

D-Town Farm: African American Resistance to Food Insecurity and the Transformation of Detroit

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This article analyzes community building and political agency through an investigation of the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network (DBCFSN). By using farming as a strategy of resistance against the structural factors that have left much of Detroit in a condition of food insecurity, DBCFSN not only meets citizens' needs for fresh produce, but also builds community by transforming the social, economic, and physical environment. In so doing, it creates new community spaces on vacant land. DBCFSN uses the farm (a) as a community center, (b) as a means to articulate culturally relevant language about healthy food and healthy lifestyles, and (c) as a tangible model of collective work, self-reliance, and political agency. These farmers adopt a community-based model for increasing access to healthy food for the mostly African American citizens of Detroit. By focusing on improving the daily existence of citizens rather than mobilizing against the power structures, D-Town, a seven-acre model urban farm project of DBCFSN, activists participate in the revival of a city mired in racism and poverty, and all but abandoned by politicians, the automobile industry, and the merchants and supermarkets who once served Detroit's residents.

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This project investigates a group of African American activists, members of Detroit Black Community Food Security Network (DBCFSN), who are reclaiming vacant urban space within the city for farming. Using data col-

lected through interviews, I suggest that their work on this land is a resistance strategy to re-create a sense of community around intergenerational engagement, exercise, and better-quality food. To accomplish these goals, they construct a culturally relevant language for discussing healthy eating and lifestyles. The result of their work is a visible example of community-based transformation, where abandoned city spaces become mechanisms of food delivery and improved access to healthy food through the processes of self-determination, empowerment, and cooperative economics.

The Detroit context is described to offer a perspective of the causes and conditions of food insecurity, and the need for access to healthy food for many Detroiters. The description of urban agricultural-related initiatives in Detroit situates the work of DBCFSN. The conclusion summarizes how agency and strategy are important concepts for understanding community building through farming as a form of resistance.

The Detroit Context

For decades, Detroit has been referred to as ground zero for numerous negative social conditions and social ills. Even prior to the 1967 rebellion, Detroit has been recognized as one of the most racially polarized urban centers in the United States (US). Scholarship on the underdevelopment of Detroit has attributed its decline to housing discrimination and racial segregation; business, tax and capital flight to the more affluent suburbs (Sugrue, 1996); hostile race relations, especially in residential segregation (Darden et al., 1987); and a combination of race relations and urban and labor conflict (Thompson, 2001). The recent transformation of the automobile industry, which no longer employs armies of Detroit residents, along with the subsequent shrinking of the working and middle classes, have left

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Detroiters mired in poverty-induced challenges, including reduced city services, poor-quality education, and high rates of unemployment, crime, and housing foreclosures, with little to no access to healthy food.

Detroit's population has undergone dramatic shifts within a relatively short period. At its high point in 1950, Detroit's population was almost two million. According to the recently released 2010 census data (US Census Bureau, 2010), the current population at 713,777 rests at less than half the population in 1970 (see Table 1); recent projections based on the 2000 Census and the 2009 American Community Survey project that 77.7%¹ of Detroiters are African American, 16.9% are White, and the remaining 5.4% are Asian, Hispanic, or report that they are of mixed race (Data Driven Detroit, 2010). Population declines took place in different phases. White flight occurred during the late 1950s, when Whites began to move out of the city into the surrounding affluent suburbs. African American flight, a parallel migration of middle-class African Americans to the same suburbs, did not begin until 2000, according to census data. The high percentage of African American urban residents versus White suburban residents and the subsequent racial polarization of the region have earned the city an unfortunate second-place ranking in overall residential segregation of African Americans as of 2000 (Iceland, Weinberg, and Steinmetz, 2002). A preliminary study based on the 2010 census finds Detroit to be the most segregated city in the US, whether either a dissimilarity index or an isolation index is used (Logan and Stults, 2011). This regional hypersegregation has far-reaching implications, including a decline in the quality of city services and unequal opportunities in housing, education, health care, employment, and transportation (Iceland, Weinberg, and Steinmetz, 2002).

Detroit had experienced an economic depression for several years before the US-wide economic downturn of 2008

Table 1. Population change in Detroit, 1970–2010

| Year | Population |
|------|------------|
| 1970 | 1,511,482 |
| 1980 | 1,203,339 |
| 1990 | 1,027,974 |
| 2000 | 951,270 |
| 2010 | 713,777 |

From the US Census Bureau (2010).

(Kaza, 2006). This decline has exacerbated Detroit's myriad socioeconomic ills. According to the 2009 US Census Bureau American Community Survey, household incomes in Detroit have fallen by 31% since 2000, making it the poorest city in America, with 28.3% of families living below the poverty level (see Table 1).

Another indicator of economic hardship is the high unemployment rate, which, according to 2006–2008 census estimates, is approximately 30%, or almost three times the national average. This staggering number does not even account for those who have given up looking for work, who are currently employed part time but are seeking full-time employment, or who are underemployed. If these groups are included, the city's unemployment rate is 44.8% of adults who otherwise are able to work (Wilkinson, 2009). Joblessness is another measure of the intensity of unemployment. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics in 2009, the jobless rate at 7.3% in the Detroit Metropolitan Statistical Area represented the highest increase of any metropolitan area in the nation. Relative to long-term unemployment, the rate of joblessness is estimated at 48.5% among men ages 20–64 in Detroit who did not have a job in 2008.

For those who lack a vehicle (estimated at one in five urban residents), or those with unreliable transportation, many of whom are also single-parent heads of household, life in the city is particularly difficult. Transportation is not only a critical prerequisite to accessing employment, particularly in a city that lacks a reliable public transportation system, but is necessary to access resources such as health care, healthy food, and other essentials (US Census Bureau, 2006–2008).

Food Insecurity

Detroiters long have had insufficient access to grocery stores and major supermarkets. Numerous studies have documented racial disparities in access to these food outlets. For example, Zenk et al. (2005b) found that African American-majority communities are on average 1.1 miles farther from a supermarket than are predominantly White neighborhoods. In other words, when controlling for income, Whites still have greater access to healthy food outlets than do African Americans. The problem culminated in 2007 when Farmer Jack, the last major grocery store chain serving the city, closed its doors (Smith and Hurst, 2007). Now many areas within Detroit are designated as "food insecure" (Galagher, 2007, p. 2). Of the city's residents, 80% must purchase their food at the more than 1,000 fringe food retailers,

such as “liquor stores, gas stations, party stores, dollar stores, bakeries, pharmacies, convenience stores and other venues” (p. 5). These stores offer few, if any, healthy food choices and often charge higher prices for poorer quality than comparable stores in the suburbs (Brown, 2003; Dowie, 2009). Zenk et al. (2005a) also found that these fringe food retailers or independent stores that are more likely found in Detroit’s impoverished neighborhoods are directly linked to a decline in the consumption of fruits and vegetables for the city’s African American women.

Inadequate food supply to poor, inner-city communities has long been viewed as a problem by planners and food activists. While the suburbs attract food markets and national chains, until recently the problems associated with poor effective demand and the lack of political pressure leave poor inner cities with few food options (Pothukuchi, 2005). Add to this the abundance of fast-food outlets, and the result is a perfect storm of food insecurity and subsequent diet-related illnesses for poor people in Detroit.

In response to the lack of access to healthy and affordable food, there have been several initiatives that have galvanized to develop community food security for the citizens of Detroit. *Community food security* is defined as “a condition in which all community residents obtain a safe, culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet through a sustainable food system that maximizes community self-reliance and social justice” (Hamm and Bellows, 2003). Earthworks Urban Farm and the Detroit Food Justice Task Force (DFJTF) are examples of the organizational response to increase community food security. Earthworks Urban Farm is a critical project sponsored by the Capuchins of the Province of St. Joseph and is the first certified organic urban garden in Detroit. These organizations run several children’s programs as a part of their commitment to “build a just, beautiful food system through education, inspiration, and community development” (Earthworks Urban Farm, 2010, p. 1) Much of Earthworks Urban Farm’s sustainably grown produce is prepared at the Capuchin Soup Kitchen. However, it also sells its produce through the Youth Farm Stand program, where children learn about and participate in the development of a community food system including production, marketing, sales, and value-added products.

DFJTF is a newly created collective of organizations led by people of color who are engaged in “creating a food security plan for Detroit that is: sustainable; that provides healthy, affordable foods for all the city’s people; that is based on best-practices and programs that work; and that is just and

equitable in the distribution of food, jobs and profits” (DFJTF, 2010, p. 1). They sponsor monthly activities that encourage interethnic interaction, cooking, eating, and discussions around food issues in the city. They also are implementing feasibility studies to investigate green economy and food-related entrepreneurial opportunities for citizens (L. Spady, personal communication, 2010).

While these organizations are concerned with addressing food security and the politics of increasing access to healthy foods, several organizations are engaged, more specifically, in the resurgence of community/urban agriculture within the city. The Detroit Agriculture Network (DAN) offers resources to community and family gardeners. According to their website, they provided seed, education, tools, and other support with an estimated combined of over 120 tons of produce for “263 community gardens, 55 schools, and 557 families” (DAN, 2010). These numbers speak only to the people and organizations that are members of DAN. Accessing the numbers of people who engage in agriculture and who are affiliated but not members of the various organizations proves difficult to quantify.

What follows is a case study of DBCFSN to explore how grassroots community-based efforts can alleviate the food crisis and mobilize a community to effect change. DBCFSN, formed to address food insecurity in the Black community, represents the majority African American population and is motivated by the belief that successful community change is led by leaders from within its own community. Nevertheless, this organization strives to improve access to quality food to all Detroit citizens as it organizes to improve the city’s future. The activities of DBCFSN can be viewed as a first step in building partnerships with other community-based organizations, as well as public agencies, so that residents can work to rebuild their city.

Community-based organizations have several key objectives around food security that tie together aspects of the food system (production and distribution) with strategies for community change. Organizations, like DBCFSN in collaboration with Earthworks Urban Farm and DFJTF, use mobilization, education, policy advocacy, and the physical improvements in neighborhoods to increase the food supply and prevent hunger, thereby enhancing the health of its residents, revitalizing neighborhoods through shared activities that also improve and strengthen the community’s local economy, and building a sense of justice, equity, and self-determination.

Methods

I gained access to the members of DBCFSN as a researcher interested in studying Black farmers who were active in the current resurgence in urban agriculture. I informed them of my interests to capture the history of agriculture in Detroit through interviews and through collecting oral histories of elders, some of whom no longer gardened. As I attended the meetings, I became more and more committed to the work as a volunteer and was able to contribute my skills to work for the organization, thus making this a participatory research design. It was through our extensive interactions that they trusted me to tell their stories. In addition to the initial interviews with members of the organization for the purpose of data collection, supplemental interviews were conducted with the leadership in order to document the organization's history.

For this case study, in January 2009, I interviewed 10 of the most active volunteer farmers cultivating city lands during the 2008 growing season. These farmers were identified among the most frequent volunteers on rolls maintained by the organization's farm manager. All 10 farmers were African American; 5 were men and 5 were women, ranging in age from 33 to 70. They represented a wide range of occupations, from city government employees to educators, retirees, and the those in search of employment. Of the 10 respondents, 4 were founding members of the organization, and the other 6 are active volunteers of the organization.

The interviews, conducted via phone, were recorded using a digital voice recorder and were transcribed by the author immediately following each interview. The interview schedule was semistructured and lasted approximately 1½ hours. They were asked questions addressing their involvement in gardening and participation in DBCFSN. Several themes emerged in response to the questions. Many of these African American farmers' responses focused on creative uses of vacant land to create new urban spaces and a new vision of Detroit. When I asked about their reasons for getting involved in gardening and farming, many discussed their desire to be agents of their own transformation and the transformation of Detroit.

Interviewees' responses were coded several ways. First, I searched for themes, definitions, and functions of the words *community* and *resistance*. Second, to undertake the analysis, I also highlighted concepts such as agency and responsibility. Last, I analyzed these urban farmers' perspectives

on the appropriation of vacant and abandoned spaces within the context of their work as urban farmers.

Community Building: Agency and Strategy

Agency and strategy are key analytic categories to explain individual and collective action aimed at community building. *Agency* can be defined as social actors' ability to create and enact options necessary to shape their future. How individuals conceptualize agency and the strategies they adopt reflects their beliefs about whether they are able to influence events in their own lives based on the information available to them and on their interpretation of that information. Yet the analytic potential of agency and strategy has not been fully realized because they remain underdeveloped in social movement theory (see Morris, 2004). More specifically, the literature does not flesh out agency as "an analytical category in its own right—with distinctive theoretical dimensions and temporally variable social manifestations" (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998, p. 963). Nonetheless, the literature offers lines of inquiry that lay the possible foundation for a renewed approach. A brief review of the literature on social action identifies positive developments and gaps in order to advance a more thorough conceptualization of urban agriculture as a resistance strategy and social vehicle for self-determination and community building.

The aspect of agency that scholars have explicated the most concerns the origin or location of agency either in the structure, in the individual, or in a combination of the two. Theorists who adopt the first position argue that external, structural, and cultural conditions largely determine individuals' options and behaviors (Dietz and Burns, 1992; McAdam, 1986; McCarthy and Zald, 1979; Stevenson and Greenberg, 2000; Tilly, 1978). Among the theorists who locate agency within the individual, Davies (1992, p. 42) employs a humanistic definition, seeing agency as "a feature of each sane, adult human being" (see also Mahoney and Yngvesson, 1992). Still others view agency as primarily a social-psychological construct, privileging the internal as the source motivating social actors to create and to join movements but also recognizing external influences on the process. *Constructionism* explores the ways in which "movement organizations and actors are actively engaged in the production and maintenance of meaning for constituents, antagonists, and bystanders or observers" (Snow and Benford, 1992, p. 136). Similarly, Michel Foucault's (1980, 1983) concept of subjectification describes the *origin of agency* as that which secures a subject's subordination but also par-

adoxically provides the climate for producing a resistant identity. The capacity that defines an actor's agency, in other words, is a product of the operations of power or structure. Building on Foucault's work, Judith Butler (1993, 1997) locates agency in the performative. She argues that the performative reinforces conventions and norm structures.

A few scholars have gone beyond the effort to locate the origin of agency and have attempted to link the nature of agency to desired outcomes, some of which are relevant to the kind of collective action that social movements entail. These theorists argue that for individuals to resist they must initiate a specific type of agency based on desired outcomes that demand a deviation from the hegemony, create new identities, and require new kinds of social relations.

According to some theorists, the enactment of agency suggests the second construct of interest—strategy. *Strategy* is defined as “an explicit guide to future behavior” (Mintzberg, 2001, p. 67) or the development of a plan or a set of innovative ideas for “performing different activities from rivals’ or performing similar activities in different ways” to achieve predetermined objectives (Porter, 1996, p. 62). In addition, strategy typically is conceptualized as revolutionary—as action that is the antithesis of existing behavioral norms (Hamel, 1996, p. 70).

Strategies are often theorized as “a stream of choices”; strategic goals and processes. *Strategic goals* emphasize the desire of “subunits to use their power to influence organizational decisions in their own favor, particularly when their own survival is threatened by the scarcity of critical resources” (Salancik and Pfeffer, 1977, p. 17). Strategic goals consist of conscious and rational decisions and have both intended and unintended consequences, including the “ability to organize and control the allocation of resources and definition of what is critical” (p. 9). Another line of inquiry concerns *strategic processes*, the ways in which strategies are created and applied. This process develops progressively and includes both a temporal dimension and a situational dimension. The *temporal dimension* emphasizes the gradual development of strategic options such that the “past actions of others are taken into consideration and their future actions are anticipated” (Crow, 1989, p. 4). The *situational dimension* of the strategic process explores the degree to which strategies are either deliberate or emergent, formed or formulated (Crow, 1989; Mintzberg, 2001; Salancik and Pfeffer, 1977). The dialectic between the temporal and situational dimensions of strategy emphasizes the ability of social actors to design a set plan of action but

also maintain the flexibility required to enable them to respond to specific situations.

Extant research on strategy, then, explores the process and context within which agents formulate and implement innovative and effective strategies. These studies provide valuable information on the conditions under which strategies develop, and they suggest that social actors change behavior to affect the outcomes of a specific social condition. What remains undertheorized is an understanding of types of resistance strategies that are internally transformative, for both the activist and their community and not directly confrontational against the power structure. This will be part of my exploration in this study.

Previous literature takes us only so far in understanding resistance and urban farming as a strategy of resistance and an instance of individual and collective agency. From a social movement perspective, the structural impoverishment of the Detroit community and its environment would appear to diminish organizational capacities for mobilization. Even the more culturally attuned theories are insufficient to explain urban farming not only as a reactive response to deprivation and injustice but also as a proactive activity aimed at self-determination and community building.

Detroit Black Community Food Security Network (DBCFSN)

In 2006, Malik Yakini, the organization's founder and longtime Black liberation activist, brought together a group of citizens, many of whom were political activists and community organizers, to address the lack of food access for the citizens of Detroit. Approximately 40 people attended the first meeting at the Black Star Community Bookstore to discuss the importance of “raising the awareness about food policy to ensure our community was getting the healthiest food possible” (M. Yakini, personal communication, 2009). Also of importance was the absence of the Black community in the most recent attention to the resurgence of community/urban agriculture and conversations around community food security. From their perspective, Whites moving into Detroit were able to garner considerable influence in the resources allocated to address food access and the use of land for urban agriculture directed toward the revitalization of green spaces within the city. Yakini argues that the importance of DBCFSN's participation in the movement is to articulate a Black voice, not just in the use of land for urban agriculture movement

but also to connect the work in food production as a strategy to demonstrate self-determination toward political and economic liberation:

Most of the people involved in the community food-security work are young White people, and I do believe that they are well meaning. But what we have seen in Detroit and other urban areas is that they move to the city and because they are already well connected with other White people who are doing this work and have the resources, they end up having a degree of control over urban agriculture in the city of Detroit—control which is inordinate to their actual numbers in the population, and that is a problem. It is an imbalance, in the city of Detroit, which is at least 80% Black people, for them to position themselves in the forefront of this movement. I'm all for cordial, cooperative relations with anyone doing this work. I'm not for any ethnic group coming in the African-American community to control any aspect of our lives, and that includes issues of food security. (M. Yakini, personal communication, 2009)

DBCFSN has approximately 50 dues-paying memberships broken into over 40 individual members, 7 families, and 1 organization. Almost 80% of the members are women. The vast majority of members are lifelong Detroiters whose previous political activity ranges from those who were very politically active in Detroit's Black power and labor struggles to those who have been involved in community organizing around issues of police brutality and community control of public education to those formally engaged in city politics. The organization also has been successful in attracting members, with little or no previous political activity, who were recruited through the organization's community outreach on the issues of food security and urban agriculture. Ten of the founding members are still quite active, with most of whom occupying leadership positions within the organization. A sitting board of directors determines organizational policies and appoints the executive director, who handles the daily operations. In 2009, they received funding from the Kellogg Foundation for capacity building that was used to fund such positions as office manager, farm manager, and part-time executive director. A WHY Hunger grant was received to develop farm signage and tour-guide training to develop D-Town,² a seven-acre model urban farm project of Detroit Black Community Food Security Network, as a site for agritourism.

The most vivid debate around group identity occurred when attempting to decide the name for the organization: although members self-identify as Black, African, or African American, there was considerable discussion around using the word "Black" in the name. Those who supported using Black in the name argued that it was important to inform

the Black community that this organization organically represented its concerns. Those who opposed believed that using Black in the name suggested racial exclusivity.

The well-documented increase in vacant land in Detroit (a logical consequence of depopulating a low-density city) presented DBCFSN and others with an opportunity to embark on an urban farming agenda. The organization responds to food insecurity through three major initiatives: (a) cooperative buying, (b) food-policy development, and (c) urban agriculture.

Cooperative Buying

Ujamaa (meaning "collective economics" in Swahili) Food Coop began in 2008 as a way to develop a sense of community through collective buying from this monthly co-op, where members purchase bulk food, household items, and supplements. This enables members to enjoy considerable savings and contribute to the vision of a storefront co-op location within the city. The overall goal is to provide an alternative to expensive health-food stores, supermarkets, and other retail outlets, which no longer operate within the city of Detroit. Co-op membership is more racially diverse than the general membership of DBCFSN.

Policy Development

In 2006, DBCFSN was appointed by JoAnne Watson, chair of the Neighborhood and Community Service Standing Committee of the Detroit City Council, to head a task force to develop a food policy. DBCFSN members, under the leadership of then-chair Malik Yakini (personal communication, 2009), gathered existing food policies in other cities, conducted hearings and listening sessions in the community, and created a comprehensive food-security policy that includes developing a food system analysis for Detroit, undertaking data collection on hunger and malnutrition, formulating recommendations for alternative food systems such as urban agriculture, creating citizen education guidelines, and producing an emergency response plan in the event of a natural disaster. In March 2008, the city council unanimously approved the food-policy proposal and established the Detroit Food Policy Council to implement its mandates.

Urban Agriculture (Food Justice and Food Security)

D-Town Farm, a critical program of DBCFSN, began during the planting season of 2006. What started as a $\frac{1}{4}$ -acre

garden plot is now a two-acre farm located in Rouge Park (in Southwest Detroit), with an additional five acres currently under negotiation to be added to this farm. D-Town uses “sustainable, earth-friendly food production techniques to produce thousands of pounds of high quality fresh produce each year” (DBCFSN, 2010, p. 1).

During the 2010 growing season, D-Town Farm produced 30–35 different crops, including acorn squash, zucchini, kale, collards, tomatoes, basil, green beans, cabbage, watermelon, pumpkins, beets, turnips, radishes, and much more; this produce is sold at various farmers’ markets throughout the city. In addition to a fully functioning farm, D-Town has beekeeping, hoop houses for year-round food production, and a composting operation. Additionally, it is one of few city farms growing several varieties of mushrooms.

Much of the farm labor is donated by about 20 regular volunteer farmworkers. With support from the Kellogg Foundation grant, D-Town Farm was able to hire two part-time farm managers, who direct the work of daily crew leaders. The farm is the choice volunteer destination for hundreds of students from local and regional schools, as well as various community organizations. Finally, D-Town hosts the annual Harvest Festival, which brings together hundreds of local, regional, and national supporters of the organization.

D-Town produce is sold at a number of outlets, but, as a policy, sells only within Detroit. The produce is sold on site, at a market stand at the farm on weekends, as well as at several local farmers’ markets throughout the city, such as Northwest Farmers’ Market, the Detroit Medical Center farmers’ market through the activities of SEED Wayne, and at the Eastern Market. The price for produce is set by the collective market rate established by the Grown in Detroit³ cooperative, which is a collective of local youth, family, and community gardeners. Through their participation in Grown in Detroit, they receive support to sell their produce at “markets, restaurants and other retail outlets across the city” (DAN, 2010).

Members of DBCFSN farm for many reasons. They are concerned about neighborhood beautification and increasing Detroit citizens’ access to clean and healthy food, and they consider themselves stewards of the environment and engage in farming to reallocating vacant land within the city for green purposes while meeting the needs of the local community. They also, perhaps more significantly, engage in farming as a community-based resistance strategy with a political change initiative, one that will

hopefully plants seeds in the minds of its workers for community-based control of all of its resources.

Farming for D-Town activists is perceived as a strategy of resistance. In this case, resistance does not require confronting an agent in hopes of changing a situation. D-Town farmers instead chose to resist through direct action. For them, it is an opportunity to work toward food security and to gain greater control of the food system that impacts residents’ daily lives. Farming and food security become steps toward self-determination and self-reliance. Restoring the earth and transforming the food system is an example of what can happen when the community controls the social institutions with which it comes into contact, as in community-controlled education, community-based policing, and the like. D-Town farmers’ resistance strategy focuses on their use of land to create community spaces, to teach about healthy eating, and to create a new vision of Detroit for members of the community.

D-Town activists use three strategies to create new urban spaces within vacant land: they use the farm (a) as a community center, (b) as a vehicle to articulate culturally relevant language about healthy food and healthy lifestyles, and (c) as a tangible model of collective work, self-reliance, and political agency. Thus, earth becomes an ally in, and provides the location for, citizens to politicize and mobilize others around issues such as access to clean food, land and water use, and conservation, pollution, and refuse management.

The Farm as Means of Community Building

In an attempt to balance the Detroit budget, many community health and social programs have been cut and community centers closed, eliminating social and physical activities in the neighborhood and most directly affecting the community’s most vulnerable residents: children and senior citizens. In response to this need, D-Town farmers have established at the farm alternative communal and social spaces where intergenerational relationships are nurtured and maintained and where citizens can access a safe space for exercise. Additionally, these gardens are centers where people learn about healthy eating, access healthy food, and receive health screenings and services.

D-Town also has played a vital role in creating employment opportunities for young people. Kamu,⁴ one of the study respondents, asserted that this is one of the organization’s greatest successes: “With all the recreation centers closing down, there are very few outlets for teen-

age employment and little for youth to do throughout the summer.” Another reason he got involved in D-Town was for the community building: the farm provides healthy, organic produce to those who would otherwise be unable to afford it. For Abiba, D-Town is a center of activity where everyone always has something to do. The center provides opportunities for different generations to engage collaboratively in positive, productive projects. She says, “Everyone takes part, and everyone seems to have a stake in its success. It gives everyone in the community something to do . . . the children, elders . . . [You gain] a great sense of satisfaction seeing something go from a seed to your table.” Mtima argues that farming “builds community; it builds a sense of cohesion and collective action; it builds intergenerational dialogue and intergenerational work. Many times folks involved in gardening are older people . . . [and] giving older people a chance to work with younger generations and pass on that knowledge is important.”

D-Town farmers also emphasize that the farm is an alternative space to offer community services. Describing the most successful activities of the farm, Lina points to the annual Harvest Festival, where health professionals offer their services: “The Harvest Festival is such an accomplishment with great success. Citizens got a chance to check your blood pressure, sugar levels—things like that are important, and a lot of people don’t have the opportunity to do. They also teach the importance of vegetables, what each vegetable represented, was good for, in terms of how it would help the body, those kinds of things were great.” Thus, community gardens fill the gaps created when community centers must close their doors.

The Farm as Location to Learn a New Food Language

Typically, education about healthy food choices and exercise begins in elementary school, where many children are introduced to the food pyramid. After that initial exposure, most learning regarding healthy lifestyles comes from such sources as news reports, academic studies, websites, public service announcements, fitness clubs, and health-food establishments. Poor African Americans do not have ready access to many of these informational sources. Moreover, many people in this demographic have difficulty reading and interpreting the information on the nutrition labels printed on packaged foods. As Russell Rothman and colleagues (2006) have shown, comprehension of food labels is influenced by education, literacy, and income: those with higher levels of education, income, and literacy are better

able to interpret the nutritional information on packaged food and make healthier choices on the basis of that understanding.

Members of D-Town use the farm as an accessible source of food information and assume the role of information disseminators about nutrition. These African American farmers deliver information about the importance of food choices, the dangers of unhealthy food, and the benefits of exercise within culturally relevant and easily accessible formats directed specifically to the African American community, such as through community workshops, church events, and invited speakers.

Ngozi highlights the importance of African Americans reaching out to other African Americans in recounting the debates around naming the organization: “When we say *Detroit Black Community*, that means that somebody from the Black community from Detroit needs to reach people. In the past, it’s been people who have not been the same color, and they can help, but it’s just so far that they can go. . . . When it’s your own helping your own, it makes a difference.” Ebum uses her work on the farm as the context within which she provides information about her vegetarian lifestyle to others in her community:

Because of my own diet, the choices that I make personally—I am vegetarian and trying to eat organic and those kinds of things—I wanted to be able to reach people outside myself who are new to eating healthy or haven’t been exposed yet to it. So by being involved in community gardening, it gives us an opportunity to open up [other African Americans’] eyes to the importance of food. . . . We take food for granted. . . . Even those who are struggling, we don’t have the appreciation for food. If we knew how important food was, I just don’t think we would make the choices that we do.

D-Town farmers offer workshops and training sessions at the farm, such as cooking and raw-food-preparation demonstrations using ingredients that are culturally significant. At the request of community organizations and church groups, they will go off-site to give presentations about healthy food choices. The organization’s members also volunteer their time during the fall Harvest Festival to lead discussions and give presentations about composting, growing food in small spaces, and the importance of sustainable agriculture. At such events, the D-Town farmers work from an African American perspective to inform citizens about healthy lifestyles such as veganism, vegetarianism, and preparing and eating raw foods. Ngozi suggests that the D-Town farmers have been successful because they have “raised the awareness of the need for healthier foods and the fact that Detroit is a food desert.”

D-Town farmers center their workshops on the farm and promote its importance by providing their community with information about good nutrition. Farmers also encourage citizens to regain control of the food choices in their community by practicing their own gardening or farming as an alternative. Furthermore, they present information about the hazards of manufactured foods disseminated to the local community without its control. When community members control the production of their food, assess its quality, and distribute that information to others, healthier food reaches the community. This is the guiding principle of the D-Town farmers' cooperative and typifies the relationships it nurtures with communities.

The Farm as a Sign of the Possible: Collective Work, Self-Reliance, and Political Agency

D-Town is an urban space that serves as an example. Instead of petitioning the city government to increase their access to fresh food, or lobbying for more grocery stores and markets to locate in the city, these farmers demonstrate their agency by farming to feed themselves and their families and to provide an example to their community of the benefits of hard work. Food becomes a point of entry to discuss how African Americans might gain control over other aspects of their lives, including, for example, access to affordable housing, clean water, and decent public education.

The D-Town farmers, many of whom live in areas where food security is compromised, responded to their initial feelings of abandonment and helplessness by volunteering on their community farm. Abiba's involvement in community gardening came in response to a feeling of being abandoned by retailers who left the city during the economic downturn: "Particularly in Detroit, our grocery stores have been woefully inadequate in terms of clean food. The major grocery store chains have all left our city, and a lot of people felt very abandoned and almost helpless." Lina also describes inaccessibility of food as the exigency for becoming involved in urban gardening: "There are no markets in our area; therefore, people are not able to shop in their immediate area for healthy food, for fresh vegetables, as opposed to canned foods or fast-food restaurants, so the need is what directed me to towards going out and helping out in community gardens."

D-Town Farm members also argue that they cannot count on others to provide them with healthy foods because

access to such foods is a matter of race and class privilege. They have experienced neighborhood markets that are unkempt and are stocked with foods that are past the expiration date, foodstuffs that show visible signs of mold and decay. They note that residents of more affluent communities have mechanisms to monitor available food, such as grocers who remove recalled and unsafe foods, and have easier access to safe, clean, and a wider range of healthy food options. Those who live in wealthy, predominantly White neighborhoods have the financial means to choose between conventional versus organically grown fruits and vegetables. Ngozi comments on the importance of location in determining food security: "In the suburbs, there's a fruit market on every other corner. There's someplace to get fresh produce—to get fruit and vegetables." Kamau agrees, "They [Whites] have better access to fruits and veggies in their own neighborhood. People in the suburbs make the choice to engage in urban farming. For D-Town farmers, it's a necessity."

The designation of Detroit as food insecure means that its citizens are forced to obtain a considerable portion of their food from fringe food retailers. Whether from racism, sheer neglect, or profit-driven decisions, these inner-city stores specialize in the sale of alcohol, tobacco, lottery tickets, and a small selection of prepackaged and canned food products high in salt, fat, and sugar. Kamau argues that food retailers intentionally make decisions for profit over health and nutrition when dealing with Black Detroiters: "The only access [to food] in Detroit is through party stores or gas stations or grocery stores that have inferior quality fruits and veggies, meat and poultry that is outdated, and they don't care about switching the labels to continue selling them."

Through farming, D-Town members argue, they can produce their own food, invest in their communities, and assist community members to learn much-needed survival skills. Abiba describes her participation in gardening as a way to develop self-determination and empowerment:

Community gardening lets you decide the kinds of food you want to eat and grow, and the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network lets you have some input as to what is grown. You get to help in the entire process of growing the food. That addresses the problem of self-reliance. . . . I feel more empowered by growing my own. I have experienced not having it, and I felt powerless. They [grocery stores] can come and go. . . . If I grow it myself, I know what's going to happen. I get more peace of mind knowing that I can grow it, freeze it, dry it. Even if there were a grocery store that consistently provided fresh produce [in my neighborhood], I would still participate because I need to be able to control it myself.

Others agree that community gardening promotes a general sense of self-determination, as Ebun exemplifies:

The reason I'm engaged in farming is self-determination. It is important for us to create for ourselves and define our own realities, and the reasons that we should be doing anything when it comes to businesses, housing, anything, we should be in control of that. Being in Detroit, a predominantly Black city, it's important for us to determine, for those of us who know, to be in control of the food system in Detroit because there are a lot of us who don't know.

Ebun also constructs the gardens as essential to survival when she describes what can happen when citizens rely on others to meet their needs:

The reality that at any moment on any given day the folks who control the grocery stores can say, "You know what? We tired of y'all. We are going to make our money somewhere else, or we are not going to sell what you want us to sell." You need to be able to feed yourself rather than waiting, you need to know how to grow it yourself instead of waiting on somebody down the street to sell it to you or choose not to.

Some of the farmers see self-reliance as a larger issue than control over the food supply.

Mtima extends the argument that community gardening is a means to gain control of the community: "I've been involved in efforts to build greater degrees of self-sufficiency or self-reliance in the Black community and control of our communities. A logical extension of that work is to grasp larger control over the food system as it impacts us in our communities. That, in turn, led to gardening." Abiba similarly sees gardening as a way to gain control of her life and her community in general:

I heard that if you control the food supply, you can control the people; you don't need guns, you don't need bombs. To control what my children eat is very important to me. Community gardening is very political because it puts control in my hands. We won't have to live from someone else's hands, and neither will my children when they learn how to grow their own food.

Mtima's view is typical of many other farmers who feel gardening is an issue of community survival and agency, with the production of food being almost incidental: "It isn't just an issue of having access to fresh produce in the community. It's also an issue of who controls that fresh produce and who profits from the sale of it. So even if there are stores selling fresh produce, we still benefit from building as high a degree of self-reliance as we can."

Kamau suggests that gardening can also increase the ability to control one's own health by reducing the need for tra-

ditional medical care: "We don't seem to have access to medical care that other communities have on an ongoing basis due to employment status. . . . We need to learn how to go back to basics of what our parents did down South—cook food locally, cook nutritiously, understand why our parents lived [into their] eighties and nineties."

What began for the D-Town farmers as an effort to control and secure their food supply came to have much broader significance for them. They chose to take responsibility for securing their own access to fresh fruits and vegetables, develop vacant land through their own self-reliance and agency, and enact these qualities in multiple areas of their lives. D-Town represents the enactment of agency by showing the possibility inherent in collective work. The farm now illustrates a new vision for the city at a time when many have given up hope.

Not only is the urban farm a locus for services, food, and health care, but, as Abiba suggests, it is a public example. Many Detroit residents are transforming vacant land in the city into spaces that produce food and ultimately inspire those who witness it: "[The farm] is a light in the neighborhood. Helps people see what can be done with nothing. . . . Look at what we have done on a vacant land with nothing. . . . It feels like a light, an example of what anyone can do."

Even if there were grocery stores in their neighborhoods, these farmers would still see a need for D-Town. Beyond the need for proximity to food sources, what community members envision and work toward is knowledge about the soil, how to grow food, and to return to the African American community economic opportunities associated with the harvest and distribution of food and resources, opportunities that their government and the free market no longer provide.

Conclusion

Typically, scholars have focused on the formal strategies of direct-action campaigns focusing on social change that are often visible, public, organized, and directed against a power structure. In contrast, D-Town activists, by creating community centers, providing nutrition education, and establishing the farm as a beacon of progress in an economically abandoned area, demonstrate a different strategy of resistance to structures of oppression.

D-Town activists have not only appropriated public space for the purposes of creating a healthy, well-fed, well-

educated, and inspired African American community, but they also have created a sustainable community food system that fosters a sense of self-determination and self-sufficiency. Their engagement in urban farming is only part of their much larger mission to end relationships of dependency and educate the community about the importance of providing for themselves.

In response to the failure of the local government to provide a safe community and a range of social services, D-Town farmers have worked to build community and place the earth in the center of their struggle for social transformation. Their efforts are not invested in opposing existing power structures through protest, but rather directed at contributing to the development of a safe space through the transformation of their physical environment. In this way, the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network and the D-Town Farm create the foundations for a new world marked by new ways of being.

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Notes

1. The racial breakdown of the population is based on the 2000 census data updated by annual American Community Surveys, and projections are at odds with the recently released 2010 census data of the number of residents in Detroit (see Data Driven Detroit, 2010).
2. D-Town Farm in Detroit, Michigan, began in the planting season of 2006 and “utilizes sustainable, earth-friendly food production techniques to produce thousands of pounds of high-quality fresh produce each year” (DBCFSN, 2006, p. 1). The D-Town Farm was developed as a critical project of the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network (DBCFSN), a nonprofit grassroots community organization.
3. Grown in Detroit is a division of the Garden Resource Program.
4. Pseudonyms were given to respondents.

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