



INDIANA UNIVERSITY PRESS
INDIANA UNIVERSITY

Sisters of the Soil: Urban Gardening as Resistance in Detroit

Author(s): Monica M. White

Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Race/Ethnicity: Multidisciplinary Global Contexts*, Vol. 5, No. 1, Food Justice (Autumn 2011), pp. 13-28

Published by: [Indiana University Press](http://www.indiana.edu/~iupress/)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/racethmulglocon.5.1.13>

Accessed: 17/01/2012 16:16

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at

<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Indiana University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Race/Ethnicity: Multidisciplinary Global Contexts*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

Sisters of the Soil: Urban Gardening as Resistance in Detroit

Monica M. White

Wayne State University

This article analyzes an overlooked innovative experience led by black women activists, who participate in urban agriculture as a way of reassessing their cultural roots and reclaiming personal power, freed from the constraints imposed by consumerism and marketing, on the supply of food in the city of Detroit. By farming, they demonstrate agency and self-determination in their efforts to build a sense of community. Using an ecofeminist perspective, this article examines the relationship between women's resistance and the environment. By focusing on women's urban gardening, the article broadens the definition to include less formal, but no less important, forms of resistance.

The article is divided into two parts. The first deals with the implementation of the project launched by the members of the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network (DBCFSN). Government statistics and secondary research provide the backdrop to the economic problems in the City of Detroit that triggered the community response. The second part presents women farmers' attempts to transform vacant land to create a community-based food system. These activists construct the farm as a community safe space, which operates as a creative, public outdoor classroom where they nurture activism and challenge the racial and class-based barriers to accessing healthy food. In addition to improving access to healthy food by repurposing vacant land, they are transforming their communities into safe and green spaces.

The Detroit Context: Food Insecurity

Detroit's social and economic ills have been well documented. Some scholars argue that the city's underdevelopment and overall economic decline is a result of housing discrimination and racial segregation, the flight of business, taxes, and

capital to the more affluent suburbs (Sugrue 1996; Darden et al. 1987), and a combination of race relations and urban and labor conflict (Thompson 2001). The recent transformations of the automobile industry, along with the subsequent shrinking of the working and middle classes, have left Detroiters mired in poverty-induced challenges, including reduced city services, poor-quality education, high rates of unemployment, crime, housing foreclosures, and little or no access to healthy food.

Detroit's economic "depression" existed for several years before the U.S.-wide economic downturn of 2008 (Kaza 2006). The city's high unemployment rate, according to 2006–2008 census estimates, is approximately 30 percent, or almost three times the national average.¹ Life in the city is particularly difficult for those who lack access to a vehicle (estimated at one in five urban residents), or who have unreliable transportation sources, many of whom are also single-parent heads of household. Transportation is not only a critical prerequisite to finding employment, particularly in a city that lacks a reliable public transportation system, but is necessary for accessing resources such as health care, healthy food, and other essentials (U.S. Census Bureau 2006–2008 American Community Survey).

Numerous studies have documented racial and economic disparities in gaining access to food outlets in cities. These findings suggest that lower-income and African American neighborhoods have fewer supermarkets and greater access to liquor and convenience stores with lower-quality food and limited access to more expensive, healthy food options (Beulac, Kristjansson, and Cummins, 2009; Larson, Story, and Nelson, 2009; Andreyeva et al. 2008; Ball, Crawford, and Mishra 2006–2008; Cummins et al. 2005; Franco et al. 2008).

Zenk et al. (2005) found that African American-majority communities are on average 1.1 miles farther from a supermarket than are predominantly white neighborhoods. Many areas within Detroit are designated as "food insecure" (Gallagher 2007, 2). Eighty percent of the city's residents must purchase their food at the more than one thousand fringe food retailers, such as "liquor stores, gas stations, party stores, dollar stores, bakeries, pharmacies, convenience stores and other venues" (Gallagher 2007, 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 (2006) also found that these fringe food retailers or independent stores, which are more likely located in Detroit's impoverished neighborhoods, are directly linked to a decline in the consumption of fruits and vegetables for African American women in Detroit.

Inadequate food supply for 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

Eighty percent of the city's residents must purchase their food at the more than one thousand fringe food retailers.

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.

Black women's health is especially negatively affected by inadequate access to healthy food options. According to the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey 2005–2006 (NHANES), 52.9 percent of black women are defined as obese, a precursor for other diet-related illnesses, compared to 37.2 percent of black men and 32.9 percent of white women. Black women are two to three times more likely than their white female counterparts to be diagnosed with hypertension, a condition that often leads to cardiovascular disease (Lackland and Keil 1996). Additionally, black women are diagnosed with Type 2 diabetes at twice the rate of white women and at 1.4 times the rate of black men (Cowie et al. 2006).

In response to this situation, agriculture has been suggested as a major initiative for developing community food security for 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). According to a feasibility study conducted by Colasanti, Litjens, and Hamm (2010), the city of Detroit has the capacity to provide "31% and 17% of the seasonally available vegetables and fruits, respectively" (41). Utilizing the approximately 44,085 acres, or the equivalent of 7.6 square miles, of vacant land within the city would improve the health of city residents by providing healthy, sustainable, locally grown fruits and vegetables. It would also provide much-needed employment opportunities and green spaces within the city.

What follows is a description of the farmers of one such organization, the women members of the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network (DBCFSN). We observe their involvement in farming as a strategy to exercise political agency and bring about community transformation and, in the process, alleviate the food crisis and demonstrate social and political 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 should be led by leaders from within its own community (DBCFSN 2010). Nevertheless, this organization strives to improve access to quality food to all citizens of Detroit 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 residents can work to rebuild their city.

DBCFSN uses mobilization, education, policy advocacy, and physical improvements in neighborhoods to increase the food supply and prevent hunger, thereby enhancing the health of residents, revitalizing neighborhoods through shared activities that

also improve and strengthen the community's local economy, and building a sense of justice, equity, and self-determination.

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 interest in capturing the history of agriculture in the city of 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 the organization, thus creating a participatory research design. It was through our extensive interactions that members 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 history of the organization.

For this case study, I interviewed eight black women farmers who were highly active in the D-Town farm operations during the 2010 growing season. Involvement was determined by the frequency of signatures on volunteer rolls maintained by the organization's farm manager. All eight of the women farmers interviewed were African Americans, ranging in age from thirty-one to their late fifties. They represent a range of occupations, from community organizers to city government employees to educators, as well as the unemployed in search of work. Three

These women farmers define themselves as activists and fight for causes such as food justice, prisoner's and prisoner's families' rights, community-based and citizens' education, digital justice, and environmental rights.

of the eight respondents were founding members of the organization, two served on the board of directors, and the remainder were volunteers who were most active and involved in the farming operations of the organization. These women farmers define themselves as activists and fight for causes such as food justice, prisoner's and prisoner's families' rights, community-based and citizens' education, digital justice, and environmental rights. Their work, as they conceptualize it, all moves toward the liberation of African people, and they are all brought together in the struggles for food justice and security. The political ideology of the organization, and subsequently of many of its members, is undeniably influenced by the tenets of Black Nationalism. While not all respondents would identify themselves as Black Nationalists, many of the founding members of the organization and its philosophy demonstrate the influence of the radicalism of the 1960s. Many still consider themselves freedom fighters against capitalist and racist oppression.

The interview schedule was semi-structured and lasted approximately 1.5 hours. For this study I chose to code the interviewees' responses in several ways. First, I searched for themes, definitions, and functions of the word *resistance*. Second, I high-

lighted themes that identify their perspectives on their relationship with and the role of the environment and earth within the context of their work as activists and urban farmers. Many of these women farmers' responses focused on creative uses of vacant land to develop new urban spaces and a new vision of Detroit.

Members of DBCFSN farm for several 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 for the purpose of reallocating vacant land within the city for green purposes while meeting the needs of the local community. They also conceptualize their efforts as a resistance strategy in providing a replacement for the vanishing community centers that were once prevalent in African American communities. Through a strategy of engaging the environment, communities that have been polluted and abandoned show agency by rebuilding themselves while restoring their environment.

Theoretical Framework: Ecofeminism

Ecofeminism, coined by French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne (1974), is a philosophy that examines feminism in relation to the natural environment and lobbies for women's ability to engage with the earth, respond to, and solve ecological crises. In an attempt to understand and deconstruct oppressive relationships between men and women and between humans and nature, ecofeminism argues that a masculinist paradigm perpetuates the status quo where "women, or rather women's work and lives, like the natural world, are externalized and exploited by the valued economy" (Mellor 2006, 139). Given traditional and contemporary gender roles, women continue to be largely responsible for the "mental and manual labor of food" (Allen and Sachs 2007). Women's traditional roles of providing sustenance for the family enhance their dependence on the earth along with their vulnerability to the ecological degradation caused by multinational corporations that, these scholars argue, exploit the environment in order to increase profit. Women's vulnerability is exacerbated by ongoing deforestation, desertification, water and land pollution, blocked access to clean water and fertile land, toxins, and the harmful effects of hazardous wastes. Shiva casts women's commitment to the environment as necessary for their own survival: "Women's involvement in the environmental movement has started with their lives and with severe threat to the health of their families. From the perspective of women, environmental issues are quite directly, and clearly, issues of survival" (Shiva 1994, 2).

Although ecofeminism offers a theoretical framework from which to understand oppression, it also has a practical component that includes participation in social movements and, especially, women's resistance. Scholars have typically applied

ecofeminism to cases of resistance against multinational corporations that are allegedly responsible for ecological disasters. Women's resistance has been documented as an international concern (Steady 1998), ranging from examples of rural Himalayan women challenging multinational corporations (Guha 1989), to Micronesian women fighting nuclear weapons testing, English women protesting the storage of nuclear missiles (Kirk 1997; Krauss 1993), rural Kenyan women planting trees (Rocheleau, 1991) in order to conserve soil and water, and women protesting flooding in the Chipko Mountains brought about by corporate deforestation (Shiva 1994).

Hill-Collins (2000) discusses the importance of safe spaces in understanding black women's political consciousness and mobilization. She argues that safe spaces "represent places where black women could freely examine issues that concerned us . . . one mechanism among many designed to foster black women's empowerment and enhance our ability to participate in social justice projects . . . their overall purpose most certainly aims for a more inclusionary, just society . . . [these safe spaces] foster the conditions for black women's independent self-definitions" (110–11).

Ecofeminism and the work of black women farmers in Detroit emphasize women's traditional gender roles as food providers in ways that encourage oppressed communities, especially women, to participate in the food system in greater numbers and for political, liberatory reasons. This application also endorses a human collaboration with nature as opposed to the domination of nature. Black women, in this case, engage the environment and transform vacant land into urban/community gardens, and in so doing, these spaces operate as a safe space where they are able to define their behavior as a form of resistance, one in which their resistance is against the social structures that have perpetuated inequality in terms of healthy food access, and one where they are able to create outdoor, living, learning, and healing spaces for themselves and for members of the community.

Farming, for them, is an opportunity to work toward food security and to obtain more control of the food system that affects their daily lives. Food security is one goal in the direction of self-determination and self-reliance. The transformation of the food system is an example of what can happen when the community controls those social institutions with which it comes into contact, as is the case with community-controlled education, community-based policing, and other examples.

Black Women, Resistance, and Farming as Self-determination

Black women activists engage in urban/community gardening as a strategy to increase access to healthy foods in communities that have been defined as food insecure. In doing so, they

This application also endorses a human collaboration with nature as opposed to the domination of nature.

participate in gardening as a strategy of resistance, one that demonstrates self-determination and political agency. They also argue that the earth is an ally in the struggle for liberation because it provides a living learning space and a refuge for communities that experience racial and economic apartheid.

Gardening in Detroit, for these women activists, demonstrates self-reliance and self-determination. When members of the community face harsh economic realities, gardening becomes an exercise of political agency and empowerment. Instead of petitioning the city government to increase access to fresh food, or lobbying for more grocery stores and markets to locate in the city, they transform vacant land into a community-based healthy food source that allows them to be able to feed themselves and their families and to provide an example to their community of the benefits of hard work. In addition, food becomes a point of entry for discussing how African Americans might gain control over other aspects of their lives, including access to affordable housing, clean water, community policing, and decent public education.

If food is life, as these women activists suggest, then the ability to control the quality of food and increase access to healthy food in Detroit's predominantly black community is an essential aspect of the struggle for self-determination and self-reliance. Lewa² suggests that the importance of healthy food access is essential to recognizing the difference between a community in control versus one that is being controlled: "Whoever controls the food, controls the people, controls everything. Farming and sharing food with one another, potlucks and building community dinners slaps in the face of the systemic ways we've come to think about food. In so many ways farming is active self-determination, self reliance, and empowerment." Abiba agrees: "If you can control the food supply you can control the people, you don't need guns."

Ebun elaborates on the importance of control of food sources and portrays 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 factor than control over the food supply. Ebun suggests that farming, as an act of self-determination, is specifically what attracted her:

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 con-

trol 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.

Most of these women farmers live in areas where food security is compromised. Major chain grocery stores and supermarkets joined the exodus from the city for more economically affluent suburbs, and this phenomenon is obvious to them. 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." They farm in response to their initial feelings of abandonment and helplessness by exercising their own political agency. Involvement in community gardening came in response to their feelings of being abandoned by retailers who left the city during the economic downturn. Abiba describes this: "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 the inaccessibility of healthy food as her reason 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, or 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 garden."

Gardens as Resistance

Women farmers view gardening as an act of resistance. It offers an opportunity to work against systems and structures that have oppressed them. They envision their work in the areas of food sovereignty, food security, and community development as a recent manifestation of an agrarian tradition of African people and a legacy of African Americans who have connected food to life, liberty, and justice. For Eburn, work in urban gardening is connected to a history of food justice and resistance of African people in the area of food:

Women farmers view gardening as an act of resistance.

Resistance [and food] started before enslavement ended. When our ancestors were kidnapped and brought over here they stowed seeds that were native to their land, that we now know were native to the areas that they were taken from. These foods are staples in our diet . . . they were holding on to their culture. They were holding on to home. That right there was resistance.

Tisha suggests that for her, contemporary gardening in the city is an undeniable, everyday act of resistance:

Gardening in the city of Detroit is saying, "Fuck it!" It says, I can grow my own food *and* I can feed my community. You are

dealing with a majority [African American] population that has been scarred, battered, and bruised. The first step to rebuilding a culture is agriculture.

While not all who engage in gardening and farming identify their behaviors as resistance, the women of DBCFSN clearly do. They characterize their gardening as resistance against multinational corporations who attempt to “colonize their plate.” They articulate their struggle as one that includes decisions about where grocery stores and supermarkets should be located based on profit instead of people’s need, as an indicator of oppression. They articulate their strategies of sustainable, ecofriendly agriculture as an act of defiance against genetically modified food, the harmful toxins that are sprayed as pesticides and fertilizers, and the damaging effect these chemicals have on people and on the environment. Their work is also connected to the local food movement. They argue that it is important to know your farmer and to contribute to the economic well-being of people in their community. They conceptualize their work as contributing to a much larger cause. Their work is an effort to demonstrate their own voice in being able to grow food that goes to feed their families, but also as an example of a community-based solution to food insecurity.

Rabia articulates the complex issues that, for her, gardening challenges:

You resist when you grow. Gardening resists the corporations that are knowingly putting things that we can’t even pronounce into our foods. You resist those things when you grow wholesome foods or when you buy wholesome foods. There is so much genetically altering of things now and you don’t even really know what it is. When you grow a tomato, you know that tomato is not something that was created in a laboratory because you grew it from organic seeds. You resist the whole corporate factory farm type of thing.

While agribusiness is coupled with modern technology to offer the convenience of stored, canned, boxed, and highly processed foods that are plentiful in many urban corner and convenience stores, these women believe that their involvement in urban agriculture is an act of resistance against these unhealthy food choices. Abiba resists the prevalence of convenience and prepackaged foods that are high in sugar, salt, fat, and contribute to diet-related illnesses that plague the African American community, most significantly black women:

I’m resisting everything that’s in the grocery stores, that’s on tv that’s bombarding me. Everything in the media bombarding me about what I should eat, medicines I should take. I’m resisting commercials [for convenience foods] that are out there and I’m creating my own food. I feel powerful when I’m doing this with other like minds. When I’m at the farm with the farm manager or the irrigation manager, it

When I’m at the farm with the farm manager or the irrigation manager, it feels like resistance.

feels like resistance. I am not engaging in commercialisms, not engaging in consumerism. The choice I'm making is to engage in the farm.

Lewa identifies her resistance to a larger context, one that opposes not only large agricultural operations, but pharmaceutical and insurance companies that she argues benefit from disease and ill health as well. She sees her work as a visible example of the ability to directly influence the health and food system:

You are resisting the "colonization of your plate." Monocrops, plantations, controlled environments are not natural. Fruits and vegetables don't resemble what they use to. [Gardening allows you to] educate your palate . . . gardening is actively pushing against the health-care industrial complex, manufactured diseases, dietary-related diseases. . . . Realizing the collective power to influence the food system by holding accountable grocery stores, or school lunches.

Through farming, these women activists argue, they can produce their own food, invest in their communities, and assist community members to learn much-needed survival skills and impact the quality of life through improving the quality of food.

Garden as Safe Space for Women in the Community

Through this intimate relationship of preparing the land to grow healthy food, they have begun to see the environment and their relationship to the earth in a different light, as a safe or community space. White (2011) argues that urban/community gardens have filled the void left behind by the cost-cutting act of closing community centers that once offered services for residents of the city:

Farmers have established alternative communal and social spaces where intergenerational relationships are nurtured and maintained and where citizens have access to a safe space for physical exercise. Additionally, these gardens are centers where people learn about healthy eating, access healthy food, and receive health screenings and services.

In addition to community centers, the women farmers argue that the community garden is an earthen sanctuary. As a demonstration of their agency, they have created the farm as a safe space, a community space where they are able to develop meaningful relationships with their neighbors. They see the farm as an outdoor learning center, and even a healing space, a location where they are able to exercise, reflect, meditate, and farm as a stress reliever.

Contrary to the assumption that African Americans avoid farming as a result of the historical memory of slavery and sharecropping, these women are appropriating this activity and its negative connotations from a painful reference and creating

spaces that are cathartic, political, and liberatory. Lewa speaks specifically to the farm's role in urban communities. "Black women create the safe space of the garden. Gardens operate as place for conversation and for healing, as a safe space, a place where we can give birth to ideas, give birth to concepts, and to new ways of doing and being. It's about healing as it relates to our historical wounds and perceptions around farming and gardening."

Not only is the farm conceptualized as a place for healing, but Abiba also describes the farm as a safe space where she can transform her powerlessness into empowerment:

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.

Rabia similarly describes working in the garden as a stress reliever:

When you come out there you can clear your mind. We talk, we vent . . . the garden is a gathering place. It's like the earth takes up your problems . . . you're weeding the earth and it's like you're pulling out problems in your mind. You are venting your anger and it feels like you leave it there. Healing, positive energy, nothing like solving your problems with weeding. Gotta go out and weed, it's a stress reliever.

In mourning the passing of her father, Lewa was counseled by the some of the founding women members:

My father had just passed and I came out to D-town. The women told me, "You need to get in the dirt." [They told me] I needed to literally to get my hands, connect with the mother [earth], the original mother. This is the spiritual quality to gardening. What I learned gave me a way to be alone with my thoughts, a safe space to get with my thoughts. Women were all around me, they saw a satisfaction to it. I saw a direct connection from the pain of mourning my father to what I was planting. I planted that whole of collard greens, look at me go. What a sense of satisfaction.

This lesson of viewing the farm as a cathartic space was so powerful for Lewa that she insisted her children experience the farm's healing potential: "I knew that getting out in the garden would be good for their soul. As a mother I was doing a good thing."

These women activists also see the farm as an easily accessible, outdoor, living classroom. Lewa argues that "growing your own garden is the most popular form of popular education, learning by doing, placed-based, spiritual, all those things in one and in its resistance." Tisha also sees the garden as a place

the farm is a space where political engagement begins

to teach and learn resistance, especially for young people. She argues that the farm is a space where political engagement begins and they learn agency. Not only do they learn how to grow food, but they also learn the power of their own voices:

To ask children for their opinion in designing something that's a permanent fixture in a community, and that's powerful. Their faces are illuminated and when they see the results, "I wanted the tomatoes there and they're there." That's empowering. I want children to know that they are powerful. That they are in the position to change things and that they are worthy of being heard. Their voices are worth being heard and it makes sense. A lot of times they don't feel like they make sense.

Another healing benefit of farming and gardening is the ability to, through ecologically sustainable techniques, grow fruits and vegetables that are healthy. Rabia sees genetically modified, chemically treated food as a link to disease, but gardening and increasing access to healthy food provide a source of healing. For her, growing her own food becomes another form of treatment:

Healthy food is healing. I've had health issues and there was not a link. . . . I would ask the doctors how did I acquire this illness, and they wouldn't really know. This is not a hereditary thing, so I really had to think. This was what I ingested either from the environment or from the food that I ate. If I can have peace of mind, if I can put love into the food that I grow, then hopefully it can have some healing effect on me. There's power over what you put into and take out of your food. The decisions that you make about what you take into your body are very important to your longevity and your health and that's a powerful thing.

Discussion

Participation in urban gardening for these women functions as protest, one where their energies not only feed their families and their communities healthy food, but also feed their need to be the change agent in their community. The farm operates as a space where they are able to work and relieve the stressors of their everyday lives and create a food system that is community-based, environmentally responsible, and an example of the potential transformation from rustbelts to greenbelts.

In response to the race and class distinction in accessing healthy food for citizens in the city of Detroit, black women activists engage farming as a strategy of resistance against capitalism, corporatism of the food system, and agribusiness and its use of environmentally unsustainable food production practices. These new spaces teach communities the power of a different kind of inwardly focused resistance that produces creative and productive spaces in the neighborhood.

These findings are significant for several reasons. The application of ecofeminism to the work of black women farmers in Detroit broadens the utility of this theoretical model to include instances of race and class as well as proactive mobilization efforts. Previous theoretical applications often focus on women's resistance in reaction to threats or actions of environmental destruction and degradation. The work of the women of DBCFSN demonstrates how a relationship between the land and members of an oppressed group can lead to an expression of resistance before or without threats of destruction. This case study illustrates the importance of an ecofeminist analysis to explain how a group of black women farmers proactively engage the environment, emphasizing the symbiotic relationship between activist and earth, prior to ecological destruction, in the interests of mutual liberation.

Ecofeminist scholars often discuss resistance strategies that involve more formal means of confrontation with the oppressive social structure such as boycotts, formal protests, and pickets to draw attention to the struggle to protect the land and ultimately save the lives and communities of those who live closest to the earth. For Detroit's women activists, transforming public spaces enables them to resist the social, economic, and gendered oppression that complicates the accessibility of healthy food for poor people and the communities of color who have not left the impoverished city. Instead of petitioning the city government to demand greater access to healthy food, these women turn their strategies inward. These findings suggest that through their work, they connect the oppression and pollution of the earth with their own oppression and view the earth as an ally in the respective liberation struggles.

Instead of petitioning the city government to demand greater access to healthy food, these women turn their strategies inward.

This case study allows us to apply the ecofeminist theoretical perspective to Global North communities and includes the work of African American and urban activists in efforts to work toward more sustainable communities; their work in the environmental justice and sustainability movements is often overlooked. In their struggle for increasing food access, these women see the pollution of the earth and the environment as directly related to pollution of their bodies and the community as united struggles. Given the intersection of race, class, and gender, they see themselves as structurally located to understand and connect with the earth to respond.

Endnotes

1. Detroit's high unemployment rate, which according to 2006–2008 census estimates is approximately 30 percent, is almost three times the national average. This does not include those who are no longer looking for work, those who are working 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 percent 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 percent in the Detroit Metropolitan Statistical Area represented the highest increase of any metropolitan area in the nation. Relative to long-term unemployment, among men ages twenty to sixty-four in the city of Detroit who did not have a job in 2008, the rate of joblessness is estimated at 48.5 percent.

2. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from respondents are verbatim.

Works Cited

- Allen, Patricia, and Carolyn Sachs. 2007. Women and food chains: The gendered politics of food. *International Journal of Sociology of Food and Agriculture* 15(1): 1–23.
- Andreyeva, Tatiana, Daniel M. Blumenthal, Marlene B. Schwartz, Michael W. Long, and Kelly D. Brownell. 2008. Availability and prices of foods across stores and neighborhoods: The case of New Haven, Connecticut. *Health Affairs* 27: 1381–88.
- Ball, Kylie, David Crawford, and Gita Mishra. 2006–2008. Socio-economic inequalities in women's fruit and vegetable intakes: A multilevel study of individual, social and environmental mediators. *Public Health Nutrition* 9(5): 623–30.
- Beaulac, Julie, Elizabeth Kristjansson, and Steven Cummins. 2009. A systematic review of food deserts, 1966–2007. *Preventing Chronic Disease* 6: A105.
- Brown, Katherine H. 2003. *Urban agriculture and community food security in the United States: Farming from the city center to the urban fringe*. A primer prepared by the Community Food Security Coalition's North American Urban Agriculture Committee. Portland, OR: Community Food Security Coalition.
- Colasanti, Kathryn, Charlotte Litjens, and Mike Hamm. 2010. Growing food in the city: The production potential of Detroit's vacant land. <http://www.mottgroup.msu.edu/uploads/files/59/Growing%20Food%20in%20the%20City%20-%20Colasanti%20Litjens%20Hamm.pdf> (accessed July 7, 2011).
- Cowie, Catherine C., Keith F. Rust, Danita D. Byrd-Holt, Mark S. Eberhardt, Katherine M. Flegal, and Michael M. Engelgau. 2006. Prevalence of diabetes and impaired fasting glucose in adults in the U.S. population. *Diabetes Care* 29: 1263–68.
- Cummins, Steven, Anne Findlay, Mark Petticrew, and Leigh Sparks. 2005. Healthy cities: The impact of food retail-led regeneration on food access, choice and retail structure. *Built Environment* 31(4): 288–301.
- Darden, Joe, Richard C. Hill, June Thomas, and Richard Thomas. 1987. *Detroit: Race and Uneven Development*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Detroit Black Community Food Security Network. 2010. <http://detroitblackfoodsecurity.org> (accessed November 18, 2010).
- Dowie, Mark. 2009. Urban farming in Detroit and big cities back to small towns and agriculture. *Whiskey and Gunpowder*, November 3. <http://whiskeyandgunpowder.com/urban-farming-in-detroit-and-big-cities-back-to-small-towns-and-agriculture/#hl-Detroit> (accessed July 6, 2011).

- d'Eaubonne, Françoise. "The Time for Ecofeminism," trans. Ruth Hotell. In *Ecology: Key Concepts in Critical Theory*, ed. Carolyn Merchant and Roger S. Gottlieb, 174–97. Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1994.
- Franco, Manuel, Ana V. Diez Roux, Thomas A. Glass, Benjamin Caballero, and Frederick L. Brancati. 2008. Neighborhood characteristics and availability of healthy foods in Baltimore. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 35: 561–67.
- Gallagher, Mari. 2007. *Examining the impact of food deserts on public health in Detroit*. Chicago: Mari Gallagher Research & Consulting Group.
- Guha, Ramachandra. 1989. *The unquiet woods: Ecological change and peasant resistance in the Himalayas*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Hamm, Mike W., and Anne C. Bellows. 2003. Community food security and nutrition educators. *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior* 35(1): 37–43.
- Hill-Collins, Patricia. 2000. *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. New York: Routledge; 2nd edition.
- Kaza, Greg. 2006. Michigan's single-state recession: When local politicians attempt to allocate capital, local economies suffer. *RO Financial Online*, October 18, 2006.
- Kirk, Gwyn. 1997. Ecofeminism and environmental justice: Bridges across gender, race, and class. *Frontiers* 18(2): 2–20.
- Krauss, Celene. 1993. Blue-collar women and toxic wastes protests: The process of politicization. In *Toxic Struggles: The Theory and Practice of Environmental Justice*, ed. R. Hofrichter, 107–117. Philadelphia and Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers.
- Lackland, Daniel T., and Julian E. Keil. 1996. Epidemiology of hypertension in African Americans. *Seminars in Nephrology* 16: 63–70.
- Larson, Nicole I., Mary T. Story, and Melissa C. Nelson. 2009. Neighborhood environments disparities in access to healthy foods in the U.S. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 36: 74–81.
- Mellor, Mary. 2006. Ecofeminist political economy. *International Journal of Green Economics* 1(1–2): 139–50.
- National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES), 2005–2006. United States Department of Health and Human Services. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. National Center for Health Statistic.
- Pothukuchi, Kami. 2005. Attracting supermarkets to inner-city neighborhoods: Economic development outside the box. *Economic Development Quarterly* 19(3): 232–44.
- Rocheleau, Dianne. 1991. Gender, ecology and the science of survival: Stories and lessons from Kenya. *Agriculture and Human Values* 8: 156–65.
- Shiva, Vandana. 1994. *Close to home: Women reconnect ecology, health and development worldwide*. London: Earthscan.
- Steady, Filomena. 1998. Gender equity and ecosystem balance: Women and the environment in developing countries. *Race, Gender & Class* 6(1): 13–32.
- Sugrue, Thomas. 1996. *The origins of the urban crisis: Race and inequality in postwar Detroit*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Thompson, Heather. 2001. *Whose Detroit? Politics, labor and race in a modern American city*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- U.S. Census Bureau, 2006–2008. American Community Survey. Selected Social Characteristics in the United States: 2006–2008: Detroit

City. http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/ADPTable?_bm=y&-geo_id=16000US2622000&-context=adp&-ds_name=ACS_2008_3YR_G00_&-tree_id=3308&-_lang=en&-_caller=geoselect&-format= (accessed June 24, 2010).

White, Monica M. 2011. D-Town Farm: African American resistance to food insecurity and the transformation of Detroit." *Environmental Practice* 13(4), forthcoming.

Wilkinson, M. 2009. Nearly half of Detroit's workers are unemployed. *Detroit News*, December 16, 2009.

Zenk, Shannon N. 2006. Fruit and vegetable intake in African Americans: Income and store characteristics. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* (0749-3797), 29(1): 1.

Zenk, Shannon N., Amy J. Schulz, Barbara A. Israel, Sherman A. James, Shuming Bao, and Mark L. Wilson. 2005. Neighborhood racial composition, neighborhood poverty, and the spatial accessibility of supermarkets in metropolitan Detroit. *American Journal of Public Health* 95(4): 660-67.