority, but it is still there.
Chapter 2. Putting Food Justice and Public Health in Conversation

In the Smithsonian Anacostia Community Museum’s spring 2021 exhibit *Food for the People: Eating and Activism in Greater Washington*, text suspended against a metal cage resembling a shopping cart reads: “DC has the largest life expectancy gap between Blacks and whites in the country. Black men in DC die 17 years earlier on average than white men, and Black women die 12 years earlier than white women. Heart disease, which is often a diet-related illness [emphasis added], is one of the primary causes of these inequalities” (Smithsonian Anacostia Community Museum 2021). This panel draws the connections between health disparities and diet/nutrition. In the context of this exhibit, they argue that food justice (vis-a-vis Produce Rx) is a crucial remedy to racial health disparities in life expectancy.

Over the past several decades, conversations surrounding racial disparities in public health have become increasingly concerned with what used to be referred to
as “diseases of affluence”. This category encompasses a range of mostly chronic non-communicable diseases that are thought to increase in prevalence as a country’s per capita income climbs. This includes many diet-related diseases such as obesity, hypertension, and diabetes, among others. Generally, researchers and practitioners in the field have taken a medicalized approach to combating these diseases by establishing nutrition protocols and dietary restrictions for patients (and the public, conceived of as patients in waiting) to follow. As seen on the “Take Action!” section of the panel at the Smithsonian Anacostia Museum, Washington, DC has implemented a “Produce Prescription (Rx)” program to address the dual crisis of food insecurity and diet-related illness in the city. The program is characteristic of approaches that fall under the umbrella of the “medicalization of food” (Poulain 2017). When the arms of the medical-industrial complex reach out beyond the hospital to encompass the way that we consume (consumption here meaning both our shopping decisions and eating habits), public health can have a colonizing effect on the work of food justice as well as other domains of life.

My thesis draws on theory and teachings from environmental justice and Black geographies. Both ways of knowing have taught me to identify and critique the myriad ways that anti-black state violence permeates Black life, while also highlighting the ways in which Black people create life in spite of said violence. I use these theoretical frameworks to interrogate the boundaries of the medicalization of food by problematizing the public health discourse of morality tied to “healthy” foods, diet as an individual choice, and pushing past the rhetoric of “food deserts”. By placing environmental justice and Black geographies in conversation with current public health and food justice practices, I hope to achieve a greater understanding of the violence enacted by public health in Black communities and what can be achieved by reframing the conversation through teachings from EJ and Black geographies.
Moral judgements on healthy food

What does the “health” in public health mean? Neither the National Institutes of Health (NIH) nor the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), the two leading governmental sources for health information in the U.S, offer definitions of health on their websites. Turning to the World Health Organization (WHO), health is defined as “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (WHO 1946). This definition is expansive and encompasses more than just the physical aspects of wellness, but it fails to specify: who or what is considered healthy? Is “health” something that can reasonably be achieved? Is it an end? A process of maintenance?

As the WHO definition signals, there is more to health than disease, but there is also more to health than avoiding poor health outcomes. In medical and public health rhetoric, health is a state that is measured by subtracting from a standard or a norm. In the biostatistical methods that provide the foundation of public health knowledge and praxis, researchers have to compare data to a reference value in order to determine how the population they are studying differs from the norm. The distance from the reference value affords the basis for the assertion of statistically significant differences in health outcomes, and it is these deviations from the “norm” which shape public health priorities. So, if racial health disparities are often measured with respect to the health of white people, I then raise the question again, who is considered healthy? Which bodies are presumed normative and what does the answer to that question—in medicine and in popular opinion—say about the way common knowledge of health has been constructed?

Many mainstream indicators of good health are measured by scales that are built on the very bedrock of racist and ableist definitions of health. These include the Body Mass Index
(BMI) and Disability Adjusted Life Years (DALYs), among others. Such measurements work to pressure individuals into spending their whole lives in the pursuit of good health. And if one is unable or chooses not to pursue that medical or societal standard of “health,” then moral judgement quickly follows (Metzl 2010). The practice of over-quantifying health to such an extent also causes labels such as “pre-diabetes” or “pre-obesity” to become conditions in and of themselves (Rosenberg 2002). While I acknowledge the material realities that Black populations face while bearing the burden of many chronic illnesses, I also acknowledge that this is the byproduct of a food system that devalues Black life at every step of the process. From food production to chronic disease treatment, Black Americans have been historically and systemically excluded from the benefits of this system (Hatch and Knight 2019).

Public health literature often supports these moral judgements by approaching food through a limited scope. Medical prevention discourse has gained traction so much so that the fear of obesity, diabetes, and hypertension holds more weight in the pursuit of our food choices than pleasure and satisfaction. The fear of chronic illness permeates daily food choices, laden with moralism, insisting that we feel guilt and shame for choosing french fries over a baked potato or ice cream for dessert rather than a bowl of fruit. Assigning personal responsibility as the site for the production of chronic disease establishes the individual diet as the appropriate site of prevention and therapeutic management. If medicine labels poor health outcomes as a problem of individual failure, thereby the solutions must also be addressed through individual level interventions for example, pharmacological prescriptions for weight loss. Then the medical-industrial complex can fulfill its need to always have patients; not because people are sick but because “the only way to know you are healthy is to become a customer” (Metzel 2010, 6).
Diet as an individual choice

**Figure 6 Harvard’s Healthy Eating Plate**

**Figure 7 USDA’s My Plate**


The United States Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) “my plate” nutrition guide is among my earliest memories of public health education and a leading resource for diet education in the U.S. On the companion website to the plate, viewers can access additional resources on how to “eat healthy on a budget,” including suggestions to “make a plan,” “shop smart,” and “make healthy meals.”

Researchers at Harvard University have gone so far as to create a “healthy eating plate” that refines the principles of the USDA to specify that consumers eat “healthy proteins,” “whole grains,” and beyond matters of diet, “stay active.” While these are useful in the plainest sense, they fail to attend to the barriers that impede access to “healthy” foods. Nowhere do either of these models acknowledge that regardless of how much one has the capacity to budget, fresh produce is more expensive where it is scarce, fresh foods typically do

---

11 Harvard School of Public Health “Healthy Plate”: https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/nutritionsource/healthy-eating-plate-vs-usda-myplate/
not store as long as their processed counterparts, and the ability to plan each and every meal is a financial and temporal privilege.

Both plates assume that lack of knowledge is the primary barrier to adopting a healthy diet and thus achieving “good health”. Although neither website specifically addresses racial inequalities in food access, health disparities literature demonstrates that Black Americans are diagnosed with non-communicable diseases at higher rates than White Americans, especially in Washington DC (King et. al 2016). Focusing on the individual plate without first attending to where and how individuals are sourcing their food reifies diet as a choice and affirms the value judgement that it is a personal failure if one makes the “wrong” choice. Public health literature that attempts to address the built environment and social/structural determinants of health often re-pathologizes Black people and Black places as “unhealthy consumers” who live in “food deserts”. As a result of these narratives, notions of lack and absence are ascribed to Black communities: biologically, socially, and spatially.

**Beyond food deserts**

I view the environmental justice concept of “slow violence” (Nixon 2011) as the backdrop against which food justice becomes necessary work—not the reason it exists. This concept is particularly useful in recognizing the limitations of public health to satisfy notions of wellbeing as geographer Naya Jones argues in her article, “Dying to Eat? Black Food Geographies of Slow Violence and Resilience”. Jones reconstitutes slow violence as “attritional and delayed violence, violence that is traditionally overlooked by media and policy because slow violence is not immediately dramatic and impacts historically-oppressed populations over time” (2019, 1079). Jones builds upon Nixon’s conceptualization of slow violence, previously limited
to discussions of environmental toxin exposure, and expands it to Black food geographies by paying attention to the feelings that Black people experience in various food environments. From the vantage point of the somatic experiences of Black people, the forces that cause harm with respect to food—be they structural (i.e. not having a grocery store within two miles) or interpersonal (i.e. a security guard following you around and not feeling safe to shop)—can be understood as agents of violence.

As a concept, slow violence necessarily draws connections to the relationships between race, place, and health. Thinking with Black geographies tells us that “racism, specifically, is the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death” (Gilmore 2007, 28). Slow violence requires that its subjects be fixed in place in order to deliver its harms. And “place” here needs to be understood at various scales: from the home, to the neighborhood, the city, and even beyond. By convention, the primary vector of analysis in public health is population. Many of the commonly used social determinants of health (SDOH) frameworks attempt to unpack and address relationships between social and structural environments and individual health, but many iterations of the framework fail to identify racism, white supremacy, and capitalism as the root cause of those socio-structural inequalities.12

In the context of food (in)justice, slow violence is most recognizable through “food apartheid”—the human-designed, structurally-determined absence of supermarkets and other food outlets that can provide for basic food needs, and the overrepresentation of predatory and otherwise unhealthy food options in a given location (Penniman 2018, 224-225; Reese 2019, 7). The more commonly accepted framing of “food deserts” relies heavily on narratives of resilience

---

12 Increasingly, state and local health officials have pushed to declare racism as a public health crisis. As of writing this, no national declaration has been made. https://www.apha.org/topics-and-issues/health-equity/racism-and-health/racism-declarations
which normalize the harms created by inequitable food access “assuming the endless capacity of affected groups to simply cope… resilience language fails to account for what creates the need to be resilient in the first place” (Ranganathan and Bratman 2019, 3-5). Food apartheid is a more accurate descriptor than “food desert” because it draws attention to the processes that have created lack of access, rather than relying on a metaphor from the natural environment to signal the “presumed nothingness” that is associated with food deserts (Reese 2019, 9). Whereas the term food desert further assigns moral value to food and distinguishes between good sources of food (i.e., supermarkets) and bad ones (i.e., fast food restaurants), the ecosystem of food access in urban settings is in reality far more complex than the food establishments that are visible a given neighborhood (Chatelain 2020; Hatch and Knight 2019; Penniman 2018; Reese 2019). Food apartheid, on the other hand, foregrounds the belief that Black communities deserve more than simply food access—food justice work is not simply the burden of outside actors to “bring good food to others” (Guthman 2008, 443) but about restoring the agency and ability for communities to acquire the foods that they want and need that contributes to community wellbeing.

Converging public health and food justice

Food justice and public health work often converge to achieve similar goals. For example, the DC Food Policy Council set their top three priorities for 2021 as follows:

(1) Decrease food insecurity and promote health equity among most at-risk populations highlighted in DC’s 2020 Food Access and Food Security Report. (2) Increase investment/support for Black and Latinx-led food businesses and organizations and entrepreneurs of color. (3) Expand healthy food access in areas where structural racism and disinvestment have led to low food access. (Figure 9)
Following the police murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery among others in the summer prior, the language in this iteration of the priorities report reflects the influence of food justice advocates in the city. Phrases in the report such as “health equity,” “structural racism,” and a focus on supporting Black and Latinx business were noticeably absent as recently as the 2020 priorities document (Figure 8). The council’s priorities exemplify the ways in which food justice rhetoric has permeated public policy and public health efforts in the city.

*Figure 8 DC Food Policy Council’s 2020 Priorities List*

*Source: https://dcfoodpolicy.org/2020-dc-food-policy-priorities-2/*
Review of current interventions

On the surface, public health policies and food justice activism both seek to address issues of food insecurity and health inequity. Food insecurity is a very pressing issue and has only become compounded and more visible during the COVID-19 pandemic (Wolfson and Leung 2020), but is diagnosed and defined on different terms by both parties. Food justice largely operates outside of governmental structures as a corrective response to meet the needs of communities who have been neglected by the state. As such, the proposed solutions to food insecurity differ depending on who has defined the problem. There are many responses to food insecurity and not all of them are necessarily justice-oriented. Different attempts to address food insecurity frame the recipients in differing ways (as patient, customer, etc.), and each framework has distinct benefits and drawbacks. In this section, I will provide a brief overview of some current interventions in Washington, DC.

Some of the most prominent actors addressing food insecurity are non-profit organizations. DC Greens is a local non-profit that is committed to improving food justice and health equity in Washington DC. Of the several programs that they run, the aforementioned
Produce Prescription Program\(^\text{13}\) has garnered the most traction. In this program, DC Greens connects a number of federally qualified health centers (FQHCs), through a local Medicare provider, to a full-service grocery store in Ward 8 (the only full-service grocery store in Ward 8). DC Greens’ website describes the program as taking a “food-as-medicine approach by integrating produce prescriptions into the health care system” (DC Greens 2021). Individuals who live in Ward 8 and receive treatment for hypertension, diabetes, or pre-diabetes at one of the partnering FQHCs are eligible to receive a $20 per week produce voucher. Patients also receive consultations and check-ins from the in-store nutritionist to track their shopping habits throughout the program.

This is the clearest example of a way in which food is medicalized in the fight for health equity – literally written to patients as a medical prescription. In the absence of structural transformations, this sort of direct-to-consumer intervention is fairly effective for patients who meet the criteria. In this instance, recipients must meet the following criteria:

1. A current resident of Ward 8
2. Over 18 years of age
3. An AmeriHealth caritas DC member
4. A current patient at a participating FQHC
5. And be diagnosed with either hypertension, diabetes, or pre-diabetes

The initial iteration of the program from 2012-2017 was dubbed DC’s “best food access program” for decreasing BMI in over 50 percent of participants (DC Greens 2021). However, effective this intervention is for the 120 people who receive it annually, it nonetheless reinforces paternalistic notions of hierarchy in which the doctor knows best and the (predominantly Black) recipients are presumed to need strict guidance to make better decisions for their own health. While Produce Rx does not claim to be a race-based intervention, given that it operates in a ward

\(^{13}\) See more on the Produce Rx program here: [https://www.dcgreens.org/produce-rx](https://www.dcgreens.org/produce-rx)
that is 91.84 percent Black (DC Health Matters 2021), it is grounded in a set of suspect assumptions about the knowledge/capacity of low-income Black people to feed themselves “properly”.

Ultimately, Produce Rx falls into the fallacy that food justice can be “folded into neoliberalization processes through state involvement… and can be solved by private market forces” (Agyemen and McEntee 2014, 211). This intervention operates under the premise that people need strictly bounded incentives to make good decisions. Moreover, it is worth noting that, prior to the COVID-19 stay at home orders, the $20 voucher only applied to fresh fruits and vegetables and could not be used to purchase frozen or canned items. Given that the vouchers are only redeemable at one location and one week at a time, there are several barriers to redeeming the vouchers that are not addressed by the money itself. Be it transportation to the store, food storage space at home, or time between shopping trips, there are still many gaps left unaddressed by this program.

Another set of tactics for addressing food insecurity are market-based approaches. Under this approach, the lack of food access is addressed by selling solutions that position the recipient as customers. DC Central Kitchen, a local non-profit and social enterprise, runs a program called the “healthy corners initiative”. In this program, they sell produce wholesale to corner stores in low-income neighborhoods; “instead of just giving away food, we have demonstrated significant demand in low-income communities for our fresh, affordable food deliveries to corner stores” (DC Central Kitchen 2021).14 In this intervention, buying more is posited as the solution to food insecurity. Such “purchasable solutions” (Agyemen and McEntee 2014, 214) can also perpetuate paternalistic dynamics between the organization, corner stores, and community members, “as we

14 For more on DC Healthy Corners see here: https://dccentralkitchen.org/healthy-corners/
prove to store owners that selling healthy food is good business, we then help them transition to receiving deliveries from larger, for-profit wholesalers” (DC Central Kitchen 2021). This assumes that local store owners do not know how to optimize profit in their business and that for customers, the purchase of “unhealthy” foods can be defined narrowly as a problem of not knowing better, rather than not having more options in their current food stores.

Lastly, a variety of community-based organizations aim to address food insecurity on the hyperlocal level. I will spend the remainder of this thesis focusing on urban agriculture, specifically Black-led urban agriculture, to explore the ways that community-driven food initiatives fill the gaps left by other programs. While urban agriculture projects are not inherently revolutionary spaces in and of themselves, many Black-led urban agriculture projects prioritize values such as free produce distribution, community education, and cooperative economics that are not always seen in other for-profit urban agriculture settings.

Soilful City is a “space dedicated to connecting humans to nature through information, ideas, and people in urban environments. Creating leadership through the wisdom of nature.” The founder and director of Soilful City, Xavier Brown, has created several food initiatives from this project that center the needs of low-income Black residents in Washington, DC. Soilful City helps to maintain community gardens in Wards 7 and 8 through partnerships with schools, churches, and other community spaces. Many of these local partnerships such as the one with Project EDEN are primarily focused on growing food to donate directly to local residents. The organization's more entrepreneurial ventures are focused on stewarding the community of Black farmers in the greater Washington area. Their Pippin Hot Sauce initiative adopts a cooperative economics model of production as well as youth leadership and entrepreneurship.

15 You can find the organizations Facebook page here: https://www.facebook.com/Soilful/
peppers used in the hot sauce are all sourced from Black farmers across DC, Maryland, and Virginia, and youth employed in this venture assist in the production, marketing and branding of the product. While the food justice initiatives of Soilful City vary widely, each of these programs see the recipients of their initiatives as community members and collaborators first and foremost. They operate under the principle that eating healthy food is a human right and use their platform to ensure that those rights are actualized.

While still doing the work of providing food as medicine, they don’t reinforce the same harmful stereotypes about Black consumers and Black neighborhoods. Using a “for us by us approach” they leverage the knowledge that already exists within these communities. Brown developed a cosmology of “Afroecology” to encapsulate the approach that Soilful City and similar grassroots organizations have brought to food justice:

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. (Brown 2018, 7)

Operating under the tenants of Afroecology is an example of how an organization can make urban agriculture spaces revolutionary. Human-centered small-scale urban agriculture, unlike its agribusinesses, are shaped by community. The proximity of people to each other and to the growing spaces creates opportunities for building social ties, community mentorship, and knowledge exchange beyond just the practice of growing food (Penniman 2018, 222).
Blackness and relationships to land

Black identity is inextricably tied to place. For many Black people in the Americas, our first lessons about land and farming come packaged in messaging about our history in bondage as enslaved people. Little did we learn about the agricultural innovation of our ancestors on the continent of Africa or the sustenance gardens that enslaved people tended to feed their families. The plantation was the central logic through which we are meant to understand our subjectivity in this country (Thomas 2019). However, the paradox of the plantation economy is a fallacy that cannot sustain itself: it “enforced placelessness that demanded the enslaved work and thus be chained to land” (McKittrick 2011, 949).

Many families left the rural south for the industrial north in the first half of the twentieth century. But in many cases, they were “transplants that didn’t take” (Penniman 2018, 205). This mass exodus from the south was more than just a physical migration, it was “an ideological turn away from the provincial in favor of modernity and development. The physical relocation of Black people altered Black American relationships to land, food, and health” (Hassberg 2020, 86). Even though some families may have migrated away from the sites of the plantations and settled elsewhere, as Black people in the United States we are still living in the wake of the plantation – the violence that is experienced in the present is shaped by the future that the plantation provides (Sharpe 2016; McKittrick 2011). I am astonished everyday by the fact that Black people have the audacity to have relationships with the land at all. Like a scab that is broken before the wound could heal, how do we heal from the trauma of the plantation if we never left?

But, like trauma, healing is something that can be passed down culturally as well (Penniman 2018, 273). Our very relationship to this land is a testament to the capability for Black people to
recognize that land is central to our well-being, and to begin the process of reconciliation and repair. Our bodies hold the knowledge that our minds cannot, that we need the land for our “psychological, emotional, and spiritual well-being”; for our freedom (246 & 263).

In the epilogue of *Chocolate City: A History of Race and Democracy in the Nation’s Capital*, Asch and Musgrove conclude that the faults and shortcomings of this nation can be understood through the demographic shifts in its capital city:

> The democratic promises of this nation’s founding documents have foundered repeatedly on the shoals [emphasis added] of dispossession, slavery, segregation, violence, disinvestment, and our collective inability to grapple seriously with this country’s racial sins. (Asch and Musgrove 2017, 461)

Like this country’s many other political, economic, and social ills, the push for food justice and health equity are fettered by anti-black racism and white supremacy. But if we stop to examine the shoal as Tiffany Lethabo King conceptualizes and invites us to consider in *The Black Shoals*—shoals as “interrupt[ing] and slow[ing] the momentum of long-standing and contemporary modes and itineraries for theorizing New World violence, social relations, Indigeneity, and Blackness” (Lethabo King 2019, 2)—what can we learn? When we greet the shoal, where these tensions of the country’s racial sins connect, we must pause and reframe our thoughts through a Black epistemology and a Black sense of place. From there we have a lot to learn about what more food justice *can* be.
Chapter 3. “Impact your world, don’t worry about impacting the whole world”: Exploring our Farming Journeys

“Revolution is based on land. Land is the basis of all independence. Land is the basis of freedom, justice, and inequality.”
- Malcom X, “Message to the Grassroots”

“We are each other’s harvest: we are each other’s business: we are each other’s magnitude and bond.”
- Gwendolyn Brooks, “Paul Robeson”

Introduction

In this chapter I seek to recontextualize health on different terms, terms that center the epistemologies of young Black food justice activists to go beyond simply resisting pain and oppression. When life isn’t spent avoiding death, what do you do in the meantime? How can we imagine health as an additive process? Black placemaking and Black ways of being emphasize the centrality of relationships in defining health—health as relationships to food, to land, and to other people. In this chapter, I couple autoethnographic reflections on navigating my own food environment with data from the interviews with other young Black food justice activists to explore our journeys navigating food, land, and community.

Methods and criteria

In planning for this project, I sought to center the experiences of “my community” all while recognizing that each of our individual lived experiences would bring diverse and perhaps divergent perspectives on food justice and urban agriculture. To gather these perspectives, I conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews over Zoom, working under the constraints of the COVID-19 pandemic. While I would have preferred for this research to be conducted in
person and embedded in place, there were limitations during this academic year. To qualify for these interviews, individuals had to meet the following criteria:

1. Identify as Black and/or African-American
2. Between the ages of 18-35
3. Live and/or work in Washington DC, Maryland, or Virginia
4. Participate either formally or informally in Urban Agriculture

The call for participation was shared on my personal social media channels, Black gardening groups on Facebook, and my neighborhood groups on both Facebook and Nextdoor. I also networked with Black-led urban farms and gardens and food justice organizations in the DMV. Each participant was additionally invited to share the call and refer other individuals who might be interested in participating in the study.

The data included in this analysis are the results of three interviews conducted for the project. For the purposes of protecting anonymity and confidentiality I will be using pseudonyms to reference my interviewees. Details such as age, location, and organizational affiliations have been slightly altered.

1. Chris is a 30-year-old urban gardener based out of Prince George’s County, MD. He owns his own farm in a lot he purchased next to his childhood home.
2. Sharon is a 27-year-old who works for the government in public health education. She has her own plot in a community garden in Maryland.
3. Jade is a 22-year-old college student at a mid-size university in Washington, DC. They help to run the campus community garden alongside local residents from the city.

There were no conflicts of interest between myself and any of the organizations the interviewees may work for. I did not have prior relationships with any of the participants. However, I was pleasantly surprised by the commonalities and divergences in our experiences.

**How do you define food justice?**

Across the board, everyone defined food justice as fundamentally being about access, choice, and health. Health was mentioned on multiple scales such as physical, mental, and
spiritual health. With respect to the material realities of diet-related illnesses, food justice opens a space to rectify them. It creates a space for healing in an otherwise unjust system.

There is no cure-all for remedying access under food apartheid, all responses have to be locally relevant. One factor that drew Chris to start his own farm was the knowledge that, contrary to what dominant food desert discourse asserts, a grocery store is not necessarily the solution in every neighborhood. For Chris, access looks different in every community, but should include variety: grocery stores, farmers markets, and urban gardens are each ways to address food insecurity and a combination of those options is even better.

All three participants agreed that access must come hand in hand with choice, and that choice shouldn’t impose inherent moral value in personal food decisions. Several participants, including myself, shared our fondness for fast food: whether it be Wendy’s, Burger King, or McDonalds, we enjoy the indulgence of a quick burger or dollar menu meal. Choice is about having all the options laid out in front of you and expressing agency to choose what you desire in that moment. On some days it might be a salad from the local farmers market, on others a Wendy’s four for four. When empowered with education and knowledge to make informed choices, it becomes an individual’s prerogative to choose what is right for them.

Food justice and health are always personal. Food apartheid structures community level access and choice, but the violence of unequal food environments is felt by each and every individual body within those communities. Sharon, who is navigating several compounded health issues, experienced this first hand:

I realized that I was fighting something bigger than I even know right now. Like this is more than just me living, this is as big as future generations stopping diabetes and so many other things – I started having heart issues. I'm sitting in the cardiologist’s office, racking up medical bills. I don’t feel good, I'm lethargic, have less energy, and I'm tired. Sometimes you sleep so deep that you don’t even know if you’ll wake up... it gets scary. Like I don’t want nobody to have to deal with this.
This pain is embodied. The environmental transgressions, aggressions, and racism are felt on the individual body but expressed through the community. It takes each one to teach one to help the community heal and grow.

Defining what the “justice” in food justice looks like is the crux of the problem. As defined in the previous chapter, slow violence works in silence, behind the scenes in ways that cannot always be named. It is in the air that we breathe, the food that we eat, and the medicines we take.

Jade: Our parents just kind of had us so the least we should have access to is everything that sustains life. I feel like food, water, shelter, those things should at least be awarded. But you know they try to take it away from us every chance they get so I've found that this work is political but I came into it just wanting to survive.

Sharon: It's like a whole chain connected – cause also with less of us being educated on this and dying then there are less of us to teach each other about this and fight for what we need in our communities and I almost think of it like depopulating our community without even knowing it.

Over time slow violence becomes necropolitical—the state uses power to expose people to premature death—and this wielding of power dictates how “some people may live and how some must die” (Mbembe 2003, 17). Interviewees named government agencies such as the USDA and EPA as being prominent perpetrators of this violence. There is no justice, food or otherwise, without accountability on their part.

Sharon also described the overlaps in her farming journey and career in public health. As a result of current and generational legacies of harm inflicted by public health, many Black Americans don’t feel that the institution of medicine has earned their trust. At times, this lack of trust creates self-inflicted damage when Black people aren’t comfortable receiving life-saving care in the medical setting. As with gardening, she felt that because Black people sometimes associate farming with enslavement and desire to distance ourselves from those feelings, we are
missing out on an activity that can bring us good health and continued life. Acknowledging the violence that exists in this racist and unjust food system gives rise to a healthy dose of cynicism. One that makes way for imaginative futures: as Jade says, “food justice doesn't seem very tangible with our current structures to me… So, I think justice is a conversation of *abolition work*. That's the only way justice can be served and accountability can be had.” Food justice, according to these Black gardeners, is as much about reconciliation and repair as it is about growing food.

**Building Community: Learning to Garden**

As a noun, community lacks specificity and meaning. However as a verb, to commune is praxis. It is the heart and soul of Black-led urban agriculture. As one respondent said, “there is no urban agriculture without community in most cases.” The foundation of community is built on relationships to other people and requires active participation to be sustained. Closeness or proximity to each other is not enough to assume that groups of people are in community together. Community requires acceptance and even further, refusal, to define the boundaries of who is included. Black-led urban agriculture is highly intentional about fostering safe-spaces to build community bonds.

Learning to grow food is a journey, and the gardener is a perpetual student of the earth and its stewards. For each of us, coming to gardening happened somewhat haphazardly. But since we found it, it has become a part of our lives that we can’t (nor would we want to) live without it. There are many reasons people begin gardening: as a hobby for pleasure, to generate self-sufficient food access, for exercise, as a job, etc. And in retrospect, there are many small moments of learning that we can identify that so clearly led us to this passion. We point to
grandparents keeping gardens and houseplants, childhood curiosities that were a precursor to interests in soil science, and more directly, visiting urban gardens themselves.

Once the gardening journey begins, so too does an insatiable search for guidance and information and the realization that you cannot learn this all alone. Respondents point to social media, books, and conferences as the materials they have consulted along this journey. But most importantly, they learn from other gardeners. Whether through formal apprenticeships or word of mouth, there is an unadulterated pleasure in sharing this practice with family and friends—really any and everyone who will listen.

This exchange of knowledge does not only come from the living. Each interviewee highlights how learning to garden has enhanced their spirituality and brought them closer to their ancestors: “almost every day I’m stumped by the fact that one of my ancestors is somebody who survived that [the transatlantic slave trade] and then as soon as they got off they were forced into labor to cultivate the land with blood, sweat, and tears.” Drawing on ancestral knowledge brings strength and wisdom to break generational curses, because “if you don't break the cycles, if you don’t see yourselves as somebody capable and able to produce reparations, you kind of ignore the class struggle along with the race struggle,” Jade says.

Part of this learning includes the process of navigating funding challenges. Although everyone I interviewed works in different settings under different conditions, they all expressed frustration with money. For Chris who owns his own farm, the process of getting a loan to buy the land presented significant barriers. But since acquiring the lot, he has been able to secure county grants to support his work. Jade, running the community garden at the DC-based university, explains that the school does not materially support the initiative and the students get by on writing applications for small grants and Home Depot gift cards to continue their work.
There is often an altruistic desire to feed our families and enable our communities to exercise self-sufficiency. Knowing that your work has a positive impact on individuals and the environment is a motivating factor to continue this work. Chris and Sharon also point to the desire to be a role model and show other Black people that this is something we can be a part of.

**Connecting food and health: relationships to food**

Fresh produce is the primary product of urban agriculture and the main reason that many people get involved in the first place, for access to affordable, local, or otherwise unavailable foods. What is not immediately obvious, or at least what was not to me, is that growing food drastically alters your relationship with the food itself. As Chris said, “you know like I'm not a super environmental guy... or I hadn't been, but you know it's tough to not become attached to the land and improving it and making it produce life.” In my own experience, patiently watching as my crops grew little by little each day, and quickly over the course of the summer, made me that much more excited to taste my harvests. Being aware of the process made me respect the food all the more. It broke the illusions that food begins wrapped in plastic at the grocery store with a barcode on it – there is a whole life before it ever gets to our mouths. Like Chris mentioned in our conversation, having “that connection to the seed and have that turn into several fruits is something that makes you snap into reality almost. It's something that makes you pay attention to life and how life is started and how everything is connected, and your environment is a very sacred space.” Through building a better relationship with food, I not only had a heightened desire to grow vegetables I already loved, but my willingness to try new and unusual foods increased as well.
Beyond my personal investment in my crops, I was able to excitedly share produce with friends and family and expose them to new foods. As she navigates her own health challenges and food journey, Sharon can’t help but bring her parents with her too. She spoke a lot about her father who, as an older West African man, is stuck in his ways with many of his food preferences but is also navigating chronic health issues. Growing food has made her feel empowered to take control of her own health and encourage others around her to do the same. By modeling new eating habits, Sharon is able to influence her parents to include more plant-based foods in their diet as well. Through a familial introduction to the food, they are comfortable to explore new food options without shame or losing their other diet choices.

In most cases, Black-led urban agriculture produces food for people over a singular focus on profit. For example, at the university garden, Jade has recently helped spearhead a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) that student and local community members can access. This program is free of charge to the people who receive the food. Jade’s use of the university’s resources for this project is intentional—the university doesn’t care whether the garden is there or not, but “a part of reparations is being able to reclaim it for your benefit, for the way you want things to be and for what you believe you’re entitled to,” they said. They believe that using the university’s land to produce this food to meet the material needs of students and neighborhood residents is a form of intra-community reparations.

Working his own farm, Chris uses his produce to disrupt the local food system, offering an alternative for local restaurants and small business owners looking to incorporate locally-grown produce on their menus. He acknowledges that while he cannot match the low cost of the larger industrial farms that specialize in monocrops, he takes pride in the added moral value of agroecological methods to provide high quality produce to restaurants. He believes that if more
restaurants were sourcing their produce this way the demand would sustain farmers in a way that could really strengthen the local economy.

Each interviewee’s experience exemplifies ways that Black gardeners are providing food for people. They recognize that a food system that centers productivism can never contribute to a truly healthy lifestyle. They refuse to allow Black bodies to continually be dumpsites for GMOs and over-processed foods and are participating in their own practices of reclamation and reparations everyday by feeding themselves and others.

**Connection/relationship to land and to the earth**

Land is at the center of urban agriculture. In each of the journeys explored here, land is central to the story of gardening. When I began thinking about the possibility of writing a thesis on food and health, I quickly found that there was no way to talk about these issues without centering land.

Working with the land opens up spiritual connections to our ancestors. Although many of us have had to shake the association of land and slavery, like Jade, we have grown to acknowledge that the “site of the atrocity was land, labor, and that’s why we're here so all of it is a collective struggle.” In working through my relationship with the land over the past year, I have had to reconcile my animosity towards land and land-based labor. Through careful reflection alone and in community, I’ve come to realize that my animosity was misguided. When I should have been angry at European imperialism and institutions of white supremacy for stealing my ancestors and forcing them to labor on this land, I was mad at the land itself.

In Sharon’s experience, that memory sticks around, but she has also found purpose in it. It is a powerful reminder that this land she gets produce from was once the land that people were
enslaved on. For her it's a testament to the fact that Black people are connected spiritually in ways that we may not be able to understand:

    I wonder how our ancestors are looking down at us like, ‘Man I once worked on that land and I'm happy to see my daughter there.’ So, I think of that. I also think of healing, healing and the land. Even when I'm sitting there sometimes I take my gardening gloves off and just go straight bare hands. Just feeling soil, like a connection.

She points to the fact that even though land has been and still is a site of struggle, she marvels at the fact that the plants are still able to grow. That connection with the soil engenders responsibility to continue to care for the land our ancestors once cared for instead of letting go to waste.

    For Chris, his gardening journey would not have started had he not had the opportunity to purchase a plot of land. And it's more than a site of production for him. Owning a plot of land where he grew up in, in PG County, MD gives him a stake in the area's development. While many other people are facing “gentrification blues” he says, he is actively shaping the way the city will evolve. As a landowner, he feels a certain responsibility to the land, to be a caretaker and a steward. He keeps up with the environmental impacts of agriculture and the positive benefits his work has on reversing climate change is an area for further growth and interest.

    Likewise for Jade, they maximize their positionality as a college student by using the land owned by the university to bring forth something useful from it. They recognize that the university is actively participating in the “loss of the chocolate city.” As a large landowner in the city, the university contributes to gentrification and the displacement of Black and brown people in DC, so they are subverting notions of productivity to provide a collaborative space for community recreation as well. It's a constant struggle over land use Jade says, “just cultivating the land is political because land is money and our university kind of sees it as an empty plot… They may claim it once every year on earth day” they say, but the university doesn’t know (or
care) about what is happening there. As new luxury condos go up across the street, new residents are invited by building management to walk their dogs in the community garden, desecrating the space that students and their local collaborators have worked so hard to cultivate.

As Malcom X said in his 1963 *Message to the Grassroots*, “there is no revolution without land” (Malcom X, 1963). As we each navigate life in the DC metropolitan area, working for a more equitable food system, land is the backbone of our activism. In a world where Black people are disposable, taking up space and staking a claim to land is revolutionary. When our universities, cities, and governments do not value Black life, it is a radical practice to work to ensure that there are Black people in the future.

**Envisioning and creating livable and sustainable futures**

Regardless of what brought them to urban agriculture, Black gardeners understand that an investment in gardening is an automatic investment into the future. You cannot reap your harvest the day you plant the seed, you are betting on a combination of time, conducive growing conditions, and labor to realize your collect the fruits of your labor. Much like the embedded futurity of the practice of gardening itself, young Black gardeners harbor goals of self-sufficiency, land ownership, and Black food futures in their aspirations.

Admittedly, I now see the potential for gardens everywhere. Wherever there is a plot of land, I can envision ways that food crops or beneficial native plants could supplement the space. In a future where we maximize agroecological growing practices, fresh food won’t have to be a luxury. Narratives of scarcity cannot hold up to community caretaking and mutual aid.

Sharon aspires to eventually take the next step: to own land for herself. Drawing on her reading of Leah Penniman’s book, *Farming While Black*, her dreams are growing bigger than she
previously could have imagined. On a smaller scale, she wants to become more self-sufficient in growing her own food and investing in land as real estate. On a larger scale and more important to her is that she wants to create something that is a space for her community.

[I want to] impact my community and provide them with the space to be able to learn—educate themselves, connect with each other, a safe space where they can improve their health, gain some knowledge, become self-sufficient and impact their generations from there.

This desire—the need to provide for the community and not just for herself is emblematic of why Black-led urban agriculture is a vital part of future sustainable food systems.

Each of my informants considers the urgent implications of urban agriculture in the age of the global climate crisis. Not only is gardening beneficial for human food access, it helps to remediate some of the harm that humans have inflicted on our environment. But they also understand that climate change goes beyond the scientific atmospheric effects:

When Columbus sailed the ocean in 1492… the climate changed. It wasn't global warming. But the climate was manipulated by a need for free labor and that’s what [we see] happening… if you address climate change and international global health crises as ones that are prompted by human trafficking and enslavement and genocide, then we can have real solutions on out hand

As discussed in the previous chapter the violence of global anti-blackness shapes the climate we live in today (Sharpe 2016). Beyond fixing food access, Jade wants solutions that “keep fossil fuels in the ground” and “ensure renewable energy.” Solutions that center reconciliation and repair for Black communities at home and abroad. Like the problem of the industrial globalized food system, the work of environmental liberation needs to be a globalized effort as well. As United States-based gardeners, we recognize our struggles as being intertwined with international movements towards food sovereignty. And that as long as the earth is in a state of degeneration, we will never truly be healthy.

***

Samuels 45
“A climate resilient future looks like abolition, and to me that's not a scary thing. Cause if we are free then, that means we aren't free now and I feel pretty liberated right now so that's exciting!”

- Jade

Conclusions and Further Directions

In Black feminist ecologies, there is an understanding that we as humans are an integral part of our environment -- for better or for worse, “Black women’s ecologies guide us toward a more restorative relationship with the natural world” (Ferarri 2020). Ecologies that position human health right alongside the health of the planet offer new ways of thinking about resistance. For young Black food activists gardening is not just about access to food, it defies necropolitical forces to create access to life and living. It is the work of repair and creating the future we want to live in.

At its core this project is a love letter to all the young Black food activists who are out there making change in the DC area. I see you, I acknowledge you, and I am so proud of you. This thesis was born out of my own experiences learning to garden as a young Black woman living in Maryland – from my own curiosities that I wanted to explore further. I implicate myself in this work to build on the rich legacy of Black feminist theory and praxis. In this thesis I offered a critical retelling of DC’s history to provide the context for the “place” in which the place-based work of urban agriculture is situated. I explored the productive tensions and divergences between public health and food justice with a specific emphasis on Black food geographies. And I interviewed and analyzed conversations with other young Black food activists from the DC area. Through highlighting their commitments to creating equitable food access in the present, we offer a glimpse into how they are shaping more just futures.
I recognize that the academy was not the start, nor will it be the end of my work. As I continue on to graduate study, I would like to approach this work further in conversation with Black studies to explore relationships between Black people and the environment. How are Black ontologies being challenged and/or shifted in the anthropocene? How does this impact the ways in which we understand Black identity formation? How are Black and Indigenous struggles intertwined on this land? And in what ways can we align our work towards decolonization? Outside of the research components of this work, I hope to do something with these findings. I look forward to the opportunity to further connect beyond the limitations of COVID-19. Whether that is formally tapping into the network of Black growers in DC or forging new connections with organizations in Southern California, I look forward to exploring this passion with people—in person.

***

I spent many mornings outside sitting on the stoop in front of the garden last summer, just watching – staring. Over the course of the summer, my garden faced many trials and tribulations. As a first-time gardener I ran into many unexpected challenges: learning a proper watering schedule for the plants, protecting my crops from animals, and discerning which bugs were beneficial or threatening. And as the garden grew, so too did social unrest around the country.

Maybe my almost daily routine of attending Black Lives Matter protests and coming home to garden provided the synchronicity I needed to wake myself up. But from the stoop, I learned many lessons about revolution. Although my garden faced several challenges, by the end of the summer I had an abundance of food that I was able to share with my community. We were fed both physically and spiritually as our connections to the earth grew deeper. I close by returning to my meditation on “feeling in Black” after over a year of beginning to repair my
relationship with the land. Now, I can say that my relationship with the land is becoming stress reliving, life-affirming, and revolutionary.

When the world around us is stifling – as a respiratory virus ravages through the population rendering hundreds of thousands of people breathless – as state violence asphyxiates the sanctity of Black life – when the world around me could not, the garden offered me a space of escape – a place to breathe.
References


Hatch, Anthony Ryan and Deja Knight. 2019. “Food Sovereignty and Wellness in Urban African American Communities.” In Well-being as a multidimensional concept: understanding

Samuels 49


Metzl, Jonathan, and Anna Kirkland. 2010. Against Health: How Health Became the New


https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/washingtoncitydistrictofcolumbia,MD,US/PST045219


https://www.who.int/about/who-we-are/constitution
