The Impacts of Urban Agriculture: Black Earth Farms

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Advocates' Forum

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> If the yam does not grow well, do not blame the yam. It is because of the soil.
>
> —Ghanaian proverb

In his essay, “Stranger in the Village,” James Baldwin (1955) remarked that if the racial history of the United States is indeed a nightmare, it may well be impossible to wake from it, even if one travels far away and takes refuge in a remote Swiss village. The reason, he says, is that “people are trapped in history and history is trapped in them” (p. 163). In a parallel fashion, it could also be said that in the United States the land is trapped in history and history is trapped in the land. That history is one of blood, displacement, enslavement, war, genocide, and the commodification of the soil. One manifestation of that history is food insecurity, which according to the United States Department of Agriculture, means 13.8 million households were unable to always afford adequate and nutritious meals. Those facing endemic food insecurity include 21.7% of African American and 20%–28% of Native American households (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2021; Long et al., 2020). In other words, the communities most affected by food insecurity in the present are those with what feel like the most traumatic histories on the land.

In what follows, I explore food insecurity and its impacts on African Americans and urban agriculture as an alternative, community-based solution this condition. I am seeking, as well, to understand how certain collective forms of urban agriculture might center members of

their community and cultivate the innate spiritual relationship humans have with land and food. I undertake this exploration with Karl Marx's (1906) ideas of commodification in mind. He begins *Capital* with the definition of the commodity, noting that whether the desire for an object stems from "the stomach or from fancy, makes no difference" (p. 41)—the significance is only that the object is created by a worker to be sold for the boss's profit. Thus, it was also Marx who reminded us that capital enters our consciousness "dripping from head to foot, from every pore, with blood and dirt" (p. 834). But I also engage in this exploration of urban agriculture with an ear turned to indigenous ways of knowing and eyes open for processes of decolonization within liberatory urban practices—practices of generating food that promote or engender the self-determination of marginalized communities.

This was the critical sensibility that I brought to my time with the urban agricultural collective, Black Earth Farms in Berkeley, California.

Food Insecurity

Black Earth Farms is part of a larger, urban agricultural movement that seeks to address the prevalence of food insecurity for many poorer Americans, who have limited access to full-service grocery stores. Predominantly Black and Hispanic neighborhoods are much more likely to be in what have come to be called "food deserts," where access to food requires travel across longer distances for shopping, typically at small independent markets or convenience stores. Shopping at such places means access to a limited variety of food that is more expensive, lower in quality, and less nutritious. For those who are food insecure, the impacts are diminished health outcomes in the form of chronic diseases, premature deaths (Beaulac et al., 2009; Powell et al., 2007; Coleman-Jensen et al., 2021), and even mental health complications (Arenas et al., 2019).

These negative outcomes are tied not only to limited access to groceries, but the very foodstuffs available to buy. Subsidies for select crop production by the U.S. government lead directly to poor diets that

lack nutritional value. Upwards of 20 billion dollars is doled out to bolster the production of corn, soybeans, sorghum grass, rice, and barley, all of which lead to an abundance of processed foods (Franck, 2013). One way to look at those who live with chronic food insecurity is that they are trapped—without agency—in a system that forces them to acquire something unhealthy through a necessary dependence. Food-industry giants control the growing, manufacturing, and distribution of what people must consume to live (Pol, 2014). It therefore seems reasonable to conclude that they create the conditions of food insecurity through their control of the land and the profitable form of what's created from it.

Urban Agriculture as a Political Act

According to oral history, when African women were being enslaved, they hid seeds in their braids so wherever they went, they would have food. The seeds they brought to the New World included okra, rice, and peas, all of which later shaped culinary and cultural forms in the Americas (Bandele & Meyers, 2016). And despite being forced to grow their own food on plots of malnourished soil, enslaved Africans were still able to transform those meagre plots into viable spaces for the cultivation of food, medicinal herbs, and livestock (Blassingame, 1972). It was impossible not to reflect on this history as I spent time with Black Earth Farms, whose mission statement reads: "We are an agroecological lighthouse, spreading ancestral knowledge within the community and regenerating a connection to and reverence for the land within its members."

Black Earth Farms is a collective working to reclaim land and reclaim human health by offering ways to access food beyond its commodification. What constitutes their farming practices within the city of Berkeley is a conscious effort towards earth-work, community enrichment, and food recovery. To this end, they provide boxes of produce to those in need, introduce people to different plants and uncommon vegetables, and offer space for gardening. They also conduct food sovereignty workshops and lead discussion groups. At

present they do not own any of the land they garden but collaborate with other Bay Area urban gardens—though they are intent on raising money for land that they might purchase.

What stood out to me in my interactions and discussions with members of the collective was their insistence that farming was political. They pointed to the economic, racial, and spiritual factors that divided those who are able to eat from who cannot eat. They cited the history of African food systems capable of feeding everyone within respective communities and pointed out how African people had influenced culinary and agricultural practices globally. It was ironic, they pointed out, that in the United States people who historically understood and shaped the world's agricultural practices now face high rates of food insecurity while armed with little to no knowledge about growing their own food as a response.

While urban agriculture is generally a means to ameliorate the degree and effects of food insecurity, the founders of the collective discovered the communities and spaces of urban agriculture in their area were white dominated. They talked about how uncomfortable it was to work within the white-controlled spaces that inhibited their authentic creativeness and joy when working with the soil to grow things. Black Earth Farms was created, they explained, to allow people outside that "norm" to participate in urban agriculture. Establishing their own collective allowed them to generate a sense of broad inclusion. They believe that Black Earth Farms can, in this way, create the social conditions required for members of different and overlapping communities to come together.

They explained that Black Earth Farms tackles the commodification of food by refusing to limit its accessibility. They aim to teach people that they can sustain themselves outside the current food system—a system that sustains those with purchasing power at the exclusion of those without. When I asked them to describe some of the forces they believed Black Earth Farms was resisting, they talked about neoliberal capitalism, racism, mass incarceration, and gentrification. For them,

urban agriculture and farming are intrinsically connected to those other issues of control and power, and therefore has the potential to be a foundation for larger social movements.

Their immediate goal is for community members to see nutritious and sustaining food as a human right. As they see it, if more communities successfully engaged in urban agriculture and Black and Indigenous communities stopped shopping at food markets there could be an immediate threat to corporate food systems. For this to happen, however, more people would need to know how to raise their own food and there would have to be land. Here the connection to larger social movements becomes clearer. For a community with land and the capacity to grow food can organize to create a better world: a world beyond the constrictions of capitalist commodification. As they taught me, if we can free the land, we can free ourselves.

Cultivating Community

During my time at Black Earth Farms, I indeed found it to be a space where people from diverse backgrounds were brought together as social media, an email listserv, and word of mouth kept community members informed of activities. The founders talked about how they believed growing plants was an ancestral practice and that by working together in a non-oppressive environment, a deep connection between people could flourish. They felt, in other words, that the growing of food was a form of individual and collective healing. In this spirit, they stressed that it was important to respect the land and honor the people who worked to grow food before them. The believed that it was their duty to nourish the soil as it nourishes them back—articulating appreciation for the reciprocity, which included, they stressed, the oxygen from the trees that help keep them alive and the cycles of water they pour on the plants that will eventually feed themselves and others.

Of all the aspects of this collective that I witnessed in my time there, my favorite feature was that no one was *required* to actually garden in

order to be considered a part of Black Earth Farms. People could meditate, play music, paint, or simply walk around. In this way, while focused on food production, the collective managed to provide a space that is non-oppressive and nonjudgmental, encouraging members to be authentic. By encouraging community, respect, and inclusion, it did feel as if the collective were providing people with a way to heal themselves.

When someone actually developed a positive relationship with growing food, however, it seemed to me that they were tapping into the power that shifted their consciousness to a place of true belonging—for when people can attain and eat food without struggle there is greater freedom. I often heard folks talk about how they wished that they had begun gardening at an earlier age. Many people discussed stories of how they tried to find peace and happiness through partying, when all along a simple relationship with the Earth made this sense of peace possible.

All this is not to deny the challenges inherent in maintaining the collective. The farming and gardening needed to get done and it was sometimes hard to get people to *start* gardening, or to come back due to limits of time or transportation. Materially, the farming is expensive and requires resources. Some of these costs could be offset, the founders explained, by recycling the cinder block and wood used for growing beds and accessing free seeds from local nurseries. Their biggest challenge, however, was bringing in the large amounts of healthy soil required. This last challenge was clearly claiming a great deal of the collective's energies and focus. Obtaining their own land was becoming paramount. As one member of the collective I interviewed put it:

Gaining access to land in this current political and economic state where Black and Brown proletariats are working for industries that do not provide enough money is powerful. I think that people need to start occupying land and taking it back from the city. It might be dangerous, but it will allow us to start not getting exploited for

another sixty-five years by somebody who do not care about our wellbeing and longevity.

Ruminations

During my time at Black Earth farms, I found myself thinking about the ways marginalized groups must constantly fight for their freedom while tethered to, and dependent upon, the very structures that oppress them. The collective showed me that land and food are inseparable from freedom. I began to think about how, from the beginning of colonization and enslavement, land and food were essentially utilized as weapons against Black and Indigenous people; whether through displacement from their means of survival or forced to labor so as to produce the cash crops of sugar, cotton, or tobacco. As one of the founders told me, “If you control people’s land and food source, you control their life.” That statement kept me thinking about capitalism’s construction of food as a commodity. From this perspective, I could see how Black Earth Farms works to combat the relationship of the exploited producer and consumer, as well as actively engaging in trying to secure the land and resources needed for the most basic human needs.

My discussions with the founders and members, as well as my work in the vegetable plots, got me to contemplate what it meant to be a gardener. I feel like the mainstream media rarely portrays Black people working on the land in a positive light and that whiteness and white supremacy have insisted that we do not belong on this Earth. Now I think, to be a Black person who is a gardener and who wants to tend the soil and grow food resists that message. Instead, it pushes forward a different narrative, one that can help heal the severed relationship between African Americans and land. I feel like this is a path toward a spiritual justice—the cultivation of a people’s sense of self-worth and empowerment.

I have seen how individuals internalize the trauma of not being able to eat well, treating it as a personal failure and not as a structural matter.

If people cannot nourish themselves, how can we expect them to have the energy and capacity to transform their lives? I believe that how we perceive ourselves internally affects how we interact or live with other communities. I think now that the growing and sharing of food for the sake of life (and not profit) can indeed create bonds with others, prompt a sense of love for the community, and that this increases a desire for social justice. Can one translate this into communities eventually having autonomy and agency over what is necessary to sustain themselves? That seems a larger, more daunting question.

After studying Black Earth Farms, I believe that urban agriculture—at least as it is practiced there—can at the very least help create a closer connection between people and the food they consume and engender an interdependence that allows people to practice and cultivate positive qualities, such as sharing, sustaining community, and engaging in reciprocity. These are important qualities and symbols of peace and egalitarianism. Moreover, it threatens capitalism itself. I would say that if we stop producing food as a commodity or consumable luxury, we can get closer to the Kwanzaa notion of Ujima, which means taking a collective approach to work and responsibility, to sustaining the community by collectively solving problems and overcoming obstacles. This was a spirit I saw at work at Black Earth Farms. Broadly speaking, if we lack the basic needs to grow and survive, there should be a change to the “soil” from which we spring—particularly if that “soil” is capitalism.

Author Note

Throughout my time in academia, I have pondered a lot. I have pondered metaphysics, ideas of freedom, love, God, and how to create a just world. I have come to the realization that life is a system best governed by love. The more (evil) we enact the more negative energy we bring to ourselves. What we eat, what we do, how we treat people, how we value life, all these things must be understood and approached with compassion. I think it's important to clear your mind

and become conscious of all the negative things you allow yourself to entertain—those small things which you invite as guilty pleasures mentally, physically, and spiritually. The universe has no boundaries; your thoughts are not off limits to the sentient soil you stand upon. Your virtue, your essence is on record, and the universe renders to you what you plant in it. Now is the time to accept what you've planted, apologize to yourself and the world, forgive yourself, and finally plant a new crop to harvest in the next season. How much love and happiness you receive in the next season depends strictly upon the effort you place in the amount of purity and love you contribute to the world. I hope that this research inspires you and encourages you to care about your community!

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Author Biography

Guutaa Regassa is pursuing his master's degree in social work at the Crown Family School of Social Work, Policy, and Practice with a focus on trauma-informed care. He is interested in collaborating with others on improving the overall health and holistic well-being of low income and historically marginalized communities. He is also passionate about food security and believes that access to food should be a human right. In the long term, he hopes to establish community gardens in order to create a sustainable and consistent food source for communities who are otherwise food insecure.

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