

# “We will not perish; we’re going to keep flourishing”: Race, Food Access, and Geographies of Self-Reliance

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**Abstract:** Drawing from 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Washington, DC, this article outlines geographies of self-reliance; a theoretical framework for understanding black food geographies that are embedded in histories of self-reliance as a response to structural inequalities. Using a community garden as a case study, I argue that the garden functions as a site for addressing several manifestations of structural violence: racist and classist depictions of low-income and working class people, joblessness, gentrification, and youth underdevelopment. Drawing on self-reliance ideologies as well as collective and personal histories, the residents exhibit a form of agency that demonstrates unwavering hope in the sustainability of their shared community. Through this analysis, I show that self-reliance functions as a mechanism through which residents navigate spatial inequalities.

**Keywords:** race, community gardening, self-reliance, food access

## Introduction

The geography of food resources in Washington, DC reveals a tale of two cities. “Washington”, as some Black natives refer to it, is the nation’s capital. It is the part of the city that reflects abundance of supermarkets and small special stores, Michelin-starred restaurants, and walkability that urban planners boast about. “DC”, or the *real* DC, as one of my research participants called it, reveals the contradictions that are not always visible in the shiny glare of Washington: food access inequalities and a wealth gap that leaves Black residents east of the Anacostia river several tens of thousands of dollars poorer than many of their neighbors to the west. Black residents in the *real* DC navigate neighborhoods that bear the marks of stalled economic development, several decades of systemic neglect, and a lack of diverse food retail.

Growing conversations among food justice activists, policymakers, and researchers call attention to the role of race in the distribution of and access to food (Guthman 2008, 2011; Morales 2011; Slocum 2006, 2007). In addition to revealing how food access mirrors racial residential segregation patterns, scholars critique the presumed whiteness of food justice advocates, their racially coded assumptions about low-income communities of color, and how race has been undertheorized in the study of food, though it is integral to understanding food inequalities (Guthman 2008; Slocum 2011).

Much of this work has been theoretical or quantitative. Alkon et al. (2013:127) argue for in-depth, qualitative research about the specific foodways of the urban poor, which they define as “the cultural and social practices that affect food consumption, including how and what communities eat, where and how they shop and what motivates their food preferences”. While also advocating for qualitative inquiry, Miewald and McCann (2014:539) assert that “foodscapes” as a theoretical concept should not be abandoned in favor of foodways as it calls attention to the spatiality of food systems that are dynamic, political, and constantly shifting.

Yet, even with the considerable amount of critical food studies research that examines race as a significant factor in the spatial distribution of food coupled with Alkon et al.’s and Miewald and McCann’s assertions that qualitative inquiry into how people define, consume, and navigate food is vital, the question of Black agency within the context of intensified food justice efforts lingers. Ramirez (2015) suggests that a turn towards Black geographies disrupts the presumed whiteness of food justice work in communities of color and offers alternative framings for how to understand Black food geographies. A focus on Black geographies re-inscribes Black ways of being, knowing, and doing as essential to understanding placemaking (McKittrick 2006). Chin (2001) argues that part of the historical legacy of scholarly interest in low-income Black communities is a tendency to look for what is wrong instead of what is happening, pathologizing Black people in the process. Building on Ramirez, McKittrick, and Chin, I argue that an examination of Black agency through a lens of “what is happening?” (Chin 2001) reveals particular Black geographies, namely “geographies of self-reliance”, that are embedded within communities with unequal access to food.

As a theoretical intervention, geographies of self-reliance centers Black agency, particularly considering how this agency becomes spatialized within the structural constraints of food inequalities. As evident in qualitative research concerning urban life broadly and urban food access specifically, how the urban poor and working class *survive* preoccupies much of the literature (Miewald and McCann 2014; Mitchell and Heynen 2009). Geographies of self-reliance reveal different yet related experiences; namely, how the everyday lives of residents disrupt the dichotomy between death and survival to reveal how hope and visions for an uncertain future inspire small-scale food justice work.

Secondly, self-reliance bridges spatial and sociocultural components of accessing food. Both foodscape and foodways provide frameworks for qualitatively understanding components of food access that are not limited to where grocery stores, supermarkets, and alternative food sources are located. Yet, there is a need to understand the overlap of these two, because residents understand food access through cultural and social lenses that are not divorced from the spatial relations of food resources. Thus, geographies of self-reliance call attention to how spatial, historical, and racial dynamics intersect and insist that Black folks navigate inequalities with a creativity that reflects a reliance on self and community. In particular, this article examines how the “self” in self-reliance almost always reflects an interest in and commitment to community, despite any social and interpersonal ills that may plague it. In the context of food specifically, because of the presumed “nothingness” that is embedded in understandings of so-called “food deserts”, food

justice advocates outside of these neighborhood spaces often overlook or do not see the ways in which residents make “ways out of no way” that are embedded in their own food security and reflect their hopes and desires for their communities more broadly.

Based on 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in a predominantly Black neighborhood in northeast Washington, DC, this article outlines geographies of self-reliance as a theoretical framework for recognizing residents’ agency and the sources of inspiration from which they draw to address structural inequalities. I examine how a community garden run by public housing residents reflected geographies of self-reliance that are informed by personal history, legacies of neglect, and interpretations of Black history. Throughout the article, I employ self-reliance as a particular manifestation of agency that is rooted in both residents’ lived experience as well as their understanding of Black people’s histories of responding to structural inequalities through collective agency.

## **Still Separate, Still Unequal: The Geography of Food Access Inequalities**

Research on urban food access has exploded in the past 20 years, particularly as rising obesity and diabetes rates have prompted scholars to ask questions about the role of the built environment in the proliferation of preventable diet-related diseases (Auchincloss et al. 2008; French et al. 2001; Larson et al. 2009). The food desert metaphor dominates food access literature, reflecting an ongoing interest in supply-side approaches that aim to understand, define, and measure the number of grocery stores or supermarkets. Early research on food access compared low-income and middle or upper class neighborhoods, finding that upper class neighborhoods had greater access to supermarkets and fresh produce than low-income neighborhoods (Alwitt and Donley 1997; Chung and Myers 1999; Moore and Diez Roux 2006; Morland and Filomena 2007; Morland et al. 2002; Powell et al. 2007). Relatedly, a body of research acknowledges the intersections of race and class, highlighting racial residential segregation as a key factor in determining access. Zenk et al. (2005:662) use racial segregation as a theoretical framework to examine the relationship between accessibility of supermarkets, neighborhood racial composition, and neighborhood poverty in Detroit. Using 2000 census data to characterize neighborhoods, they conclude that supermarkets were significantly further away from neighborhoods with higher proportions of African Americans.

Morland and Filomena (2007) also use residential segregation as a framework to examine the relationship between neighborhood composition and supermarkets. Conducting research in Brooklyn, NY, Morland and Filomena use census tract data to define neighborhoods and to determine the proportion of Black residents in each tract. While Zenk et al. (2005) only examine the physical distance to supermarkets, Morland and Filomena (2007:1487) comprehensively evaluate the fresh produce available at each store. They conclude that the number of stores carrying fresh produce is greater in predominately White neighborhoods.

Critical food scholars contend that a focus on adding grocery stores to neighborhoods obscures the root causes of food access inequalities. Those particularly

invested in exploring and addressing inequalities have turned to the built environment as not simply a backdrop against which food inequalities emerge but as an integral reflection of inequalities rooted in racism (Alkon and Agyeman 2011; McClintock 2011). This work shifts away from neoliberal understandings of individual choice and decision making towards critically examining the role of structural constraints in persisting inequalities. McClintock (2011:93–94) ties contemporary food-related problems in Oakland to the devaluation of particular types of urban capital, namely the labor of people of color and fixed capital. Along the same lines, in a TEDxManhattan talk in 2013, LaDonna Redmond declares Food Justice 2.0 is “the narratives of people of color”, arguing that the stories food justice advocates tell themselves are equally as important as the actions they take.<sup>1</sup>

Too much emphasis on the built environment, however, potentially obscures how and why people navigate their specific food contexts. As previously noted, Alkon et al. (2013) argue that more attention on urban foodways is needed to better understand individual and community food geographies. Such work has been taken up, though not nearly as comprehensively as theoretical and quantitative studies. Much of it focuses on the economic decision making of urban dwellers (Powell et al. 2007, 2009), the role of small stores and storeowners in their daily lives (Short et al. 2007), or stressors that severely limit or influence shopping and consumption (McGee et al. 2008; Whelan et al. 2002). Very rarely, however, are the hopes, ambitions, or sources of inspiration of low-income urban dwellers given as much weight as their stressors. McCutcheon (2011) is a notable exception. She argues that because of their belief in self-reliance, Black Nationalist organizations have historically developed food programs to feed predominantly Black communities. McCutcheon’s (2011:193) work inherently questions the impact of communities creating their own solutions to food inequalities as a means of uplift.

Alternative food movements are sometimes positioned as viable options outside increasingly corporatized supermarkets that serve as the staple in most US American’s shopping and consumption. Though there have always been alternatives to supermarkets, they have broadened to be considered as solutions to food insecurity. Community gardens in particular are positioned as spaces for community building, youth development, and community-controlled food production (Corrigan 2011; Firth et al. 2011; Flachs 2010).

However, there has been much skepticism about community gardening, particularly critiquing ways that the practice becomes exclusionary, used in service to neoliberal agendas, or a band aid for larger structural inequalities that cannot be solved by gardening (Agyeman and McEntee 2014). On a practical, on-the-ground level, questions concerning ownership of garden plots, who controls the narrative of what it means to be “healthy”, and the not-so-glamorous nuts and bolts of leadership also emerge (Reynolds and Cohen 2016).

The literature reviewed here, though not exhaustive, reflects key debates emerging in food studies concerning the spatial distribution of food, race, and the ways in which communities respond to or meet their needs. In the following section, I explore self-reliance in Black intellectual and activist traditions to provide a historical lineage for this particular cultural, political logic that participants in my study engaged.

## Self-Reliance in Black Intellectual and Activist Traditions

Arguably, Black communities' investment in self-reliance as a political and cultural framework for communal uplift has been central to intellectual thought and activist strategizing. Transitions from mass enslavement, migration from south to the north and west, and integration (albeit limited) into new consumer spheres from which they were once barred begged questions about how best to meet Black people's needs in a nation in which the rights of full citizenship had yet to be granted. These questions were as fundamentally about space and place as they were about accessing goods. With many living in segregated neighborhoods in urban centers, Black residents navigated White supremacy daily, using their segregated neighborhoods as places to build as much institutional capacity to meet their needs as possible. Self-reliance became a strategy, a manifesto for building communities that were not wholly reliant on White philanthropy or support.

The question of self-reliance was taken up intellectually. Scholars such as DuBois (1899) researched unequal access to housing, food, and employment and theorized ways for Black communities to live as self-sufficiently as possible. DuBois (1903) viewed the question of self-sufficiency as a necessity for building healthy, self-sustainable Black communities, and as a fundamental blow to an exploitative economic system under which Black intellectual and physical labor were undervalued. Often posited as DuBois's intellectual opposite, Booker T. Washington emphasized technical and agricultural knowledge as means for developing self-reliance communities. For both, self-reliance was a necessary, community-controlled vision and process towards liberation.

Self-reliance was not solely an intellectual question, however. As Gaines (1996:1–2) notes, self-reliance—sometimes used interchangeably with self-determination—has operated as a method of racial uplift through beliefs in education as liberation and emphasis on “self-help, racial solidarity, temperance, thrift, chastity, social purity, patriarchal authority, and the accumulation of wealth”. Black political leaders and activists working toward Black liberation operationalized self-reliance in their community-based work. Fannie Lou Hamer, for example, founded the Freedom Farm Cooperative (FFC) in 1967. Clear that Black leadership was an imperative for Black liberation, the FFC developed a multifaceted set of social and political programming to address the needs of poor and underemployed Blacks primarily in Mississippi but as far north as Chicago (White 2017).

Similarly, other activists such as Nannie Helen Burroughs and Anna Julia Cooper (who was also a scholar) argued that without self-reliance, Black communities would not progress. Both educators and influential women in Washington, DC, Burroughs and Cooper's visions for a liberated race included a well rounded, educated Black population—especially Black women—with a diverse skillset. Burroughs founded the National Training School for Women and Girls where students not only learned reading and writing but were also taught entrepreneurial skills. Indeed, the school itself partially relied on students' skills as their handmade goods were often sold to help sustain the independent school.

Entrepreneurship as a pathway to self-reliance was not limited to educational institutions like the National Training School for Women and Girls. It was also a foundational place-making strategy central to the development of community identities in the context of anti-Black racism and segregation. Mullins (2008:89) argued that although it raises an eyebrow to put entrepreneurship at the center of understanding community identity, the complex network of merchants and consumers that emerged was key to understanding how Black communities have historically functioned, particularly in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

On the one hand, improving the “self” as a means of community uplift reflects a form of respectability politics that assumes that performing the “right” behaviors and having the “right” education could earn rights associated with full citizenship in a racist society; “self” functioning as a proxy for community or representative of the race. This had both positive and negative outcomes, as an individual could be seen as a credit or embarrassment. It is worth noting that this, too, is a function of living in a racist society in which Black people are hardly given the credit of being individuals—particularly if the outcomes are negative.

However, to dismiss self-reliance as solely about earning the respect of whites obscures the ways in which self-reliance has been woven into the cultural geographies of Black communities across the Diaspora in general, and in the United States in particular. McKittrick and Woods (2007:6) argue that, “identifying the ‘where’ of Blackness in positivist terms can reduce Black lives to essential measurable ‘facts’ rather than presenting communities that have struggled, resisted, and significantly contributed to the production of space”. The reduction to “facts”, particularly the desire to “bring good food” (Guthman 2008) to Black communities not only erases Black food geographies, but reinforces the belief that these communities have little or no investment in creating their own place-making strategies toward food self-sufficiency. Indeed, taking racialized metaphors like “food desert” at face value privileges the persistence of “lack” that is nearly synonymous with Blackness in much social science research with little regard for how that lack gets transformed by the communities in question.

Thus, drawing on intellectual and activist traditions that center self-reliance as central to Black liberation, geographies of self-reliance as a theoretical framework situates self-reliance in food consumption and production as a cultural, political, and spatial framework for navigating inequality. Black intellectuals and activists have recognized the usefulness of self-reliance, but so too have residents who embedded the framework within their everyday practices. The residents I encountered during fieldwork, for example, both recognized the uneven spatial development of their food landscape compared with other neighborhoods and their own agency in transforming that landscape. They ground their analyses and their food place-making strategies in the materiality of Black life, real and imagined connections to historical narratives of successful Black communities, hope and love, and a commitment to “the self” as both individual and communal.



## Geographies of Self-Reliance at Work: A Community Garden as Case Study

The community garden and the people who tended it were part of a larger ethnographic study that took place over 18 months between 2012 and 2014 in a neighborhood in northeast Washington, DC. During this time, I conducted participant observation and interviewed 30 community residents and food justice advocates to explore the varied ways neighborhood residents navigated living in a low food access neighborhood. Over the course of fieldwork, I interviewed residents about where they shopped, what they chose to buy, and the barriers to accessing food. I also explored the ways in which residents creatively navigated the unequal food landscape through individual or collective efforts to address “lack” on their own. These strategies varied and reflected degrees of commitment to self and community. They included individual gardens, a mobile food delivery service, and the community garden that is the subject of this article.

I began participant observation at the garden in October 2013 after being in contact with the primary gardener for nearly a year. Over the course of seven months, I attended and participated in two planting events; shadowed the primary gardeners during planting, weeding, and harvesting; and observed youth involvement in the daily maintenance of the garden. Five of the neighborhood residents and two of the food justice advocates I interviewed for the larger study were affiliated with the garden. In addition to the interviews relevant to the larger study, I conducted follow-up interviews with each of them specifically about community gardening, exploring their personal connections to gardening, their conceptualizations of community, and their goals and hopes for the garden. The garden itself was small—initially only three raised beds enclosed in a gated courtyard. Near the end of my study, three additional beds and fruit trees were added.

At the time of my field research, Washington, DC’s food landscape reflected unequal food access that patterned racial residential segregation. Divided into eight wards which are subdivided into neighborhoods, the Blackest wards—7 and 8—bore the heaviest burden of inequality; 95% of the population was Black. Ward 7, where this research was conducted, had three supermarkets to serve over 70,000 residents. The neighborhood where this research was conducted was home to about 10,000 of them and did not have a supermarket within its boundaries. Though Washington, DC is a compact city and neighborhood boundaries are permeable, the absence of a full-service grocery in the neighborhood informed residents’ understanding of their neighborhood and their food geographies.

Alongside the uneven distribution of grocery stores and supermarkets, Washington, DC boasted a plethora of community gardens, including 13 owned and managed by the city. One of these gardens was located in the northeastern DC neighborhood where this research took place. The 44-plot garden underwent an extensive renovation in 2012, which added additional plots, irrigation, and a greenhouse. Though highly visible and perhaps the star in the 13-garden lineup, many residents did not know the process for securing a plot. Of the 30 participants

interviewed, only one had a working knowledge of how to move forward with being assigned a plot.

Participants navigated both lack of supermarket access and perceived (and real) exclusion from visible alternative food movements in multiple ways. In addition to relying on neighbors to get to and from stores, taking public transportation or riding bikes, and strategically budgeting to cover most needs and a few wants, some worked a small community garden less than one mile from the District-owned garden.

Constant navigation of the unequal food terrain coupled with knowledge of the neighborhood's history led some residents to critique themselves, highlighting what they saw as a lack of self-reliance in community engagement. One research participant, a 40-year-old woman who worked as an arts entrepreneur and had lived in the neighborhood for seven years, expressed a working knowledge of the community's history with producing food:

We were known as a self-reliant community, like nobody is helping us. I mean I wasn't there, but you know. Like years ago they weren't being helped, just like now. So what did you do? Built your own homes and had general farms and made your own food, like you relied on each other. Where is that?

A second participant, a 40-year-old man who grew up in the neighborhood, offered a similar critique:

We had little gardens everywhere. All of us had gardens back then. We didn't have all the amenities, but we were a community. The best part was, we had other systems that worked, that don't work anymore. For instance, you could buy shoes in this community. You could get your hair cut. There were barter systems, and community-based systems that supported us 30 years ago, that don't exist anymore.

Both residents recognized that a past engagement with food reflected more community control; something they felt they had lost and in some ways could not recreate. The question, "where is that?" is the direction that this article turns to, examining how the gardeners reimagined what this community control looked like in the contemporary moment.

The data resulting from semi-structured interviews and participant observation demonstrate three major themes that indicate the expansiveness in which the garden was situated as not simply a solution for food insecurity but more broadly as a site from which residents employed geographies of self-reliance. Their responses to food insecurity as well as other inequalities that shaped their lives were embedded in the specific geography of the place—a public housing community that was scheduled to be demolished—as well as their understandings of and belief in the role of self-reliance in improving individual and communal lives. These geographies of self-reliance responded to the spatial inequalities. However, they also served more phenomenological roles, as participants sought to engage hope and legacy in their work. Each of the major themes—framing "nothingness" and responsibility, navigating invisibility, and navigating intersecting needs—is explored individually and demonstrates the extent to which self-reliance factored into the cultivation of the garden.



## ***Framing “Nothingness” and Responsibility***

I visited the garden a few days after a successful community planting day that included a few dozen volunteers, a DJ, a makeshift dance floor, and food. Volunteers from the Student National Medical Association (SNMA) conducted health screenings, and the response from residents was overwhelmingly positive. On the day of my visit, I was meeting Mr Harris, a resident and gardener in his sixties, to survey the newly planted raised beds. When we went out to the garden, overlooking three new beds that were planted by the volunteers, I noticed a pile of bricks at the bottom of the hill. I asked Mr Harris where the bricks came from, assuming that a building in the community had been knocked down. He responded: “They knocked down something somewhere else that didn’t work good”. After I gave a confused look, he laughed and continued: “Yeah that’s how that works ... and that’s what happens when you don’t beautify your neighborhood before stuff like this happens”.

The gardener framed this as a community responsibility, suggesting that because they had not invested in the upkeep of their community, they deserved to be on the receiving end of someone else’s trash. The idea of “nothingness” is pervasive in “food desert” literature, despite the fact even communities with low food access often have food-related institutions and practices that carry significant meaning for residents (Alkon et al. 2013; Short et al. 2007). Still, research participants in my study communicated their conceptualizations of nothingness, which were not simply backdrops in their decisions for how to procure food but served as motivating mechanisms for taking individual and communal responsibility. This was often expressed in conjunction with actions or inactions that were perceived to inhibit the community’s growth.

Similarly, another gardener, a 45-year-old woman who lived alone, discussed the way in which community responsibility was key in thwarting negative conceptions of those who lived there:

You know, because they’re using anything to close this place. You know crime, you know. What they do is, they use stats ... They will meet about this thing. “But last year we did this. Oh it’s gotten worse. It is 100, 200 percent worse than last year. Close it down” ... So what we’re trying to do is allow people not to impede their own progress with too much [laughs] misbehavior. At least start somewhere.

The community garden operated within a broader context that included community members’ understandings of what it meant to navigate low food access. These framings were sometimes contradictory: calling out structural inequalities while at the same time placing the responsibility squarely on the community members themselves. Bourdieu (1990) outlined the concept of symbolic violence to describe the ways marginalized groups internalize hierarchies or inequalities as normal parts of their everyday life, and potentially reinforce them with their own actions. Both participants articulate some aspect of accepting that this is the way things work while simultaneously resisting this through an actionable belief in self-reliance. As such, self-reliance becomes a mechanism through which to resist structural violence. It is not that participants did not understand or articulate the forms of inequalities that shaped their lives. On the contrary, they understood their

subjective positioning as a product of unfair and unequal policies. Participants, however, did not see themselves or their lives as solely a product of structural racism and class inequalities. Through their gardening efforts, they manifested their belief in community-driven change in those raised beds.

### *Navigating Invisibility*

If those who lived in public housing suffered from a hypervisibility that highlighted social ills that are often associated with poor communities, the garden itself flourished primarily outside the gaze of the larger food justice movement in DC and public officials. Dametria, a mother of three, for example, believed the garden was not getting the recognition it deserved. Although she voiced concerns about the participation of community members and argued that the lack of resources is in part the community's fault, Dametria was hopeful about the garden—precisely because she considered it a type of action that countered apathy. Dametria saw the garden as a success in the community and encouraged her two youngest children to participate regularly. As something they could be proud of, the garden merited visibility in her eyes. Yet, this is where Dametria understood that even though they believed the work to be good and worthy of merit, others did not. Specifically, she spoke of this in the context of First Lady Michelle Obama who, through her campaign to fight childhood obesity, has championed community gardens, healthy eating, and exercise:

It would be helpful if we can get like Michelle Obama to come out here and to do something in our neighborhood, because you don't find the President and the First Lady to come out in these types of areas. They don't even come in the projects and it's sad. They go in high quality neighborhoods and help out, but we're the ones that are really like low income and public housing ... if we can get the news people out here one day when we're having a little green program out here, maybe we get some attention like "okay, we see [they are] trying to make a difference in their neighborhood. Maybe we can sponsor them or help them to get funding".

This garden—just shy of nine miles east of the White House where Michelle Obama planted a vegetable garden on the lawn—represented the kind of ingenuity and commitment that the First Lady often spoke about in her speeches about “healthy” eating and exercise. Yet, Dametria's narrative points to several interlocking processes that reveal how the agency of people in her community operated outside the limited gaze thrust upon them. First, she offers a critique of President and First Lady Obama's decisions regarding the areas they visit. Dametria draws connections between visibility, help, and the limits of self-reliance. Though the gardeners did all they could to sustain the garden—including recycling plastic containers and saving fruit seeds for planting—she recognized the limits of toiling in obscurity. As such, this community's attempt to create a solution to food insecurity aligned with Michelle Obama's campaign, yet with little visibility, it is as if it did not exist. This invisibility reinforced the notion that the community's problems were created by them and must be solved by them, though the problems were much bigger than the sum of their individual actions. Ironically, it also reinforced the idea

that residents themselves were not engaged in attempts to improve the conditions under which they lived.

### *Navigating Intersecting Needs*

On one level, the garden was created for the same purposes as many other contemporary community gardens in urban neighborhoods: to address the lack of fresh fruits and vegetables within reasonable reach of residents who need them and to educate residents about food production and healthy eating. On other levels, however, the garden became a metaphorical representation and critique of this model. With goals to use the garden to teach entrepreneurship, parental involvement and management strategies, and to shift toward communal ownership to alleviate stealing, those in leadership also understood that this garden could not address the food-related needs of community members without addressing other needs.

Maintaining a healthy, thriving garden symbolically represented the healthy, thriving community they wished to see. In an analysis of ten community gardens in Baltimore neighborhoods of varying socioeconomic status, Poulsen et al. (2014) reported that those involved in community gardening considered their work as part of constructing an “urban oasis” that yielded benefits not only for the individual but also for their communities. Likewise, White (2011a, 2011b) also argues that the benefits of urban agriculture extended beyond feeding communities to include developing a sense of collective efficacy. In a similar way, the gardeners at this housing project explicitly rejected notions of individualism through envisioning and planning for opportunities for community members to thrive and grow. With no partitioned plots that were the responsibility of individual people, the garden’s design encouraged this type of communalism. Though everyone was not involved in the upkeep, everyone was welcome to benefit from it, including financially.

One of the many problems that residents at the housing community faced was joblessness. Throughout my interviews, residents lamented that not only were there no jobs, there was very little hope for jobs. The garden committee planned to address the hopelessness concerning jobs by using the garden as a space to promote entrepreneurship. The rationale was that if community members had something to be proud of, if they had a space that they could use to promote their own well-being through business ventures, it would contribute to changing the culture of the place. The garden was a place from which other ventures could grow, as illustrated in the following exchange:

Ms Johnson: You know what, too? Like I say, like with that, we trying to get them to [do] entrepreneurship [through] photo shoots they can have in the garden. I’m serious about that. And then sell little postcards or something. Provide a variety.

Dametria: Yeah, that’s something. Good variety.

Ms Johnson: Sell the little postcards with this, you know.

Dametria: Yeah. And it’s just more of what you’re already doing which is taking all the plans and using them for something good.

Ms Johnson: Something. Yes indeed! Yes 'cause, see, we had thought like about expansion so we had asked [the Housing Authority] for like, yeah, he told you about it? A greenhouse right here on the property. Then the next part is entrepreneurship, all right, something, or if people wanna take pictures in front of [the garden], just like people take a drop cloth and charge, what, \$10. You know what I'm saying?

Mr Harris: Mm-hmm.

Ms Johnson: Like down at the clubs and stuff.

Mr Harris: Oh yeah.

Ms Johnson: That can take place with that. Yeah! That's magnificent, a whole lot of stuff going on. Mm-hmm.

Mr Harris: You know, you have people, they're business people but like I said its contra-band business.

Ashanté: Hmm.

Mr Harris: And, and what happens over here is once a person gets in trouble with these charges, uh, it's, it's a dirty trick because they really X'd out of other things ...

Ashanté: Hmm.

Mr Harris: So we wanna address some of that. We don't want them to be X'd out of anything.

The emphasis on entrepreneurship mirrored the same from before the 1960s, reflecting a belief that entrepreneurship was one method of embedding self-reliance in their spatial context. The desire to encourage entrepreneurial opportunity reflected an understanding of challenges faced by residents who had experienced run-ins with the criminal justice system. This particular manifestation of self-reliance reflected a commitment to second chances; chances that were often not given.

Similar to other community garden projects in urban areas, this garden had a significant focus on children and youth. Children and youth are often situated as teachable, malleable and as the hope for the future. Relatedly, the central focus on childhood obesity places children at the center of what is considered a national crisis in obesity-related illnesses and deaths. First Lady Michelle Obama's "Let's Move!" campaign, for example, centered healthy eating and exercise as solutions to end childhood obesity. As such, the gardeners' decision to focus on children and youth did not differ from others', although their reasons for doing so might be different.

The garden was a place where the youth could learn skills, stay busy, and contribute to the well-being of the community. However, it presented some difficulty when it came to overseeing and managing them. During participant observation, I often recorded how difficult it was for one person to manage the kids who wanted to weed the garden or water the plants. They were eager and helpful but also energetic and hard to keep focused. Mr Harris noted that "the children are really benefiting from this because they look forward to it. I see the same ones coming back and getting involved", but at the same time he admitted that it was difficult:

Every time I come up here I duck in quick [laughter] because I can't give them a full day. Sometimes I'm not going to do that much, and then I like to work with tools and then I'd be concerned with injuries ... I don't want to keep them away from what they would really like to do, but I just want to wait until there's more adult supervision. The executive director is aware of this and is in love with what we're doing. She gave us the go-ahead to expand [the garden] when we was getting opposition.

Ms Johnson brought home the garden's role in teaching the youth volunteers about community and responsibility:

They learned responsibility. Every Saturday, you know, something new. I said, you're supposed to be doing something to help your community. Then, we noticed that the parents like a lot of the parents, they were observing us. We're just people, but they were sending their kids up here [laughs]. We were the community baby-sitters. They were sending them all there. I mean we had told anybody to come, but I guess [the parents] said: "Now, you all keep them for us." You know, it was so funny. But what was great about it is this, it's that the community trusts us with their kids. That meant a lot. They then got to know us and all the good things.

As the gardeners navigated the tangible food needs of the community, they had to consider other needs, which included childcare and trust:

We're trying to get more parents involved. We're working on that and that's going to work because they got excited about this at the beginning. Well that, and they're trying to get jobs and things like that. So we definitely looking for much more participation this year with the adults ... we don't have a problem with the youth. They're ready to work. I just want them ... I don't want their parents to think we're taking advantage of them working for nothing. We can't push ... this is what they want to do.

Although they experienced the tension between wanting kids to participate but not having enough adult supervision to accommodate large numbers, both Ms Johnson and Mr Harris understood that part of what made the garden successful was the parents' willingness to let their children participate. For Ms Johnson in particular, the village paradigm within which she worked required a level of trust that eased boundaries between individual families and communities. In other words, the parents and their children needed to feel as though their movement was not restricted. Mr Harris hoped that, by gaining the trust of the parents, more of them would get involved with the garden. This engagement with the community's youth reflected a larger vision for planting roots, despite impending displacement:

Reese: How do you think the gardens are going to help this housing community? Because I know, you know, long-term the city has plans to shut all these down.

Ms Johnson: Oh you looked that up [laughs].

Reese: I've heard about it from several places, yes [laughs].

Ms Johnson: Yeah, well that's why we whatever, you know because, you know personally, myself and then a lot of other people don't want it to come down.

Reese: Right.

Ms Johnson: We're not trying to let it come down. You see what I'm saying?

Reese: Mm-hmm.

Mr Harris: Alright now.

Ms Johnson: Then the garden and the trees and stuff are representative of we will not perish; we're going to keep flourishing. Flourishing.

"We're going to keep flourishing" is a powerful metaphor, particularly since many demographics signified that the community was not flourishing; and, relatedly, the city's plan was built on the idea that it was not flourishing. For the gardeners, their belief in and commitment to self-reliance meant that their scope was much bigger than growing food for the community. As people were being relocated and buildings being boarded up, this garden was a form of resistance in which the garden symbolically represented their determination and desire to remain where they had planted roots.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have outlined geographies of self-reliance as a specific way that Black residents navigate and alter the structural constraints surrounding them in order to provide food and meet community needs. Geographies of self-reliance call attention to the ways Black residents creatively navigate the world around them; and how that navigation is embedded in a larger cultural framework that draws on history and narratives of community uplift to address the many forms of "lack" present in their daily lives.

The garden, in many ways, reflected a similar hope and vision as Fannie Lou Hamer's Freedom Farms Cooperative. It reflected tensions inherent in working toward liberation under spatial and economic constraints. On the one hand, the gardeners employed self-reliance to not only transform space but to also transform people. They were clear about the ways they were continuously failed by the state: persistent unemployment, lack of youth and job training programs, and the dearth of supermarkets. Drawing inspiration from former resident Nannie Helen Burroughs and many other leaders who centered Black agency in the pursuit of healthier lives, the gardeners' hope was grounded in a belief that they could help themselves and that it was their responsibility to do so—even in the face of imminent relocation.

The question of the long-term effects of their work remains. The garden was a literal and symbolic spatial reflection of their commitments to building a healthy community. This commitment, however, was unmatched by the city. Month after month, families were slowly relocated to other housing in preparation for the tearing down and redevelopment of the current housing structures. At the time of writing, the redevelopment process has stalled, but not before already disrupting the community. In addition, the garden itself did not radically redistribute wealth, decrease reliance on supermarkets, or, as Dametria aptly observed, bring any noteworthy attention to how the residents were trying to help themselves. In some ways, their work could possibly be deemed unsuccessful because of the limited



reach and capacity of the garden. Even with these tensions, however, Ms Johnson's metaphorical use of flourishing stands out as what makes this garden and the gardeners' efforts significant: in their attempts to address the effects of structural inequalities, they reclaimed their humanity under the constant, state-sanctioned threat to Black life.

Scholars particularly interested in how food access becomes racialized make connections between racial residential segregation and lack of access. This uneven development is not simply a backdrop against which residents decide when and where to buy food. Instead, it is the context in which the materiality of Black life unfolds. The whens, wheres, and whys of acquiring food are informed by the whens, wheres, and whys of the patterning and contours of racial residential segregation. For example, prior to desegregation and at the height of redlining, the patterning of racial residential segregation coupled with overt racist practices resulted in hyperlocal commerce that supported neighborhood institutions. Thus, residents drew on memories and myths concerning life during this period of time as both a critique of the breakdown of Black community life and as inspiration for reclaiming a past of cooperative living that was seemingly lost. Embedded in all this was an optimistic love for community; a belief in a redemptive love that covered a multitude of sins—in this case the scars of systematic racism and disinvestment embedded in the spatial distribution of food.

The findings from this research suggest that self-reliance is neither simply cultural nor simply spatial. Residents' understanding of self-reliance was grounded in historical and spatial contexts, addressing structural inequalities while building community, using the garden as the central site through which to work. In this context, "feeding the community" took on greater meanings than providing fruits and vegetables. "Feeding" meant youth development, visions for entrepreneurship, and potentials for strengthening relationships with parents and caregivers.

The gardeners presented in this article are not only part of a larger food justice movement but also a longstanding history of African Americans depending on self and community to address structural inequalities. As Gregory (1999) and Prince (2014) note, African Americans have historically rallied around issues in their communities that they did not believe would or could be addressed through policymaking alone. Hunter and Robinson (2016) illustrate particularly well how this has been treated in research, arguing that studies on urban Black America has always reflected an ongoing tension: should the focus be on the structural constraints or the ways in which people make lives in spite of enduring inequalities? In this article I have shown that calling attention to the agency of residents dealing with food inequalities does not diminish the realities of structural constraint. On the contrary, by paying attention to this particular form of Black geographies, we are better equipped to understand what is culturally and materially important for Black urban residents. In this case, it was not enough to feed families with food from the garden. Instead, the gardeners' wished to feed more than bodies. They aimed to feed the soul a serving of hope with a side of self-reliance.

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## Endnote

<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ydZfSuz-Hu8&list=PLvY64WxbZzBmkhonMXIFOme8tQxyRNRC-&index=1> (last accessed 20 July 2017).

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