

## “What does Ferguson mean for the food justice movement?”: Reading Black visions of food justice in times of social unrest

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Submitted October 13, 2023 / Revised February 17 and April 2, 2024 / Accepted April 4, 2024 /  
Published online August 9, 2024


Citation: Smith II, B. J., Simon, J. W., Gwin, C. S., & McMillion, D. Y. (2024). “What does Ferguson mean for the food justice movement?”: Reading Black visions of food justice in times of social unrest. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, 13(4), 105–119. <https://doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2024.134.004>

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### Abstract

The August 2014 murder of unarmed Black teenager Michael Brown at the hands of the police in the streets of Ferguson, Missouri, USA, sparked international attention, ignited a surge in

#BlackLivesMatter protests, and reconfigured national discussions about race, police brutality, and state-sanctioned violence. Black food activists on the frontlines of the food justice movement grappled with Brown’s murder by joining together on a national call to address the question: What does Ferguson mean for the food justice movement? Answers to this question manifested into the 2015–2016 special digital series entitled “What Ferguson Means for the Food Justice Movement,” published online in the Food Justice Voices section of the WhyHunger organization website. In this article, we use a qualitative critical content analysis of the series to examine how Black food activists reframed agricultural and food systems in the context of the Ferguson struggle. We draw on intersectional agriculture theory to illuminate how Black food activists draft visions of food justice through

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three intersecting pathways: (1) critical Black agrarianism, (2) radical Black mothering, and (3) Black futures. Our research reveals that Black visions of food justice in the wake of Ferguson are instructive and offer a fresh lens to understand the evolving landscape of Black food activism, given a set of racial, gendered, social, political, and economic realities. We conclude with a brief discussion on how these visions compel us to reconsider racial equity at the nexus of agriculture, food, and various forms of unrest in Black communities, providing insights for scholars, practitioners, and activists who work on issues of food justice.

### **Keywords**

Black food activists, food justice, Ferguson, Black Lives Matter, Intersectional Agriculture, Black communities, food access, Black futures, critical Black agrarianism, radical Black mothering

### **Introduction**

The entire nation had its eyes on Ferguson, Missouri, a predominantly Black suburb of St. Louis, on August 9, 2014, when Michael Brown, an 18-year-old unarmed Black teenager, was shot six times at close range by a white police officer, Darren Wilson, in the middle of a street in the city (Department of Justice, 2015). Brown's murder soon sparked international attention, igniting a surge in #BlackLivesMatter (BLM) protests and reconfiguring national discussions about race, police brutality, and state-sanctioned violence (Corley, 2015; Costa-Roberts, 2015; Cuenca & Nichols, 2014). In a larger sense, Brown's murder resurfaced the long history of intense race relations in St. Louis dating back to the Missouri Compromise of 1820, which resulted in Missouri being admitted to the U.S. as a slave state (Drexler, 2019). Although St. Louis was a settling place for thousands of Black people, during the Reconstruction era, the city and county maintained a well-documented history of discriminatory practices that pushed many white citizens out of St. Louis and into suburbs such as Ferguson (Cuenca & Nichols, 2014; Drexler, 2019; National Park Service, n.d.). In fact, in 1990, the population of Ferguson was roughly 22,000, with 75% of residents identifying as white (Cuenca & Nichols,

2014). However, the same white flight culture that pushed white people into Ferguson pushed them out, reversing the racial demographics. By 2010, the population of Ferguson had decreased slightly to around 20,000, with over 60% of its residents identifying as Black. The social, political, and economic power structures that shaped the city, however, remained virtually all-white (Cuenca & Nichols, 2014). Furthermore, housing restrictions that prohibited the development of low-income housing options outside of Ferguson trapped many Black people there (Casselmann, 2014; Cuenca & Nichols, 2014).

This sociohistorical backdrop of the city of Ferguson set the stage for the numerous public responses to Brown's murder and the Ferguson struggle. Local Black community leaders and organizers used Brown's murder to address myriad issues of discriminatory policing policies that targeted Black communities in and around Ferguson, calling into question the true value of Black life in America. Many celebrities and social advocates used their social media presence to voice their outrage regarding the Ferguson struggle, which prompted BLM activists and organizers to stage marches, die-ins, and other forms of social protest in honor of Brown (Corley, 2015). Black food activists on the frontlines of the food justice movement also grappled with Brown's murder by joining together on a national call organized by activist Beatriz Beckford, a co-founder of the National Black Food and Justice Alliance (NBFJA). The purpose of the call was to address the question: What does Ferguson mean for the food justice movement? Answers to this question manifested into the 2015–2016 special digital series titled, "What Ferguson Means for the Food Justice Movement" (WFMFJM)—a collection of narratives and five interviews with activists on the call—published online in the Food Justice Voices section of the WhyHunger organization website. Founded in 1975, WhyHunger is a grassroots organization built on the belief that access to life-giving, nutritious foods is a human right that all people should have (WhyHunger, n.d.-a). WhyHunger's mission is guided by the idea that the stories of grassroots people and organizations should be told through their own voices, offering a space to inspire com-

munities that struggle to access healthy food to act in the best interest of themselves.

Mapping WhyHunger's mission across the food landscape of Black life, the WFMFJM series transformed the Ferguson struggle into a critical food justice space for understanding agricultural and food systems as sites of Black action in the ongoing contemporary Black freedom movement (Ransby, 2018; Zafar, 2019). Geographer Rasheed Hislop's (2014) definition of the food justice movement as "the struggle against racism, exploitation, and oppression taking place within the food system that addresses inequality's root causes both within and beyond the food chain" (p. 24), provides the racialized agri-food context by which the WFMFJM series emerged. In considering Hislop's (2014) conceptualization of the food justice movement, as activist Beatriz Beckford put it, the WFMFJM series was designed to explicitly "discuss the connection between the oppression that Black communities face at the hands of the state via police violence and at the hands of an unjust food system" (p. 1). At the same time, the series challenged Black food activists to consider how they could build on the Ferguson struggle to increase their agency in the production, consumption, and distribution of food. While the food justice movement operates within a racial analysis that the current food system produces and perpetuates inequality, many proponents of the movement have overlooked the fact that historical and continued anti-Blackness is a root cause of such inequality. That is to suggest that the same anti-Blackness that shaped the circumstances surrounding the murder of Michael Brown works to maintain the current transnational, American food system.

In a broader sense, the WFMFJM raises questions surrounding how Black food activists construct visions of food justice that "reflec[t] refusals, fugitive food practices, and the desire for Black self-determination: the ability to imagine, define, determine, and create sustainable worlds free of anti-Blackness and its accompanying oppressions" (Reese & Garth, 2020, p. 6). Interrogating such questions through narratives and interviews in the WFMFJM series personalizes a canvas by which Black food activists can rethink their work in times of social and civil unrest as illustrated in the Ferguson

struggle. This rethinking process speaks to the ways in which Black food activists envision a future for the food justice movement that is built on the production of transformative mobilizations in the context of what sociologist Bobby J. Smith II (2019) has theorized as "intersectional agriculture." Building on legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989, 1991) groundbreaking work that termed and theorized "intersectionality," intersectional agriculture "represents the trend toward agricultural practices, food distribution, and consumption activities that explicitly seek to address, resist, or counter agri-food issues at the intersection of race, class, gender, and sexuality" (Smith II, 2019a, p. 828).

Drawing on intersectional agriculture theory, this article uses a qualitative critical content analysis of the WFMFJM series to examine how Black food activists reframed agricultural and food systems in the context of the Ferguson struggle. We argue that this reframing process illuminates how Black food activists draft visions of food justice through three intersecting pathways: (1) critical Black agrarianism, (2) radical Black mothering, and (3) Black futures. Reading Black visions of food justice is instructive and offers a fresh lens to understand the evolving landscape of Black food activism, given a set of racial, gendered, social, political, and economic realities. Such visions are aligned with the framework of intersectional agriculture and cultivate emancipatory discourses of food justice that rely on a "structural interpretation of US food movements that highlights the nexus between the historical, social, cultural, economic, political, and environmental contexts of food politics" (Smith II, 2019a, p. 826). To be sure, the vision of food justice put forth by Black food activists in the context of the Ferguson struggle involves a process by which Black communities work tirelessly to revise the terms that configure their food realities, cultivating innovative food pathways toward their freedom dreams (Kelley, 2002).

The article proceeds as follows. We begin by briefly describing and outlining the qualitative research methods we employed to generate data from the WFMFJM series, interfacing a critical content analysis research design with intersectional agriculture theory. Then, we present and discuss our results and findings on Black visions of food

justice in the context of the Ferguson struggle. We conclude with a brief discussion on how these visions compel us to reconsider racial equity at the nexus of agriculture, food, and various forms of unrest in Black communities, providing insights for scholars, practitioners, and activists who work on issues of food justice.

### **Research Approach: Methods and Data**

In this article, we used critical content analysis as a qualitative research method (Short & World of Words, 2017) to analyze how Black food activists in the WFMFJM series reframed agricultural and food systems in the context of the Ferguson struggle. Intersectional agriculture was selected as a theoretical lens to examine the WFMFJM series because of its critical framing of food systems through food justice that pays explicit attention to intersecting identities and how they interface with the dynamics of agriculture and food systems. According to Johnson, Mathis, and Short (2017), the qualitative critical content analysis method “involves the use of critical theories to engage in a close reading of a particular text” and “examine power relations not just through close reading of the text itself, but also through reading the world in which the text exists” (p. 196). This process of using theory to closely read text—and the world the text emerges from—provides the researcher with a strategy to observe and analyze a particular social phenomenon through documents. In this line of thinking, Miller and Alvarado’s (2005) context analytic approach to studying “documents as commentary” is helpful. This approach enables the researcher to examine documents that are phenomenon-specific to “provide insight into individual and collective actions, intentions, meanings, organizational dynamics, and institutional structures” surrounding the phenomenon and “interpret the social reality indicated in the documents” (p. 351). As a document, the WFMFJM series provides a unique commentary text on food justice that is interfaced with Black social struggle in Ferguson, offering a glimpse into how Black food activists conceptualize their food justice work in the context of the Ferguson struggle, the BLM movement, and related unrest.

Data for this analysis is represented by the nar-

ratives and voices of Black food activists that characterize the WFMFJM series. Created in 2015, the series was the brainchild of activist Beatriz Beckford, who at the time was the director of the Grassroots Action Network at WhyHunger. As Beckford processed the senseless killing of Michael Brown that triggered a range of emotions and feelings of hopelessness, she leaned on her community of Black food activists who were feeling similarly and scheduled a national call for them to collectively process Brown’s murder and the growing Ferguson struggle. Among those on the call, Beckford selected five of her comrades to be interviewed about how they connected their food justice work to the Ferguson struggle. The five interviewees were activist-farmer Malik Yakini of the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network, activist-organizer Dara Cooper of the NBFJA, activist-farmer Amanda Walker of the Holistic Organic Sustainable Cooperative, activist-artist Charm Taylor of the Backyard Gardeners Network, and activist Tanya Fields of the BLK Projek (see Table 1 for more information about the interviewees). Each interview was transcribed by Beckford and published as a separate issue in the WFMFJM series, which included an introductory issue by Beckford, along with supporting contextual data to understand the interview. All five selected Black food justice activists were from urban areas and, as a result, do not speak directly to the particularities of the rural Black experience but do provide a window into understanding how structures of inequality shape the food realities of Black people.

After conducting all the interviews, Beckford published them as the WFMFJM series in the Food Justice Voices Section of WhyHunger’s website. According to WhyHunger, Food Justice Voices “was created to support and amplify the voices of people working to regain control of their communities’ food system” (WhyHunger, n.d.-b). Designed as a repository of community-based stories about how often-overlooked actors in the food movement landscape fight for food justice in the context of their own lives, the Food Justice Voices section is a collection of ideas and thoughts that shape how we understand the food justice movement. In the spirit of Food Justice Voices, Beck-

**Table 1. Interviewee Information**

Participant	Sex	Food Organization	City Affiliation
Malik Yakini	Male	Detroit Black Community Food Security Network	Detroit, Michigan
Dara Cooper	Female	National Black Food & Justice Alliance	New York City, and Chicago, Illinois
Amanda Walker	Female	Holistic Organics Sustainable Cooperative	St. Louis, Missouri
Charm Taylor	Female	Backyard Gardeners Network	New Orleans, Louisiana
Tanya Fields	Female	BLK Projek	South Bronx, New York

Notes:

Original interviews may be accessed at:

<https://whyhunger.org/publications/what-ferguson-means-for-the-food-justice-move-ment/#:~:text=This%20special%20series%20of%20WhyHunger%27s,food%2C%20land%20and%20Black%20bodies>

Each interviewee's food organization and/or city affiliation status is from 2015–2016.

ford tailored the WFMFJM series around the work of each activist interviewed, allowing them to think deeply about how their experiences in the food justice movement informed how they made explicit connections between the movement and the Ferguson struggle. The series is characterized by a conversation format built on ideas of resistance and resilience in Black communities in the context of food, state violence, and emancipatory discourses. Throughout the series, activists spoke boldly about the strategies of resistance and the development of epistemologies in Black communities to resist oppressive structures and to flourish.

Following Miller and Alvarado (2005), we selected the WFMFJM series because it was generated to address the phenomenon of food justice in the context of the Ferguson struggle. As Miller and Alvarado (2005) put it, documents for analysis must be selected “based on assessment of each document’s importance, relevance and reliability for the project at hand rather than for its capability to stand in for a wider range of similar documents” (pp. 351–352). Drawing on Babbie (2004), we conducted a latent content analysis of the WFMFJM series, which requires the researcher to read documents closely to uncover the underlying meanings of text. To this end, we closely read the WFMFJM series through the theoretical frame of intersectional agriculture and identified from the data three themes that we conceptualize as pathways to food justice that were embedded in Black visions of food justice.

## Results and Discussion

Through a critical content analysis of the interviews and narratives in the WFMFJM series, shaped by the theoretical frame of intersectional agriculture, we identified three themes: (1) critical Black agrarianism, (2) radical Black mothering, and (3) Black futures. These themes illuminate intersecting pathways to achieving food justice when it is re-situated explicitly within the context of the Ferguson struggle of the BLM movement. We uplift the voices of Black food activists in the WFMFJM and triangulate them with food justice scholarship at the intersection of critical food studies, agri-food studies, and African American studies. This scholarship provides intellectual ideas that complement a critical content analysis approach.

### *Food Justice Through Critical Black Agrarianism*

In thinking about their work in the food justice movement through the prism of the Ferguson moment of the #BlackLivesMatter movement, Black food activists in the WFMFJM series argue for a movement for food justice that exists along the contours of critical Black agrarianism. Aligned with agrarian-economic politics of prominent Black educator Booker T. Washington, critical Black agrarianism is a concept that captures the African American agricultural experience at the intersection of collective oppression, community development, emancipatory politics, knowledge production, racial inequities, and tradition (Densu, 2009; Fiskio et al., 2016; King et al., 2018). Critical Black agrarianism offers an alternative racial justice lens by which the

food justice movement in Black communities could use to achieve social justice ends. Rather than focus on a racial justice lens that is tailored to broader instantiations of racial dynamics in the food system, we argue that critical Black agrarianism is sensitive to the particularities of the African American experience in relation to food and agriculture. Therefore, it provides a crucial space for Black food activists and their communities to navigate to structurally interpret the problematic U.S. agri-historical narrative, from the viewpoint of their racialized experiences, while building community-based solutions that shape the future of the food justice movement.

Activist-artist Charm Taylor argues that “Food justice, race, and power in America are inseparable. Simply put, it’s about examining the ways in which people of African descent have been violently, politically and economically disenfranchised. Proponents for reparations have long since made the connection between power and land in the US” (Taylor, 2016, p. 1). Building on Taylor, activist-farmer Amanda Walker states: “If we are going to examine food justice through a racial justice lens, then we first need to address the history of agriculture and the rise and fall and re-creation of the plantation complex” (Walker, 2016, p. 2). Walker’s suggestion to excavate the history of agriculture through the plantation complex represents the logic of geographer Katherine McKittrick, who writes that the plantation is “the penultimate site of black dispossession, antiblack violence, racial encounter, and innovative resistance” (McKittrick, 2013, p. 8). Mapping the Black dimensions of the food justice movement across the plantation landscape locates the movement within a long history of conflicting ideas and notions of agriculture as a source of oppression and resistance. This history provides a racial justice analysis that could pave the way for more sustainable just futures tied to the food justice movement.

At the same time, Black agrarian and food histories as recovered through critical Black agrarianism also place power dynamics vis-à-vis leadership at the center of the food justice movement. Activist-farmer Malik Yakini picks up on this when he calls for an intentional shift in the food justice movement’s leadership so that the movement can

be “led by those who are most impacted by food insecurity and the other injustices within the food system” (Yakini, 2015, p. 1).

Ironically, many of the Black people in America who are food insecure are the descendants of enslaved people who were a crucial variable in the development equation that birthed the U.S. agricultural economy and created great wealth for white landowners, which underlies our current food system. Therefore, the shift in the food justice movement’s leadership that Yakini is suggesting is a Black reclamation of a food system that was built by Black people in relation to other marginalized communities impacted by food insecurity. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Black households are the most food insecure in the nation, at 19.1%, while the national food insecurity rate is 10.5% (Coleman-Jenson et al., 2020). In terms of gender, households led by single mothers are the most food insecure at 28.7%, substantially higher than households led by single fathers at 15.4% (Coleman-Jenson et al., 2020). In terms of class, an estimated 34.9% of households below the federal poverty line are food insecure (Coleman-Jenson et al., 2020). In terms of sexuality, the Williams Institute at UCLA found that 27% of LGBT people are food insecure (Wilson & Conron, 2020). Together, these statistics suggest that the food justice movement’s leadership should come from intersecting identities.

While critical Black agrarianism places explicit focus on race as the site of analysis, the concept can still be used as an entry point into thinking about food justice movement leadership at the intersection of multiple identities. Activists Malik Yakini, Amanda Walker, and Charm Taylor’s arguments for a racial justice lens situate Black people—and their intersecting identities—at the helm of the food justice movement’s leadership. They also suggest that the food justice movement should be characterized as what historian Barbara Ransby (2018) describes as a “Black-led mass struggle” (p. 3) for all poor and marginalized communities. Ransby (2018) writes that the term “Black-led mass struggle” points to the fact that struggles in the U.S. are not Black only or solely for Black liberation, but that such struggles reveal that “Black people are represented in all categories of the

oppressed in the United States. . . So to realize the liberation of ‘all’ Black people means undoing systems of injustice that impact all other oppressed groups as well” (p. 3). Arguing that the food justice movement should be a Black-led mass struggle allows issues of food justice to be directly connected to the #BlackLivesMatter movement. It also places #BlackLivesMatter within a critical Black agrarianism framework that links historical and contemporary issues of race, inequality, food, agriculture, land, and social justice in Black-led mass struggles.

To be sure, Black-led mass struggles around food are not new, and therefore the food justice movement is located within a genealogy of Black food activism. Such activism includes the rural land-based work of Fannie Lou Hamer’s Freedom Farms in the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta and the urban-based food projects administered by the Black Panther Party (Potorti, 2017; Smith II, 2019b; White, 2018). In her interview, activist-organizer Dara Cooper (2015) argues that Black people must understand the genealogy of Black food activism “and be undeterred, and reclaim and support Black radical resistance” (p. 3). The radical resistance that Cooper suggests is part of what political scientist Cedric Robinson (2020) has described as the Black Radical Tradition: “the continuing development of a collective consciousness informed by the historical struggles for liberation and motivated by the shared sense of obligation to preserve the collective being, the ontological totality” (p. 171). This tradition, when operationalized in a critical Black agrarianism framework, produces pockets of Black food sovereignty across the nation.

In a larger sense, the intentional use of food sovereignty to galvanize Black communities connects food justice to the global food sovereignty movement that struggles, as La Via Campesina (n.d.) puts it, to maintain “the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through sustainable methods and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems” (p. 2). Transposing food sovereignty into a Black context, the National Black Food and Justice Alliance (NBFJA) argues that Black food sovereignty guarantees “that Black people have not

only the right, but the ability to control our food, through means including but not limited to the means of production & distribution” (NBFJA, n.d., “NBFJA Platform: Black food sovereignty,” para. 1). Indeed, Black food sovereignty must deal with “the question of governance” to ensure that the governance of Black food systems is “rooted in the right to healthy & culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound & sustainable methods, and the right to define our own food & agriculture systems” (NBFJA, n.d., “NBFJA Platform: Black food sovereignty,” para. 1). Similarly, activists Suzanne Babb and Lorrie Clevenger state that,

Black Food Sovereignty is about controlling our own destiny and determining our own future as self-determining Black Communities. It’s about reconnecting and deepening our relationship to the land and our traditional foodways. Owning our labor and using it in service to the nourishment of our own bodies and the thriving of our families and our communities. It’s about building our own institutions that have our best interests at the core of their purpose and are led by and for Black people. (Lawton, 2019, para. 3)

For activists Dara Cooper and Malik Yakini, visions of Black food sovereignty are crucial in the sustainability of food justice movements in Black communities. For Cooper (2015), pockets of Black food sovereignty can contribute to the building of a national platform that enables Black people to “to fight against the attacks on our communities but also to invest in real models of self-determination—models that we need in order to really work towards Black liberation” (p. 3). For Yakini (2015), Black food sovereignty can reframe the food justice movement “in a more revolutionary way” (p. 1), so that it places questions of racism and power at the center of movement discourse. This repositioning raises “the question of a fundamental shift in power so that our people are empowered. So that we can have sovereignty and define our own destiny. The reality is that no people have food sovereignty unless they have sovereignty” (Yakini, 2015, p. 1). Therefore, for Black food

activists, the goal of the food justice movement is to not only to ensure that Black food sovereignty is created and sustained but that the movement aligns itself with a larger practice of sovereignty that allows Black people to practice emancipatory politics embedded in critical Black agrarianism.

### ***Food Justice Through Radical Black Mothering***

When answering the call of food justice in the Ferguson moment of the #BlackLivesMatter movement, Black food activists propel us to dig deep into the conditions and circumstances surrounding ideas of Black love, newly found and embraced in media. Black love is found on neighborhood corners, in schools, places of work, homes, places of worship, and even on plates on tables in Black communities. Black businesses are receiving new forms of support, particularly in the fields of farming and food, and Black love is spreading like butter as Black land is being reclaimed. As the country moves closer to genuine ways to provide reparations to Black families, the food justice moment is a critical one to keep an eye on. One new way to reclaim ownership in this undertaking is in looking at food justice through the lens of radical mothering. In a sphere where food is gendered and racialized, BIPOC producers can plant and cultivate food and still not eat the food they grow.

Black love in the context of what activist Beatriz Beckford calls “radical mothering” (Fields, 2016, p. 3) creates space for food justice to preach with the lights on, balancing a new sense of purpose. Radical mothering, in many ways, is an intergenerational love letter to youth and elders from the Black women who shape their lives. Radical mothering is defined by Beckford as “. . . a beautiful notion rooted in love and justice! To mother unapologetically and to nourish kinship through mothering in a way that heals, radicalizes and helps us to build the beloved communities we all deserve” (Fields, 2016, p. 3). Beckford also argues that “you don’t have to be a biological parent to mother” or “give birth to someone to show them they are enough and that they deserve joy” (Fields, 2016, p. 3). Theoretically, in the context of the politics of food in Black life, the idea of radical Black mothering takes shape in sociologist Patricia Hill

Collins’ (1987) typology of mothering in Black communities that reveals how “the boundaries distinguishing biological mothers of children from women who care for children are often fluid and changing” (pp. 4–5). According to Collins, Black communities are not only made up of “biological or bloodmothers” but also “othermothers”—women who have committed to “assist[ing] bloodmothers by sharing mothering responsibilities” (p. 5). Such experiences of Black women as “othermothers have provided a foundation for Black women’s social activism” (Collins, p. 5). Together, bloodmothers and othermothers constitute “organized, resilient, women-centered networks” (Collins, p. 5) in Black communities that promote a form of care that takes place within community and whose benefits extend beyond the nuclear family.

Radical mothering has many influences, and one of them is a byproduct of the absence of Black men. Some of these influences include state-sanctioned violence, incarceration, drugs, and the mortality of Black men. This invariably creates a void in Black families that makes radical mothering a necessity in the Black community. In the Ferguson moment we clearly see this void and how the nation, and not just marginalized communities, would finally react. If we look closer, we see that the very thing we celebrate—radical mothering—is predicated on the demise or absence of Black men. Such realities in the Black community create a void and can be examined by looking at what is missing and what gets taken up.

In this moment we must also introduce the current conversations on reproductive justice and reproductive rights to radical mothering. In this new era of setbacks, we also see state-sanctioned violence against women who must concede to the state to make decisions about their own bodies and futures. This power imbalance turns back the hands of time on transformative change and the work related to it. Radical mothering is compromised in this space as women’s autonomy is compromised, and the erasure of women’s consent sets us back to a dark history of sexual trafficking labeled as slavery. We have to also examine the work of women and how that gets compromised as reproductive rights are now under attack. When

Black women are now subjected to the state making determinations about their reproductive rights, then the state determines their future. This future for Black women is compounded by inequitable conditions that perpetuate a deeply reliant cycle of oppression that attempts to challenge the role of radical Black mothering in the food justice movement and amplifies how state maneuverings impact food realities.

In the food justice movement, we see blood-mothers, community othermothers, and women-centered networks that feed communities when up against the illusion of food deserts, when in fact food apartheid is being initiated willfully by the state. These networks of women engage in what sociologist Nancy A. Naples (1992) defines as “activist mothering” that connects “mothering practices, political activism, and community work” (p. 448) to achieve social justice. For Black food activist and mother Tanya Fields, who is the founder and executive director of the BLK Projek in the South Bronx, Ferguson represented a sort of watershed moment for Black mothers. Mama Tanya, as Fields is affectionately known, reconciles that mothering is an act not just for your own family; we redefine the continuum of experiences to include youth and elders. It is imperative that in this moment we shine a light on the radical mothering that is paramount to this movement as well as how we serve youth and elders. Mama Tanya (Fields, 2016) offers that as a Black mother,

You make the road by walking. When other moms, particularly low-income Black mothers[,] have seen Black women in this space as leaders, the reception is that people feel very inspired and motivated. If this mom and her whole gang of children can do this, in the spirit of creating a better world for our kids and everyone, it plants the seeds for everyone else. (p. 2)

Public policies that are designed to protect Black families must also be considered in the context of food justice in Black communities and families (Ewoodzie, 2021). Despite available resources, Black women aspire to (re)build the Black family

by planting the new seeds in their proverbial family despite their relationship. Mama Tanya (2016) forcefully posits, “Most mothers would tell you that they put their children’s needs before their own so it would be natural that mothers would want to be an integral part of social change” (p. 2). Black mothers do more than invoke the language of family; they create a sense of belonging. They nurture, advocate, love, provide, and stretch the definition of family well beyond the nuclear family that is often situated in the context of heteronormative relations. It is impossible for all Black women to just be mothers within the confines of relationships with men because that may not be a reality and rather a radical notion that it is not just possible to be mothers in community; it is expected.

Therefore, activist Mama Tanya implores us to connect #BlackLivesMatter to a radical Black mothering politic in the context of food justice in Black communities. This deeply gendered connection clarifies the ways in which, using the words of anthropologist Ashanté Reese and activist-organizer Dara Cooper (2021), “Black feminist freedom dreams and food justice possibilities” (p. 452) are intertwined. It stretches across what sociologists Patricia Allen and Carolyn Sachs (2007) describe as the corporeal, socio-cultural, and material domains of women’s food provisioning practices. At the same time, making this connection reveals “Black women’s food work as critical space,” as sociologist Kimberly D. Nettles-Barcelón and colleagues have argued (2015, p. 34). Such critical space can build the intergenerational capacity for all Black women to radically give, to care, to love, to dream, to struggle, to redefine and even to reclaim family or community through food (Hughes, 1997; Smith II, 2022; Smith II & Ewoodzie, 2021; Williams-Forsen, 2006, 2021). Black mothers are role models, and motherhood serves as an ever-expanding symbol of power to advocate and build family. Activist Mama Tanya put it this way: “That’s why I always say that mothers have to be on the front-lines in movement work because we are creating a world that’s going to be safe and healthy and whole for our children and loved ones” (Fields, 2016, p. 2). In the food security world, the embers

of women-centered networks should be lit on fire because providing is a part of mothering, and everyone can call their place in the social activism realm their connection to family. These complex relationships that women have in food shape communities and families alike. Despite all the nuances around radical mothering, Black women have risen up to contribute, even as they are faced with the weightiest of political, social, and economic inequities.

### *Food Justice Through Black Futures*

When asked about how to connect “the innovation and future thinking in Black communities” in the context of food “with the energy that has been generated through the response and support of mass actions around policing and police killings in black communities,” the activists responded in various ways. In a larger sense, the question raised resembles a recent question: “What does it mean to be Black and alive right now?” raised by writers Kimberly Drew and Jenna Wortham in their 2020 edited volume, *Black Futures* (p. xiii). Such a question in Black life must always be understood contextually and relationally. For Black food activists amid the Ferguson uprisings, being Black and alive at that exact moment forced them to think about what it means to produce a new Black future that reconfigures a powerful space to cultivate the development of strategies and serve as an incubator for the myriad collective concerns of Black people. “It’s not only about the very real implications of showing up in mass in support of each cause,” activist-artist Charm Taylor (2016) argues, “but it’s also about a radical shift in perspective, a fully integrated approach that says there is actually only ONE cause: more just futures for Black and Brown and marginalized bodies” (p. 2; emphasis in the original). Indeed, such a “fully integrated approach” must place food at the same level of priority as police violence in Black communities. Centering the cause to one integrated focus on justice means that the new Black future is protected when Black communities stand in solidarity for all instances of injustice.

But to prioritize an analysis around the ways in which food injustice promotes a type of “slow violence” (Nixon, 2011) requires us to think of

innovative ways to connect issues. Taylor (2016) suggests that one practical way to connect issues is for Black communities to consider holding rallies, vigils, teach-ins, and other forms of protest demonstration in “their local Guerilla Garden or onsite at an urban farm, then we may be able to visualize and connect on an experiential level, the ways in which the progress of one movement is critical to the other” (p. 2). In a sense, as activist-farmer Amanda Walker (2016) put it, “the idea is to create an environment in which local residents and community members can generate resources needed in order to become thriving, economically sustainable communities” (p. 3). This new environment could build what sociologist Monica White (2017) theorized as “collective agency and community resilience (CACR),” which is built on “the strategies of commons as praxis, economic autonomy, and prefigurative politics” (pp. 18). White writes that “these overlapping strategies encompass the ideological/social, political, and economic aspects of community reliance and community determination as strategies for freedom and liberation” (White, 2017, pp. 18–19). Freedom and liberation are central to Black futures and push us to interrogate current spaces and how we may, inadvertently, work against freedom even in food spaces. The ideology of being present by way of rallies, demonstrations, and marches has been the vehicle by which Black futures have been shaped historically. Many legislative changes that have impacted Black communities and that have shaped Black futures can be traced back to a public demonstration (Opie, 2017).

Activist Mama Tanya Fields (2016) picks up on this when she states that current activist and community spaces “need to stop respectability politics” (p. 3). Fields (2016) argues that

We do not do enough to hold space for those who are the most negatively impacted: those who are ‘less radical, less educated, and less articulate.’ . . . What ends up happening is that the people who talk about police brutality and are ‘leaders’ in the movement end up perpetuating many of the practices of exclusion. It can often feel like those who are fighting against

white patriarchal hegemony merely want to replace it with their own brand of patriarchal hegemony that exists. So, it must be emphasized that those that are the most affected need to be at the forefront. (p. 3)

Activist-farmer Malik Yakini (2015) puts it this way:

We have two levels of work to do: we have the work of resisting the system of oppression and working to empower our community, but we also have the work of transformation—the work of transforming ourselves, our organizations, our communities—so that we’re whole and healthy and we’re not replicating the same systems of oppression or replicating the values that are embedded in the systems of oppression that we’re seeking to change. (pp. 1–2)

In a sense, Fields and Yakini see the Black food justice space as a place for the building of social movements that require the transformation of self, society, and community. In *Freedom Dreams*, historian Robin D. G. Kelley (2002) describes these types of social movements as “progressive” that “do not simply produce statistics and narratives of oppression” but “transport us to another place, compel us to relive horrors and, more importantly, enable us to imagine a new society. . . something different, to realize that things need not always be this way” (p. 9). To be sure, as activist-organizer Dara Cooper (2016) put it, “there are real live models” of new ways of rethinking society through food “that we can look to and support in order understand how to create alternative systems” (p. 3). This point made by Cooper is critical in that it challenges us to think about how the systems in which we want to create do not currently exist in the present but live in Black futures. But the future is not some abstract place which Black people will never get to. The “real live models” that Cooper talks about are potential “seeds” of “food futures that are equitable and sustainable,” anthropologist Ashanté Reese (2019) writes, which are found “in the stories, in the hopes, and in the lives of Black residents and organizations that look beyond what they can see and believe in something better”

(p. 139). These seeds transcend time and space in that they draw on the collective Black past of social, economic, and political struggle while operating in the present to produce a future. This future is not only a place where Black folks solely exist, as artist Florence Okoye (2016) writes, but also where they “will be makers and shapers of it, too” (para. 9). Indeed, Black futures, for the Black food activists who were interviewed, begin with rethinking our current food system and food relationships, and by showing up for Black communities when issues that perpetuate food injustice seek to impede our collective notions of sovereignty, freedom, and liberation.

## Conclusion

The year 2024 marks the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the murder of Michael Brown, and its tremendous impact on the world can still be felt today in ongoing international and national conversations surrounding race, police brutality, and state violence in Black communities. Like similar instances of Black people being murdered by the police, however, the social unrest that followed Brown’s murder has been largely unexplored in agricultural and food systems literature. This article examined how Black food activists in the WFMFJM series reframed ideas of agriculture and food through the prism of the Ferguson struggle, clarifying the ways in which their food justice work speaks to social unrest in Black communities. Through a qualitative critical content analysis of the WFMFJM series, we drew on intersectional agriculture theory to illuminate how Black food activists envisioned a future for the food justice movement in the midst of high levels of social unrest. Our research revealed that Black visions of food justice, as observed in the wake of Ferguson, can be realized along the emancipatory contours of three pathways to food justice: (1) critical Black agrarianism, (2) radical Black mothering, and (3) Black futures. A close reading of these pathways sheds light on the complexities and challenges faced by Black food activists as they struggle to achieve a context-dependent food justice movement that is sensitive to the particularities of the Black experience. At the same time, reading Black visions of food justice provides a blueprint for a

more inclusive, intersectional expansion of the movement that emphasizes the critical need for racial, gendered, cultural, and community-oriented approaches to food justice.


Building on the findings in this article, scholars, practitioners, and activists who work on issues of food justice may also glean relevant insights from Black visions of food justice that could offer underexplored areas for future research. While it is largely understood that the food justice movement is built on an explicit racial analysis of agriculture and food systems, little is still known about how this analysis is taken up by those on the ground, especially those who are Black in the movement. The three pathways to food justice that were generated in this research could be studied individually as a way to recover the diverse voices of Black people in the food justice movement and even be used to study how the pathways play out in rural Black spaces—recognizing that Black visions of food justice in the WFMFJM were realized in urban areas. Black visions of food justice are rooted in the voices of Black people on the ground, and these voices could be used to strengthen food justice research, uncovering blind spots surrounding the connection between theorizing agriculture and food systems and the everyday experiences of those on the frontlines. Moreover, reading Black visions of food justice provides glimpses into the multidimensional Black world of food justice organizing being led by organizations such as the NBFJA, Black Urban Growers (BUGs) organization, Black Farmer Fund, Gangstas to Growers, Rocky Acres Community Farm, and the Black Church Food Security Network, to name a few. Shifting the focus of food justice research, even if temporarily, to the Black world of food justice organizing provides scholars, practitioners, and activists who work in the area new sites of analysis and activism that could aid them in the process of addressing racial, gendered, social, political, and economic dynamics in the context of agriculture, food systems, and community development.

In looking back at the WFMFJM series, ten years later, scholars, practitioners, and activists may also find helpful today the demands embedded in

Black visions of food justice found in the series. At the end of each interview, activist and WFMFJM series organizer Beatriz Beckford asked each activist to state their food justice demands in the wake of Brown's murder in Ferguson. Activist-farmer Amanda Walker's (2016) demands clarify many of the sentiments articulated by the activists. "We must demand and participate in what it takes to bring access to healthy fresh local produce in our communities and demand the capital be reinvested in the communities to increase economic and social equity and boost healthy food access," Walker argues. "We demand the city identify opportunities for revitalized landscapes, including vacant lands and housing that could be used for orchards, grain production and other crops to supply local food businesses" (p. 3). Such demands speak to the current sociopolitical moment we are navigating as a nation. Countless murders of Black people at hands of the police since 2020 surrounding the national attention to the killings of Breonna Taylor in Louisville, Kentucky, and George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota, amid the global COVID-19 pandemic. Empty shelves at grocery stores. Unprecedented levels of food insecurity in Black communities. Terrible water conditions in predominantly Black cities like Flint, Michigan, and Jackson, Mississippi. All these problems force us—who are concerned with the future of food in Black life—to begin to make connections between current realities and a world that has yet to be created.

Such connections raise the question: what would it look like if we placed Black visions of food justice from the WFMFJM series at the center of the world today? Answers to this question can be found, in part, in the current work of activist-farmer Malik Yakini and activist Mama Tanya Fields, who were part of the series. At the time of this writing, Yakini is leading the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network in the construction of the Detroit Food Commons, a two-story building and US\$22 million community development project. The Detroit Food Commons provides a space to build a sustainable Black future for the food justice movement, anchored by the Black-led Detroit People's Food Co-op on the first floor, and multiple community kitchens, offices,

and event spaces on the second floor.<sup>1</sup> In the Bronx, New York, Mama Tanya Fields is now leading the Black Feminist Project (formerly known as the BLK Projek) as they curate physical and ideological spaces for Black women to practice radical Black mothering through the Alice Fields Community Center for Black Women & Marginalized Genders, and for her community to engage in critical Black agrarianism at the Black Joy Farm.<sup>2</sup> Together, the work of Yakini and Fields illuminates *how* Black visions of food justice can be made

real, revealing the ways in which food justice cuts across “the intersection[s] of all freedom work—in abolition, environmental, labor, and reproductive justice” (para. 2), borrowing the words of the NBFJA (2021). Indeed, Black visions of food justice propel the food justice movement forward, offering a lens to see and learn from the evolving intersectional landscape of Black food activism, as we envision sustainable agriculture and food systems for all. 

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<sup>1</sup> For more information about the Detroit Food Commons, see <https://www.dbcfsn.org/detroitfoodcommons>

<sup>2</sup> For more information about the Black Feminist Project, see <https://www.theblackfeministproject.org>

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