Guerrilla Gardening:
Cultivation as Resistance

Abigail Schaus
Senior Honors Thesis
Lafayette College
Department of Environmental Studies
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Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge the land. And I would like to acknowledge the people who have stewarded this land for generations and those who are working to equitably steward it now, and even for those who will continue to steward it in the future. None of this is solely a product of myself—I am a tapestry of the countless beings that have shaped me and this work. All flourishing is mutual, and my own flourishing is a direct result of the flourishing of others.

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Acronym Key

In alphabetical order & with the first page referenced

- ABCD = Asset-Based Community Development (97)
- CACR = Collective Action and Community Resilience (30)
- DBCFSN = Detroit Black Community Food Security Network (51)
- DFJTF = Detroit Food Justice Task Force (59)
- DFPC = Detroit Food Policy Council (70)
- DSNI = Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative (38)
- EHC = Easton Hunger Coalition (78)
- KGD = Keep Growing Detroit (57)
- LVFPC = Lehigh Valley Food Policy Council (79)
- PFPC = Pennsylvania Food Policy Council (79)
- TFP = The Food Project (38)

INTRODUCTION

"Revolution is based on land. Land is the basis of all independence.
Land is the basis of freedom, justice, and equality"
-Malcolm X at a Detroit Rally in December 1962

How do we, as a society, think about space? What, through a lens of policy, is allowed to control land and how it is used? Is gardening on unused, public land inherently undemocratic? In what ways do social movements of resistance alter how governments consider community-based legislation? Before one can even begin to formulate plausible answers to these questions, I think it's best to set up a common framework of understanding built on well-defined terminology. Influenced by previous work, I will use guerrilla garden to mean small, consistent acts of resistance that offer immediate change while maintaining an overarching political message. Guerrilla gardening itself is widely thought of as the illicit cultivation of (i.e. growing something on) publicly owned land.

HOW I GOT INTO THIS WORK

I find it hard to believe that Fall 2020 me—a first-year math major—would end up writing an Honors Thesis on guerrilla gardening and cultivation as resistance. This was certainly not the trajectory I envisioned for myself. However, with much support (and grace) from some truly incredible people, I have become fully immersed in the food systems world and community-grounded justice initiatives. From my first introduction to LaFarm—the college's three acre working farm and community garden—and Farmer Lisa, one could say a seed was planted. There was something about the deep humanness that comes from growing food; the way we are a part of nature, a product of complex relationships and communication, designed to have

seasons of rest, be fed from many sources, and requiring some sunlight kept bringing me back to the stewardship of land.

The land itself, I have found, is also deeply important to myself and my work. I have spent the entirety of my college career advocating for Indigenous rights and more institutional accountability. Through the Indigenous Rights Coalition I have immersed myself in the work of Native scholars, land back movements, and community-led activism. I am grateful for the wisdom of, in particular, Robin Wall Kimmerer and the grace with which she discusses reciprocal relationships between us and the land.

I was first introduced to guerrilla gardening while doing a podcast-project for Professor Ben Cohen's Food Systems & Sustainable Societies course the spring of my freshman year. With Ron Finley as my inspiring individual, I embarked on a journey on which I learned what guerrilla gardening is, how structural racism shapes neighborhood access to food, and the true impact that empowered people can have. I admired Finley's alternative forms of change: it was an epitome of the (arguably cliché) phrase "ask for forgiveness, not permission". Challenging my existing framework of knowledge, I began reenvisioning the role of the government and the importance of land for collective growing.

Furthermore, while I was studying food systems cross-culturally during my abroad program Fall 2022, I conducted a semester-long research project on land access policies. This introduced me to the relationship between public policy and land sovereignty. Hearing first hand accounts of soil stewards who were unable to legitimize their growing space further pushed me into the

realm of governmental and community-driver advocacy. I am deeply grateful—and cognizant of the privilege—for the ability to bear witness to their relationships with land, generational fights for land access, and embedded cosmologies. Their work continues to motivate mine.

In some way or space, I have always been in connection with the land around me. From summer positions cultivating soil to growing food for others to semester-long roles that aided community growers, I was working to practice the reciprocal relationships that I talk about so extensively. What I have also learned is that, while collective growing and grassroots initiatives are incredibly important and valuable, there is a limit to their impact when they are constrained by systems of oppression and structures of power never meant to liberate the most marginalized. Inclusive and proactive policy is required to re-envision who gets what and why.

RECURRING TERMINOLOGY

Other terminology will repeatedly come up and, thus, will be beneficial to define from the outset. Much of how we think about guerrilla gardening is rooted in acts of civil disobedience, which John Rawls defines as "a public, non-violent and conscientious breach of law undertaken with the aim of bringing about a change in laws or government policies" (Rawls 32).

Social movements are generally thought of as sustained campaigns organized (to different degrees) by people not in power with goals of creating societal change (Lee 219). I argue that guerrilla gardening is indicative of a push for a larger social movement towards declaring food a human right and all communities the ability to have agency over their food and land access. Guerrilla gardening itself is an act that enters into the political. Indeed, "during every social

movement, there is a moment when its political influence becomes incontrovertible" (Obenchain & Spark 123). Widespread guerrilla gardening, and the potential for subsequent governmental action, indicates that the social movement for a food just future has reached this incontrovertible moment.

I will keep coming back to what it means to be radical, and I pull from Angela Davis's definition that she offers in her book Women, Culture, & Politics: "if we are not afraid to adopt a revolutionary stance—if, indeed, we wish to be radical in our quest for change—then we must get to the root of our oppression. After all, radical simply means 'grasping things at the root'" (Davis 14). Guerrilla gardening, as I will argue, is root-altering work that disrupts existing systems through directly and immediately challenging historical oppressions. The tangibility of this revolutionary act allows communities and governments to adopt informed, inclusive radical acts of their own.

Policy, in various forms, will also come up throughout the chapters. Chapter Three, in particular, focuses on what guerrilla gardening can do for policy and other forms of change. I'll mostly use this definition from Janel Obenchain and Arlene Spark's Food Policy: "policy is created or adopted by governments, institutions and individuals to guide choices, decisions, and actions" (Obenchain & Spark 2).

As I move beyond guerrilla gardening in action, I turn to discussing tangible ways in which local authority can collaborate on food policy, which Janel Obenchain and Arlene Spark define as "any guideline, rule, practice or regulation that affects how we…package, label, distribute,

protect, store, access, purchase, prepare, eat, and dispose of food" (Obenchain & Spark 3). It is worth noting that this is a very broad definition, and that's what a big part of the early stages of this work involved—parsing through the copious types of food policy and corresponding areas that it impacts in hopes of narrowing in on a broachable topic. They all came back to the land, how we talk about land, and the relationship between humans and land. Guerrilla gardening sat at that intersection of questions, and this project sits at the intersection of my overarching personal and professional work: grassroots initiatives and policy work.

Guerrilla gardening, arguably, is a piece of the large work for food justice, which a 2010 book by the same name defines as "ensuring that the benefits and risks of where, what, and how food is grown and produced, transported and distributed, and accessed and eaten are shared fairly" (Gottlieb, 6). This definition is ever-changing, and certain activities will inevitably fall within this category on some occasions, and outside on others. Even within guerrilla gardening, there are instances—such as planting daffodils along highways in the middle of the night—that are not inherently related to food production or justice. While these instances are not the basis of my work, I want to acknowledge that they exist and are indeed a form of cultivation as resistance.

I also echo Dorceta Taylor & Kerry Ard's acknowledgement that a "food justice approach goes further than these alternatives in challenging researchers to add environmental justice, human rights, and structural racism and discrimination analyses to the examination of food access and type of food provider" (Taylor & Ard 14). At its core, equitable food justice exists amongst the intersectionalities of identities, systemic oppressions, and liberation for all. While these can just feel like terms that get thrown around, it has tangible applications when groups, governments, or

individuals embark on an intentional journey towards food justice. It means re-centering the most marginalized, designing spaces with all identities in mind (i.e. accessibility, language inclusion, child care, bathroom types, noise sensitivity), developing a robust understanding of historical forces and power, and knowing that none of us are free until we are all free.

CONTROL OF COLONIZED SPACE

"People must be granted permission to access space at every moment", and this exceeded physical boundaries of vacant lots (Sackey 372). This is a direct outcome of centuries of colonization and a contest for the control of space. While an entire thesis can be written on the consequences of colonialism, I will note that it is important to consider how these histories and understandings influence guerrilla gardeners. We need to continue questioning definitions, who created them, and who (or what) they exclude. "These acts of place-making transformed colonized sites of oppression into terrains of struggle", Sackey notes, and they challenge long-held ideas that, as cheesy as it is, plant seeds of resistance (Sackey 368). I hope that this work is the beginning of a long process of unsettling—from positioning guerrilla gardening as a practice that unsettles the concept of land ownership to thinking about land sovereignty as a way to unsettle deeply rooted ideas of colonization.

REVERENCE FOR THE LAND

I want to ensure that there is intentional space and reverence for the land in all of this: for the reciprocal relationships we hold with living and nonliving things. Much of this work parsing through what defines land and who has access to space requires an understanding of complex histories of oppression and how land has, for so long, been used as a place of exclusion, forced

labor, and stolen culture. In order to talk about this process of reclaiming and empowerment, I needed to learn about these histories and the stories that have (and have not) been told. Donnie Johnson Sackey acknowledges this, saying, “colonized spaces speak to what plants belong but also what bodies do and do not belong” (Sackey 368). Policies meant to control land are a human construct, but the land is not—I hope that in all of this, I can give some justice to the soil, the seeds, and the Earth systems that make all of this possible.

PALESTINE

It would be an egregious oversight for me to spend pages upon pages discussing cultivation as resistance and the importance of land access without talking about Palestine. The genocide that has been going on for nearly 200 days and 75 years is, amongst other things, about the land. Justification for extreme violation of human rights and irreversible environmental degradation has often come in the name of land access and the right to growing space. Histories of land matter—it’s why I wrote this thesis and it’s why I engage in Indigenous rights activism and it’s why I will continue to talk about Palestine.

Members of the apartheid, racist Israeli state who plant trees that are not native to Palestine as a so-called act of environmental conservation are participating in the illicit cultivation of land. As scholar Ilan Pappe described, “wherever almond and fig trees, olive groves, or clusters of cactus are found, there once stood a Palestinian village: still blossoming afresh each year, these trees are all that remain” (Pappe 48). Israel’s fundraising, targeted at US Jews, is displacing communities, destroying biodiversity, and leading to higher rates of militarized IOF police (Dilawar 2024). Land you have to kill for is not yours, land you have to die for is. In 1948, only 8% of historic

Palestinian land was legally owned by Jews: it has *always* been about taking land resources. Preventing native Palestinians from cultivating and harvesting on their land is exclusion of the most harmful kind. The kind of guerrilla gardening—by whatever name—that I discuss is separate from state-sponsored projects that operate under the guise of a self-proclaimed social movement. Guerrilla gardening that illicitly cultivates land as a form of resistance is an act grounded in beliefs of collective liberation, a reimagining of holistic food justice, and a desire to empower communities from the ground up (literally).

In the words of Audre Lorde's posthumous collection of essays, "your silence will not protect you"—and I will add that it will not save the land or the life within the soil (Lorde 2017). To remain silent in a genocide is to remain complicit and while what follows is an argument for the importance of guerrilla gardening as a tool for moving towards local food justice, I encourage everyone to consider how they can take action and advocate for a free Palestine via radical work. All life is sacred—the life within the soil, that comes from the soil, and that is above the soil. I offer various options, knowing that activism can look a lot of different ways, in the Additional Resources section.

ACCESSIBILITY

Another motivator that I carried throughout all of this is the challenge of accessibility: to use words, definitions, and concepts that demonstrate my depth of knowledge yet can still reach those beyond the world of academia. My research and lived experiences have shown me that policy and discussions around land access are often riddled with intangible language, lengthy phrases, and incomprehensible addendums that perpetuate harmful methods of separation within

communities. Additionally, I have been intentional about the types of sources I consult and include. I acknowledge that this is, fundamentally, a piece of scholarly work that is intended for academic purposes. However, any kind of resistance-based or justice-oriented work must pull from the roots—this is what it means to be radical. I have studied and cited public forums, media publications, personal narratives—in addition to peer-reviewed literature—as sources. My hope is that this work informs readers, uplifts communities, and challenges existing frameworks.

WHERE THIS IS GOING

As with any kind of empathy-centered work, context is critical. That's the goal of the first chapter: to offer a deeper dive into what guerrilla gardening is, its historical roots, who is taking part in this work, what motivates them, and laying out important distinctions that will carry on throughout the rest of the chapters. Chapter Two is focused on documenting some of the current, on-the-ground work of guerrilla gardeners in the US urban hub that is known as Detroit, situated within my experience of cultivating vacant lots in Boston. Supplementing these narratives will be analysis of online forum discussions about guerrilla gardening in these locations and how historical relationships with land shape today's cultivation. While I will speak about these cities in their current form, I hope that it remains clear that all of this work is on unceded land, and that any work to reclaim space is a step towards rematriation of land to the Indigenous groups that once stewarded all of Turtle Island (the so-called US) in restorative and intentional ways. The third chapter is a chance to discuss ways that guerrilla gardening can (or cannot) both inform local policy mechanisms and shape radical change, through the hyper-local case study of Easton, Pennsylvania.

All of my chapters are signposted by epitaphs—words shared from those whose knowledge I am deeply grateful for and who continue to inspire me in this work. I do this as a way of acknowledging that I am merely a collection of the people, places, and things that I have experienced or interacted with up to this point. While the argument and writing that follows is my own, the frameworks, cosmologies, and context come from other sources of life. I am not an expert, nor do I claim to be. However, as an active member of the Easton food system, I am interested in applying these themes, findings, and suggestions within the local context. It will not be full of answers, but it feels important to resituate all of the wandering trails of guerrilla gardening and its impacts into something concrete and tangible that will continue to apply to my academic, professional, and personal work beyond this piece.

CHAPTER ONE

“Gardening has a power that is political and even democratic”
-Wendell Berry in an essay from his collection of essays, “The Gift of Good Land”, 1981

A FUNCTIONING, EXPLOITATIVE FOOD SYSTEM

If you engage with social activism or any food-related media, you are likely to hear or read that the food system is “a broken system”. However, we are currently a part of a functioning-as-it-was-designed food system that was built upon ideas of exclusion, exploitation, and oppression. Stolen land and labor—not freedom and convenience—are the pillars of our food system. I focus on guerrilla gardening within this situated understanding: the illicit cultivation of land, unlawful but widespread, is indicative of a growing shift in how we think about our food systems. Guerrilla gardening operates outside of an exploitative food system and prioritizes reciprocal relationships between humans and land, a recognition of oppressive histories, and a belief in community empowerment that extends throughout the entire food system from production to distribution to consumption to disposal. To further situate this idea, I pull from scholars and organizers.

> "The food system in the US could be said to be built on the foundations of racial capitalism, operating to produce wealth for a small group, at the expense of public health, the environment, and rural communities. The legacy of racism, enslavement of African peoples, genocide of Indigenous peoples, and stolen Indigenous lands is also evident in our farm labor policies and practices which deny many workers basic protections while relying on their skills to feed and sustain the US population” (Goldman et. al 2021).

> "To understand a garden as infrastructure in this sense is to read it as a site structured by racism, ongoing colonization, and environmental crisis (in addition to trowels and sprinklers). And, in turn, gardens can resist or restructure 'relationships between the state, capital, and the commons'" (Dimick 2).

> "Celebratory we-narratives of nationhood that distort the truth of our shared history have shaped social relations and emotional interactions between colonizers and colonized for more than two hundred years" (Mackenzie 386-387).

Certainly entire theses could—and have—been written on the origins of the existing food system, but that is not the focus of this project. Instead, I offer these excerpts as useful context for why guerrilla gardening is so important in pushing forward actions of holistic food justice that challenge the current, functional, exploitative food system.

DISTINCTION BETWEEN COMMUNITY GARDENING AND GUERRILLA GARDENING

It seems time to make a distinction: that between community gardening and guerrilla gardening. Existing literature and policy imply that community gardening involves legally protected acts of cultivating public or private land (Ginanneschi, Soja) whereas guerrilla gardening means the inherently illicit act of cultivating public land (Ginanneschi, Soja, Sackey, Reynolds). This distinction is about legal implications: one is permissible and one is punishable. Sackey, on the other hand, sees a justice-based distinction between community gardening and guerrilla gardening. He sees community gardeners as focusing on social justice and guerrilla gardeners focusing on spatial justice, despite knowing that "reclaiming our right to the city can become an

overwhelming, if not impossible, task" (Sackey 367 & 73). For him, community gardens, "despite their progressive social goals, are often criticized in eco-gentrification literature because they are seen as exclusionary spaces that tend to benefit disproportionately white, middle-class bodies" (Sackey 372). Understanding the positionality of certain identities offers a more nuanced insight into the control of access to space, further emphasizing that guerrilla gardening is a tool for resisting these colonizing and gentrifying practices.

Enter a point of tension within my argument: if I am advocating for guerrilla gardening to be included in local (food) policy, does the term need to change? Because, if guerrilla gardening is inherently an illicit activity, then recategorizing it as valid practice implies that it is no longer *guerrilla* gardening and, rather, community gardening (or some third, undefined term). However, and as Sackey might argue, guerrilla gardeners are deeply invested in the notion of spatial justice, questioning how space is controlled and who has access to it—bringing equity to the land. Here is prefigurative politics, a term I situate within the framework of collective action and community resilience at the end of this chapter. For now, it's important to acknowledge that guerrilla gardening is creating the opportunity for redefining and recategorizing these kinds of actions .

DEFINING THE GUERRILLA GARDEN MOVEMENT, THROUGH HISTORY

This is not merely a study of the term "guerrilla gardening", I am arguing that something bigger is going on. I offer a historical overview, not in chronological order, to situate the term, credit those who have resisted through cultivation for generations, and demonstrate concrete examples of guerrilla gardening's paradoxes. Grassroots, radical organizing recenters, not merely includes.

As a way of applying parts of my proposed framework (which gets formally presented in Chapter Three), I want to intentionally recenter those who have grown their own food while a part of systems that exploited their bodies, land, and labor. The concept of guerrilla gardening is older than the term—when injustice is rampant, communities implore non-conventional ways of increasing their immediate autonomy and resisting the systems that uphold oppression. Guerrilla gardening emphasizes the range of social relations and networks, including those that are small, informal, and localized as well as those that are larger, formal and institutionalized, that embedded individuals create or change to foster positive social change.

During the 2000s, there was an onslaught of articles, books, and reports documenting what was, at the time, called the "good-food" or "local-food" movement. Countless stories of urban gardens receiving grants, schools upgrading their lunch programs, and athletes turned growers flooded media outlets and bookstore shelves. While many of them did not directly reference the act of guerrilla gardening, there are plenty of allusions to the cultivation of vacant lots, seed bombing, and sometimes taking illicit action for the sake of growing food.

The term for the widely known version of "guerrilla gardening" was coined in the 1970s by Liz Christy and a group of her friends from New York City who were working to rehabilitate vacant city-owned lots, however, the history of guerrilla gardening in action looks a lot different. Dream Green describes the group's early work in their Brief History Guerrilla Gardening: "rebelling against state neglect and wasted land, a group of young artists and residents started throwing seed bombs into vacant lots, planting sunflower seeds in road meridians, and placing planters around abandoned buildings". Christy's group is not a complete history of guerrilla gardening, so

we turn now to more historical context. History shows that guerrilla gardening, in its many forms, grew exponentially "during (or following) periods when a society stopped treating land as a community resource, and started treating it as a commodity" (Miles 2023).

When we think about the atrocious history of enslavement in the US, and the stolen land, labor, and culture that colonizing whites imposed upon people of color, we see signs of guerrilla gardening, albeit in a different form and under a different name. The scholar Geri Agusto eloquently puts it this way:

> "Enslaved people took the initiative... to create small plots and provision grounds… either beside the slave hut or... [on] a piece of land that the plantation owner didn't need... [T]hey would raise vegetables, medicinal plants, and even flowers... They were supplementing their diet, but also it was a small, small patch in which they could be human" (Augusto 2019).

Much of the so-called regenerative farming movement is, in reality, a compilation of afro-indigenous practices that have been ignored and then appropriated over generations. One such strategy that is gaining popularity is that of seed saving: the act of preserving seeds from one year to the next to maintain varieties and characteristics while minimizing input cost over time. And while many seed savers claim environmental stewardship and economic management as their origins, a more honest understanding recognizes people who were enslaved that braided seeds into their hair before the Middle Passage (Penniman 2023). Naima Penniman, an artist,

grower, and activist, created this piece,“Foresight”, as a way of representing this practice and honoring the women who carried these seeds, histories, and identities with them.

“Foresight” (Naima Penniman 2018).

This kind of cultivation and resistance, in addition to the Indigenous cultivation of stolen land as a form of resistance against the regime of colonization, are early forms of guerrilla gardening. They involve the illicit use of other-owned land as an immediate form of control with an overarching political message—it is a very tangible way of saying “we are here”. Because these practices have existed within long-standing structures of power, David Tracey is correct in his book Guerrilla Gardening: a Manualfesto when he says “we will never know the name of the first guerrilla gardener”, particularly when they wouldn’t even have been called a guerrilla gardener (Tracey 24). Our conversations around land management, labor practices, and food production have produced new terms and categories, many of which perpetuate systemic inequities that are baked into the very structure of a food system that relies on the exploitation of black and brown bodies. As these terms change and reflect situational struggles, there are signs

of resistance and survival as a way of fighting back against the structures of power that enforce and uphold imbalance and inequity.

Outside of the historical context of Turtle Island, many scholars support the consensus that a group that went by the name “The Diggers” in 1649 England was the first group to share widespread information about their actions of “guerrilla gardening”, although it is likely that many other groups participated in the illicit cultivation of land. The Diggers, led by Gerrard Winstanley, began cultivating vegetables on a piece of a hillside that had been lost when the British aristocracy enclosed commons. Widespread information about the collective action on the hill had a two fold effect: it not only brought people together to garden, but it also brought about scrutiny from local authorities, leading to the end of the Diggers work on the hill. A portion of the campaigning posters read: “a Common Treasury for All... That every one that is born in the land, may be fed by the Earth” (Miles & Fagborun 2023).

Here introduces another paradox of the illicit cultivation of publicly owned land (guerrilla gardening): spreading awareness about the act and/or inviting others to participate can indeed increase the number of people involved, but it also often brings the wary eye of enforcement and can ultimately lead to the demise of whatever project was being promoted in the first place. Despite the effort of some individuals and groups of guerrilla gardeners to communicate their work in diverse ways (including, but not limited to, anonymous online platforms, de-identified posters around their area, mass-communication, or word of mouth), historical and spatial context continues to shape how successful the communication of guerrilla gardening might be (Reynolds 48). This is just one reason that some folks choose to go the route of seeking authoritative

approval of their work, whether through permit purchasing, signing over land rights, or adoption by a recognized non-profit.

We continue the history of guerrilla gardening at another US example, this time in Berkeley, CA with the “People’s Park”. In 1969, when the University of California abandoned a vacant lot, a group began planting in the soil, led by the “social values of the politically disillusioned Vietnam generation” (Miles 2023). Disagreement over how to use the land peaked on “Bloody Thursday” when a group of protesters chanting “We Want the Park!” were targeted by police enforcement—one protester was killed and several others were injured (Reynolds 72).

Beyond the physical boundaries of Turtle Island, guerrilla gardeners and resistant cultivators actively exist. Horta Alimentos, a group of residents from one of Barcelona’s neighborhoods, have been growing on a vacant piece of land since 2020, hoping that the local authorities don’t reclaim the lot. In the meantime, Horta Alimentos is a thriving community space of growing food collectively, all while sending a message to the local government that there is value to be had in the soil by means other than over-development of the land. Albeit somewhat informal in structure, they hold regular meetings to designate tasks and plan collaborative events with other vacant lot growing communities. Even though they might not outwardly identify as guerrilla gardeners, their conversations often discuss the lack of access to growing space and fresh, culturally relevant food for their communities, chastising their local government for ignoring the interests and work of their constituents.

In 2000, a group called Reclaim the Streets, brought thousands of protestors and volunteers to London's Parliament Square where they removed grass, placed it in the road, and planted trees in their place, sharing the message:

> "Under the shadow of an irrelevant government, we were planting the seeds of a society where ordinary people are in control of their resources, their food and their decision-making... a world that encourages cooperation and sharing" (Reynolds 59-60).

Their actions, while valid in motivation, brought about a level of harm and negative publicity to the guerrilla gardening community that they still haven't recovered from. Planting trees in the road is not feeding the soil or setting up sustainable futures for the crops, and the action caused expenses in damage repair that could have otherwise potentially been invested in seedlings or community gardening initiatives. This demonstration (which is deemed a "mess") often serves as a reminder that performative action is not always the most successful way of getting the attention of policy makers and local governance when it comes to advocating for guerrilla gardening and access to vacant land (Miles 12).

All of these are merely a sampling of the expansive, multi-generational forms of illicit cultivation of otherly-owned land. Guerrilla gardening in the way we, and I, define it now, is a product of all of these. It is made possible by the daring people who took to the soil to form their own kind of revolution. With that, however, I want to caution against the danger of a single story and make clear the disclaimer that the motivations, origins, and outcomes of these briefly

discussed events are not a comprehensive list of the motivations, origins, and outcomes of all acts—for those who do and those who do not claim the title—of guerrilla gardening (Adichie 2009). The single story, a concept made well-known by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, explains the risk associated with only holding a single story from a different (often cultural) perspective. The following chapter will take a closer look at current, on-the-ground operations, some illicit and others licit, as a chance to see what this generation's understanding of guerrilla gardening is and how it can be a tool in shaping local policy mechanisms. As I look further into some of the motivations behind these actions, I want to echo Adams and Hardman in their conclusions about the guerrilla gardening identity: "rather than a single guerrilla gardener 'identity', there is no essential 'core' to the character of a guerrilla gardener and identity is continuously being remade through fluid performative enactments" (Adams & Hardman 1112).

WHY DO PEOPLE GUERRILLA GARDEN?

To try and prescribe a singular motivation to all guerrilla gardeners would be a grave injustice. What I can offer, however, is a subset of recurring catalysts amongst self-identified guerrilla gardeners. While early motivations were rooted in survival, there are still undertones of pushing for autonomy that resonate with modern day guerrilla gardeners. Ideas of self-provision, land to cultivate and call one's own, making a political statement, and outright rebellion fuel many guerrilla gardeners throughout the world. Simply put "guerrilla [gardening] strategies come to the forefront during times of inequality, born from the recognition that innovation – rather than conventional force – is the only method of resistance to an overpowering adversary" (Dimick 3).

Richard Reynold's website GuerrillaGardening.org allows people to join the troop, receive a number, and blog about their experiences while inviting others to take part in their work. Reddit, an anonymous online discussion forum, has entire channels dedicated to people across the globe sharing their motivations, experiences, advice, struggles, and celebrations with guerrilla gardening—all while sparing their identity in case local authorities are on the website (check out r/GuerrillaGardening or r/GardenWild to see what they're up to). Facebook, while less anonymous, also hosts pages designed for conversations about all things guerrilla gardening (see the Guerrilla Gardening group for related conversations). From a more academic perspective, scholars are also talking about some of the motivations behind guerrilla gardening. Donnie Johnson Sackey attributes the desire of guerrilla gardeners to "a form of direct action that gives citizens immediate control over space" (Sackey 373). I echo this sentiment: putting seeds into the ground is, in a way, an immediate revolution—there is power in acting without permission, and it doesn't hurt that in a few months there are edible crops springing from the Earth where you planted a very physical resistance.

Cecília Delgado, another scholar on land access and local governance, speaks about some of the economic benefits to growing on vacant land. She discusses how the relatively low start-up cost for gardening inputs can, in the long run, drastically run down the maintenance costs of vacant lots—most of which are borne by local taxpayers (Delgado 145). This type of do-it-yourself resistance is "largely motivated by a desire to improve one's surroundings oneself, without waiting for permission, out of both civic responsibility and a sense of creative enjoyment", a way of pursuing self (and collective) entitlement (Douglas 45).

These outcomes, however, are not the main driving force behind guerrilla gardeners: many plant when they feel a loss of political power or control over their own bodies and space. Factoring in space invites new terms into the conversation and framing of my argument. It is important to note the distinction between social and spatial justice now, which I alluded to earlier in my discussion of the distinction between community and guerrilla gardening, and it will remain important in how I present my argument in coming chapters. Donnie Johnson Sackey's article and Edward Soja's book—Seeking Spatial Justice—examine this dynamic, paying special attention to the role autonomous resistance plays in motivating guerrilla gardeners (Sackey 367 & Soja 31). While social justice and spatial justice are both evolving terms, this work used Britannica's definition of social justice: "the equitable status and treatment of all living individuals" (Britannica 2024). The definition for spatial justice comes from Sackey's article "Without Permission: Guerrilla Gardening, Contested Places, Spatial Justice": "the spatiality of (in)justice… affects society and social life just as much as social processes shape the spatiality or specific geography of (in)justice" (Sackey 372).

Planting seeds directly into the soil as a guerrilla gardener (whether or not you claim the title) can serve as an alternative to holding up signs in a protest or sitting in on community forums, touching the soil that stewards so much life and where mycorrhizal networks don't see property lines or zoning boundaries is empowering, even if it just feels like pushing around wet dirt. There are stories contained within the carbon and nitrogen of the soil, multitudes of moments of growth and resilience, the memories of those who fought for control of land and life with seeds from generations past. Sometimes it is simply about (re)gaining control of space—of seeking a way to feel that some piece of land belongs to someone, that they can grow the plants that matter to

them, see petals of past lives, taste foods of childhood. Indigenous people are still growing resistance—and crops—as they advocate for the right to their unceded land. While they might not call themselves guerrilla gardeners, they are nonetheless making a political statement that offers them a chance to reap a harvest that is not dependent on the stagnant agendas of policymakers.

Other motivations fall into less robust, but not less valid, categories such as something to do, having fun and a feeling of rebellion (Adams & Hardman 1112). Often guerrilla gardeners self-report their motivation as intending to beautify a space, whether it's along roadsides, in traffic circles, or in front of apartment buildings. There's a caveat to this motivation, however, and one that doesn't always fall in favor of the guerrilla gardener. There have been multiple cases recorded in which guerrilla gardeners adding flowers or other design-based plants have increased the aesthetic viability of the land to such an extent that real estate agents have taken notice. What follows next is not a success story: agents bring out photographers to drive up the prices of local properties and new seeds are planted—this time seeds of gentrification. A classic example of intent versus impact, scenarios of guerrilla gardening started by the community, for the community, can sometimes become a situation of guerrilla gardeners harming the community.

One might ask, where do all of these motivations lead to? Guerrilla gardening, on the whole, has two potential outcomes: either the project is ended in some way or it becomes legitimized. Examples of the project ending include city bulldozers destroying the plot, multiple extreme weather events inhibiting the plant growth, posted eviction notices citing violations, or the spraying of chemicals that kill all progress. The alternative, legitimization, can come as a result

of receiving land rights to the vacant lot, obtaining a permit to grow on the land, being recognized by a non-profit organization as one of their initiatives, or the city green works taking over the maintenance responsibilities. Will Allen of Will's Roadside Farms and Markets took this route in 1993 when, after some time as an illicit cultivator, he purchased one of the only few registered farms in the City of Milwaukee (Allen 14). Community organizers and guerrilla gardeners have often considered what impact the politics of government recognition can have on the intent (and impact) of cultivation as resistance. Hanna Garth and Ashanté M. Reese ask us "to reconsider the ways that acknowledgement and validation by the state can thwart radical visions for a more equitable distribution of resources" (Garth & Reese 21). Radical, from the root work often requires operating outside of existing forms of recognition, and so state-based validation might limit the scope of guerrilla gardening, reducing motivations to a bullet point on a grant proposal or a headline on the city website. Sarah Dimick's work on urban insurgency is also interested about the outcomes of guerrilla gardening, and she believes in the potential of radical change that comes from a land-based (and not state-based) recognition of cultivation of the soil as a community empowerment and collective liberation tool:

> "Nothing less than radical, widespread, and lasting social change, which would be entirely achievable. . .if only people could be made to see how much fertile land was going begging, all around them, every day – and how much more could be accomplished in the world if everybody simply pooled their knowledge and resources – and how arbitrary and absurdly prejudicial the entire concept of land ownership, when divorced from use or habitation, really was!" (Dimick 4)

We've now arrived at another nuanced aspect of guerrilla gardening: it is not an inherently sustainable practice. It either lives on in formally recognized form, or it dies (literally). While there might be a handful of cases that go a different route, such as a conscious and collective decision to stop the project, these two outcomes are the most likely future for guerrilla gardeners starting to cultivate. Nonetheless, the work does not stop there. What I argue is that guerrilla gardening is a critical *first* step in getting the attention of local governance and inciting systemic change. It is a very tangible way of saying "We are here! We are here and we care about this! And you should care too!". What makes guerrilla gardening different is the immediacy of it—it does not wait for someone else to make a change, it is about the right here and right now of doing something. While it is often political in motivation and intent, there is something very human and individual about planting seeds into the ground, watering them, caring for them, and harvesting what they produce. Guerrilla gardening is hand held democracy, and recognizing the inherently unsustainable nature of guerrilla gardening is an empowering piece of this work.

CRITIQUES OF GUERRILLA GARDENING

Effective arguments address and make space for critiques and shortcomings. If I am going to advocate for guerrilla gardening as a tool for empowerment and collective liberation, then I must also acknowledge that it also can be, and has been, a tool for harming communities and minimizing their access to space. As the previous example of planting flowers with hopes of beautifying an area demonstrates, intentions of autonomy can result in increased lot prices and gentrification that strips group agency. Richard Reynolds urges anyone interested in illicitly cultivating land—whether to produce food or produce beauty—to reflect on the various implications and how those who do not share the same spark might react. Rebecca Solnit, in her

article “Revolutionary Plots” also has some considerations for those wanting to grow tomatoes and change the world. She argues that community gardens—which, for her, include vacant lot cultivation—are a way to empower communities while also allowing them to avoid structural and systemic challenges: “you can argue that vegetable seeds are the seeds of the new revolution. But the garden is an uneasy entity for our time, a way both to address the biggest questions and to duck them” (Solnit 2012). She goes on to emphasize that these initiatives cannot exist in isolation, citing pop up patches of peas as an avoidance tactic that can limit community growth.

> “Planting heirloom seeds is great, but someone has to try to stop Monsanto, and that involves political organizing, sticking your neck out, and confrontation…they did it by organizing, by collective power, and by political engagement. The biggest problem of our time requires big cooperative international transformations that cannot be reached one rutabaga patch at a time” (Solnit 2012).

Indeed, and as I will discuss as a part of a new framework in Chapter Three, sticking to the garden will not instantly achieve food justice or convert every vacant lot into a hub of culturally relevant gardens. However, this is where I take the argument for guerrilla gardening one step further: guerrilla gardening is not designed to be the end-all-be-all for food justice, but rather an opportunity for organizers and the politically engaged to consider what collective power is capable of and how to reimagine the process. Further, every rutabaga patch is still an act that challenges settler colonialism histories, working to reclaim the land and reinstate cosmologies that prioritize reciprocal relationships and shared food production.

Solnit's most scathing, but not unfounded, claim comes in her discussion of the impacts that urban agriculture has had on collective change. "Thought of just as means of producing food, the achievements of urban agriculture may be modest, but as means of producing understanding, community, social transformation, and catalytic action, they may be the opposite" (Solnit 2012). Solnit's final remarks call for a "revolutionary gardener [who] will get at the root causes of our situation, not just cultivate the surface" (Solnit 2012). As I go on to argue that guerrilla gardening is a step in pursuing some of the root causes of food injustice, I also acknowledge that not every seed planted or vacant lot converted sets out to topple existing power structures.

Others have noted that when land suddenly produces something such as food or flowers, developers might eye that area as a ripe and lucrative option for their next self and money motivated project. This can lead to a different kind of cultivation—one that involves concrete, contaminants, and capitalism. Additionally, Dorcetta Taylor and Kerry Ard, in their article "Detroit's Food Justice & Food Systems", address some concerns that come with governmental support of guerrilla gardening:

> "Although the new agricultural ordinance may facilitate the conversion of more vacant land to food production purposes, many of these lots contain toxic contamination from prior industrial use. Residents wanting to farm in these areas face costs associated with soil testing and remediation. While some have used raised-bed techniques to avoid soil contamination issues, the added costs of building these beds could still deter some residents" (Kerry & Ard 17).

Despite support from neighbors on Reddit about ways to remediate the soil, unexpected costs, upkeep, and lack of governmental support can make pursuing long-term projects difficult. These contribute to why many guerrilla gardens don't make it to the stage of legitimization or formal recognition.

Still others challenge guerrilla gardening, citing it as a continuation of violent colonialism: "in settler colonial settings, the guerrilla gardener mimics colonial land theft, yet another way that vast scales of violence brush up against a few rows of lettuce and onions" (Dimick 11). However, nuanced and embedded members of this work recognizes that "they were only reaping what they themselves had sown . . . they were giving to the soil, and to the air, at least as much as they were taking from it . . . after all, the landowners had committed theft on a far greater scale, simply by virtue of being landowners" (Dimick 4). Guerrilla gardeners are not interested in ownership or exclusion, they are committed to a reclaiming of what has, and continues to be, stolen from them and their communities. Cultivation that starts to bleed into areas of colonialism, land conquering, or theft should be re-evaluated and considered within the context of the situation: resistance is justified when people are occupied.

CULTIVATION AS RESISTANCE

Recognizing that the scholarship on guerrilla gardening indicates it is not an inherently sustainable practice gets at the crux of my argument. That's why there are countless how-to guides, up-to-date blogs, and public forums talking about the latest tactics and tips. Because it isn't *meant* to be sustainable, it's the first step in a movement. Guerrilla gardening is a form of resistance that is not typical or comprehensive—like attending one city council meeting or voting

uncommitted in the primaries. “Guerrilla gardens sprout in the soil of highly unequal conditions, often in the wake of the fatal exercise of state power, and usually in the looming shadow of a foreshortened environmental future” (Dimick 2). Guerrilla gardening comes as a result of over-commodification and loss of relationship with the land; while cultivators remediate the soil from lead, guerrilla gardening remediates the concept of ownership. We have to work outside of systems of commodified land, moving beyond personal property and towards notions of collective management.

Returning to the previously developed definition: guerrilla gardening offers *immediate* change via resistance, it doesn’t take an election season or two years of bureaucracy, it’s in the time that beans take to sprout and tomatoes take to ripen. But, often, guerrilla gardening is not as sustainable as a four-year term or codified laws might be, but the immediacy and presence of it is indicative of community unrest and dissatisfaction with current understandings with and relations of land. Those plants say “I am here and I matter and I am resisting”. What, exactly, the crops and those stewarding the land are resisting might look different: for people who were enslaved it was resisting a system that took away their humanness, for Indigenous groups it is resisting the western narrative of colonialism, for growers in Detroit it is resisting the post-industrial disinvestment in their city, for climate conscious citizens it might be resisting the impact of concrete on urban centers, and for others it might be resisting a fast food movement that devalues fresh, and culturally relevant food. Regardless, the resistance is valid and worth understanding, engaging with those resisting to create proactive practices that continue to allow the plants to say “I am here and I matter”.

I find something really beautiful and reassuring in what Kimmerer says about what goes on in a garden, she writes: “something essential happens in a vegetable garden. It’s a place where if you can’t say ‘I love you’ out loud, you can say it in seeds. And the land will reciprocate, in beans” (Kimmerer 254). So maybe guerrilla gardening is to take the place of the things we cannot say, maybe it serves as a way of showing the changes we want to see and to communicate how we feel without explicitly stating it in a petition or letter to a representative. The bigger question, however, is how do we convince policymakers and local governance that this is worth protecting. The third chapter investigates this question and offers suggestions for the hyper-local context of my work: Easton, Pennsylvania. Starting here I engage with what it means to be “radical”—to grasp things at the root and potentially change the course of growth. Theoretical framing is often the root of revolutionary cosmologies. This project follows that model: I ground my understanding of the motivations and implications of guerrilla gardening in theories that recognize the interconnectedness of systems and prioritize reciprocal relationships. From there, I apply these ways of knowing to a vibrant example of this long, beautiful, complex history of guerrilla gardening.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

In addition to the grounding work of food justice, I apply themes from collective action and community resilience (CACR) and ecofeminism, particularly in my analysis of Detroit’s guerrilla gardening. The latter two are intertwined, and while I introduce them separately here, they will often show up together later. In food systems, Monica White, a scholar and advocate of CACR, defines it as “ the strategies that members of agricultural cooperatives implemented in an effort to stay on the land using their agricultural knowledge base” (White 4). She sees CACR as a

combination of three strategies: commons as praxis, prefigurative politics, and economic autonomy (White 2).

Commons as praxis "engages and contests dominant practices of ownership, consumerism, and individualism and replaces them with shared social status and shared identities of race and class" (White 3). Rooted in cooperative behavior, commons as praxis puts a formal title on the vacant land guerrilla gardeners cultivate, resisting "the conditions of oppression"—whatever that might mean for each community (White 3). While the "commons", vacant lots, are not necessarily shared spaces with adequate resources to support the community, they are a physical haven that challenges how communities and local governments understand the ownership of land and collective ownership. The commons as praxis, however, does not directly translate on to the practice of guerrilla gardening in its entirety—many guerrilla gardeners operate alone or within defined family units and do not set out with a rigid set of community guidelines or intentions for their behavior. Much of guerrilla gardening, I argue, is about the immediacy of change and the larger shifts it advocates for, one of which can be a wider adaptation of CACR.

Prefigurative politics, "the construction of alternative political systems that are democratic and include processes of self-reflection", are attainable ways of living that embed themselves within our political systems (White 3). Often the first step of prefigurative politics is acknowledgement that some groups have intentionally been excluded from the decision and policy making space. Guerrilla gardeners understand that even if they don't explicitly say it: many, but not all, who illicit cultivate do so as a result of political exclusion. White's application of prefigurative politics is about creating the space to reimagine power structures, and guerrilla gardeners invite

in conversations that redefine the concept of land ownership and prioritize community autonomy. As White describes it, prefigurative politics "create the opportunity to move from conditions of oppression to conditions of self-sufficiency and self-determination" (White 4). I further discuss what this might look like as a direct result of guerrilla gardening in Chapter Three.

Working towards economic autonomy "allows a community to provide for its members financially and help them move from dependence to independence, and from powerlessness toward a position of power" (White 4). Again, this element of CACR is not entirely the angle I take, however, the notion of providing your own food by cultivating land, illicit, is an empowering and independence-creating experience. Many personal narratives, a practice that Catriona Mackenzie sees as offering valuable emotional insight, speak to the desire for growing one's own food as a major motivation for turning to guerrilla gardening (Mackenzie 379). While guerrilla gardening often does not continue in its illicit form, the radical nature of pushing for increased collective self-governance can live on via more sanctified forms of growing (White 4).

Monica White, like myself, holds Fannie Lou Hamer in highest regard, often looking to her as inspiration for how to design a better food systems future. Hamer understands the power relationships at play within food systems and just how important it is that individuals and communities have autonomy over their food, saying in a speech from the late 1960s, that "food is used as a political weapon. But if you have a pig in your backyard, if you have some vegetables in your garden, you can feed yourself and your family, and nobody can push you around" (Hamer 1968). Guerrilla gardening is the first step on this path towards CACR and a more just food future, where nobody can push us around.

Other scholars have also contributed to the literature of collective agency and CACR, often producing highly academic pieces that speak less to the on-the-ground work engaging with these ideas and more on the theoretical plane of thinking about how to create change. I will include some of the most critical takeaways from these scholars but move forward with them in the most applicable and tangible sense of their work to both acknowledge that theory is an incredibly important grounding place for any new research as well as to create work that is accessible and rooted in the narratives and experiences of those putting these ideas into practice. One such piece is Catriona Mackenzie's "Autonomous Agency, We-agency, and Social Oppression" which critically analyzes social forces and their impact on individual and collective agency. She argues that "if we are interested in understanding the social dynamics of agency, it is critical to attend to the way that agents exercise their intentional agency in relation to internalized and external social constraints" (Mackenzie 373). Echoing White's points about understanding political pasts in order to reshape futures, Mackenzie emphasizes that nothing and no one exists in a vacuum, separate from forces of power and historical outcomes. In order to understand why people are guerrilla gardening and what its potential impact is, I—and others doing this work—need understanding interlocking social and power dynamics.

Mackenzie goes on to discuss autonomy, a concept comprising three "distinct but interacting dimensions": self-determination, self-governance, and self-authorization (Mackenzie 375). I see guerrilla gardening within all three of these. Choosing what and where (with some constraints) to plant as well as how to grow allows guerrilla gardeners some amount of self-determination, especially when the communities they are a part of are shaped by larger power forces that

devalue access to fresh, culturally relevant, and affordable food. Furthermore, as Fannie Lou Hamer and many others acknowledge, the ability to self-govern oneself, family, or community is the key to building autonomous communities—and growing one's food is a good place to start. Guerrilla gardeners don't ask for permission, they grow as an act of resistance, self-authorizing their actions in tangible and powerful ways. Autonomy can not only apply to the individual, but also the collective. Even when guerrilla gardeners act alone, they are pushing for a change with impacts far beyond themselves.

Thomas Gehring and Johannes Marx take these ideas further, defining collective agency as positionally opposite from the idea that change must come from the individual (Gehring & Marx 7). They argue for group autonomy as a first-step, which then creates individual autonomy and decision making capabilities. For them, "what matters is not physical control of resources but the formal or informal right or authority to deploy them" (Gering & Marx 25). Autonomy is equivalent to acting by one's own rules. Hopefully this sounds familiar by now as guerrilla gardening is an act taken up by those choosing to act by their own accord, intentions, and methodologies. However, because true group autonomy is not awarded in our current food system, these actions are deemed illicit and either ended by force or converted into a more sanctified, and often less-autonomous, form of cultivation. Guerrilla gardening embodies many of these collective agency/CACR ideals in very tangible and immediate ways; and even if it is not the solution to food justice, it is a valuable first step.

The second supplemental theoretical framework that helps me understand Detroit's cases of guerrilla gardening is ecofeminism, a term first coined by French Writer Françoise d'Eaubonne

in her 1974 book Le Féminisme ou la Mort (d'Eaubonne 1974). The word itself has been understood differently in recent decades, but at its core ecofeminism is a philosophy that "bridges the issues of feminism and environmentalism with the understanding that gender discrimination and environmental degradation are related manifestations of systematic oppression"—a radical reconsidering of relationships (Goralnik 2023, Warren & Zalta 2015). Some recent arguments have determined that ecofeminism is more academic than activist, yet I apply it to guerrilla gardening as a theoretical framework with tangible applications. Additionally, I want to acknowledge that the roots of ecofeminism come from white feminism which prioritizes the experiences of white, cisgender, heterosexual women; however, the work of Monica White and other intersectional scholars work to apply the core understandings of interlocking oppression to sites of resistance and identity empowerment. Moving beyond the gender binary and female essentialism (the nurturing myth), I integrate ecofeminism as a way of upholding the work and the mindset that says "'Fuck it!' I can grow my own food *and* I can feed my community" (White 217).

While there are certainly gender dynamics that are a cause and effect of guerrilla gardening, those are not the focus of this work. However, it is a chance to emphasize the interconnectedness of relationships, dynamics, and histories that produce vacant lots and economic disinvestment. Detroit, which I discuss further in Chapter Two, is a case study for the applications of ecofeminism—compounding and intersectional relationships of power have shaped a cityscape with abounding vacant lots and a steady movement of women-led groups working towards a better future for their own communities.

One extension of ecofeminism that I will also reference in future chapters is Aldo Leopold's discussion of the Land Ethic. He lays out four major claims:

> "(1) the moral community should include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or, what Leopold calls, collectively, "the land" (Leopold 1949 [1977]: 204);
> (2) the role of *homo sapiens* should be changed from conqueror to plain member of the land community (204);
> (3) we can be moral only in relation to something we can see, feel, understand, love, respect, admire, or otherwise have faith in (214, 223, 225); and
> (4) "a thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community; it is wrong when it tends otherwise" (224–225), what some regard as Leopold's ultimate moral maxim" (Warren & Zalta 2015).

While this is not a philosophy paper or a discussion on morality, some of Leopold's words on relationships with land, collective ownership, and recognition of non-human contributions do resonate with my argument for cultivation as an act of resistance and guerrilla gardening as a first step towards food justice. All of this comes back to relationships—relationships with each other, the land, and every being we encounter. Karen Warren & Edward Zalta echo this in their piece on "Feminist Environmental Philosophy", saying, "*how* humans are in relationship to others (including nature) matters morally" (Warren & Zalta 2015).

TURNING TO ON-THE-GROUND GUERRILLA GARDENING

Equipped with the nuance, history, and theoretical understanding of guerrilla gardening, I move into the more tangible realm: that of on-the-ground guerrilla gardening. Expanding on my lived experience with both illicit and licit cultivation of publicly-owned land, I focus in on Detroit's complex history of food systems and land use, highlighting the community-driven work that's redefining food security and catching the eye of the local government.

CHAPTER TWO

"Do not be overwhelmed by the grief and despair of the world—we are not obligated to finish the work, but we are obligated always to take a step in the direction of completing the work"
-Leah Penniman, Black Earth Wisdom 2023

GUERRILLA GARDENING IN BOSTON

"The soil holds onto the lead from the burned houses, so when DSNI invited The Food Project to start growing on it, they had to do something called remediation, which is essentially helping the land heal and get back to a healthy enough state that we could grow food that others could eat". So went my spiel on remediation as I taught Boston youth at The Food Project (TFP) the history of the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative (DSNI) and the lot we were stewarding. I was astounded by how quickly the youth understood that land holds memory and that the soil, as a living being, needs to be fed in order to feed us. I think I had forgotten that youth are often better people than us as they have already arrived at a place of empathy and collective work, a place that, as we grow, the systems we are a part of work to undo in such profound ways. While I spoke with the youth, I was inspired by Robin Wall Kimmerer's passage on the land's ability to remember:

> "Old-growth cultures, like old-growth forests, have not been examined. The land holds their memory and the possibility of regeneration. They are not only a matter of ethnicity or history, but of relationships born out of reciprocity between land and people" (Kimmerer 291).

Reciprocal relationships, as Kimmerer mentions, show up for all guerrilla gardeners, in one way or another. As a steward of the land the DSNI cultivated, I contributed to reciprocal relationships through increasing community awareness of the soil's history, planting nitrogen fixing legumes to feed the land, and building connections with the neighbors who had watched the lot transform over the decades. The Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative is a resident-led Community Land Trust formed in 1984 to advocate "for development without displacement" (Penniman 125). After being granted the power of eminent domain to acquire the abandoned, privately-owned land in 1988, DSNI has established affordable housing, community gardens, and an urban farm—the latter of which I participated in (Penniman 126). DSNI partnered with TFP to manage the farm and begin growing fresh, culturally relevant food for the community.

The lot, which was lead contaminated as a result of white flight and racist landlords more interested in claiming insurance money than hosting tenants of color, was a host site for guerrilla gardening. While DSNI didn't necessarily take on the term, their actions of community-led action and cultivation for their own food security certainly fits the bill. Resistance, for the residents and organizers of DSNI, meant reclaiming land that the city of Boston had deemed unusable, invaluable, and, quite literally, junk. They were resisting the narrative placed too frequently on urban communities of color: a lack of potential, wasteland, not worth investing in, etc. This is exactly why the (overly academic) term "food desert" is inadequate. A desert implies something natural, but communities without access to fresh, culturally relevant food are direct products of intentional systems, economic structures, and policies designed to limit their access. Further, deserts are typically barren and not sites of high urban development. While lack of access occurs in both urban and rural areas, the systemic and intersecting inequities shaping the

food system (which academics now call “food apartheid”, as coined by Karen Washington) go much deeper than the implications of a food desert (Washington 2018). Referring to marginalized communities as a “food desert” removes some of their humanness and agency to determine their food sources and consumption practices, meanwhile excusing the structural root causes of poor food access. Further, the term desert implies naturally occurring when, in reality, spaces that lack adequate access to food are products of oppressive, exclusive systems constructed by powerful humans. DSNI is just one example of a community resisting these narratives and internally organizing for neighborhood-wide change.

My time in Boston was heavily shaped by the opportunity to bear witness to collective action and community resilience (CACR) in action. Here were residents applying the commons as praxis and contesting the dominant practices of ownership—challenging the city’s right to own land that the city openly saw no value in (White 3). DSNI’s push for eminent domain of the lot is a demonstration that their shared social status was more valuable than formal, individualistic ownership. Additionally, the group’s collective management, affordable housing program, and community garden initiative are all examples of prefigurative politics: they are creating the possibility of a more just future where power lies with the community, the land is restored to health, and resources are equitably distributed among neighbors. White’s argument that prefigurative politics relies on radical, yet attainable, ways of living embedded within political systems is embodied by the actions and organizing of DSNI (White 3). Further, DSNI’s desire to control their own economic status via growing their own, culturally relevant, fresh produce and building their own cooperative, affordable housing addresses the final aspect of CACR:

economic autonomy. Moving towards community independence, the residents are pursuing development without displacement (Penniman 125).

Boston, particularly the neighborhoods of Dudley and Roxbury, has a rich history of community activism and collective organizing. The Combahee River Collective—a group of Black feminists who began meeting in 1974—lived and worked together in Roxbury (Ransby 7). The development of Black feminist thought—and, as an offshoot, applied ecofeminism—is rooted in the complex, intersectional dynamics of Boston, communities of color, and political strife. Ecofeminsim, as I discuss at the end of Chapter One, is conscious of the interrelated manifestations of systemic oppression (d'Eaubonne 1974 & Ransy 24). Those who cultivate land as a form of resistance, whether or not they call themselves guerrilla gardeners, are evidently conscious of interlocking power structures, environmental disregard, and economic choices that create systems which prioritize some and cast aside others. DSNI, collectively, addresses these intersections as they built a message and program that moved forward with these manifestations in mind.

The land's memory, however, goes beyond the industrialization and economic disinvestment of Boston. We were growing on soil that had long been stewarded by Indigenous people of the area. As DSNI works towards community autonomy, I want to continue to push for rematriation of the land to the Pawtucket, Massachusett, and their neighbors, the Wampanoag and Nipmuc (Whose Land 2019). This history is incomplete without the acknowledgement and intentional understanding of the Indigenous peoples' whose cultivation practices are the basis of much of what we now call "regenerative agriculture". To talk about re-centering the voices of the most

marginalized and restoring the power to those silenced without including Indigenous voices, values, and desires would only be perpetuating the systemic injustices of settler colonialism. Settler colonial used (and uses) food as a weapon to enrich colonial powers. As a descendent of white settlers, I strive to be mindful of my positionality in this history and how I hold space for the land and the generations of people whose resilience and knowledge fed the soil and fed each other.

DSNI and the land we currently call Boston are one of countless present-day, on-the-ground examples of guerrilla gardening and cultivation as resistance. While this lived experience was a launching off point for much of my own work in guerrilla gardening and the potential it has for sparking large-scale change, I am choosing to focus on a case study that has an incredible breadth of connections to all things guerrilla gardening and cultivation as resistance. At this point, I turn to discuss what is currently called Detroit—the ancestral lands of the Annishinabe and Potawatomi—and their relationship to land, food, and community resiliency (Rematriate 2019).

DETROIT: A BRIEF & INCOMPLETE HISTORY

I will spend most of my discussion of guerrilla gardening in Detroit focused on a city that is a product of white colonialism and imperialistic development. However, I want to take time here and continuously throughout this section and beyond into my work and continuously into the push for a more equitable (food system) future. The Annishinabe and Potawatomi people hold a deep reverence for the land, practicing the belief that we come from the land, are a part of the land, and will return to the land (Kimmerer 20). Their cosmologies influence much of my own

approach to stewarding land and academic discourse. Despite many scholars using the term guerrilla gardening as an artifact of Liz Christy's work in New York City, the practice of cultivating land in intentional, community-driven ways has a much longer, complex history. Lisa Tanya Brook's The Common Pot details Indigenous resistance against colonial narratives. Brook's draws from various Indigenous cosmologies to dismantle widespread concepts of land, place-making, and ownership. Through this discourse the act of guerrilla gardening—not called such—is woven into the story as a tool for continuing to challenge settler colonial mindsets (Brooks 212).

Present day Detroit: a post-industrial city riddled with demographic changes, loss of public services, widespread bankruptcy, and guerrilla gardeners. Andrew Newman and Yuson Jung, in their article "Good Food in a Racist System: Competing Moral Economies in Detroit" have this to say about the city's relationship with food:

> "Starting in the 1990s and continuing into the following decade, a Black-led alliance of growers and food justice activists fostered a food justice movement that addressed Detroit's specific urban predicament: high rates of vacant land and disinvestment and a general lack of commerce options for residents…in recent years, Detroit has become well known as a place where postindustrial urban changes, racist patterns of urbanism, and a long tradition of Black politics have combined to give rise to well-developed movements centered around food justice and food sovereignty" (Newman & Jung 131).

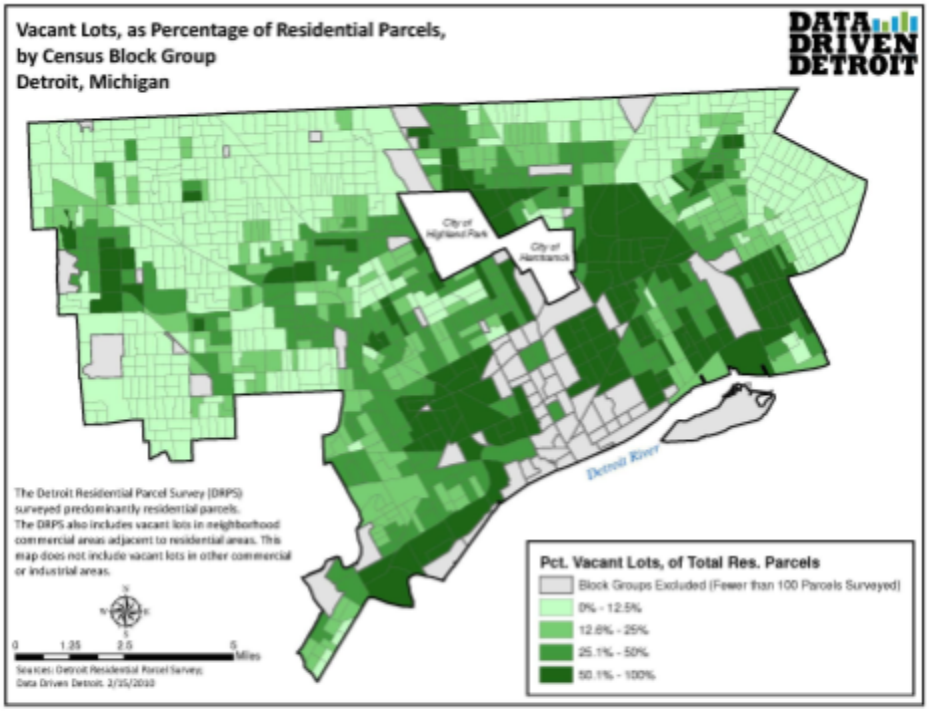
And Joseph Cialdella in his book Motor City Green adds this:

> "Urban and social historians have helped us to understand the political, social, and cultural creation of Detroit's landscape of abandonment and decline during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as well as the planning, policies, and decisions that enabled ruins and gardens to sprout from abandonment" (Cialdella 9).

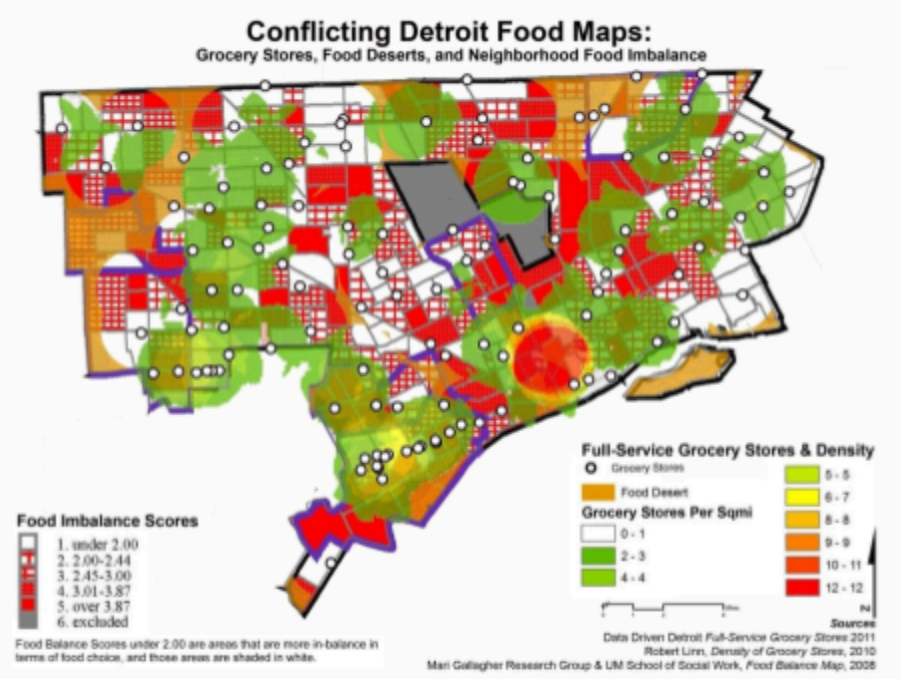
Detroit is a city full of contrast—not unlike the history and practice of guerrilla gardening. Much of the work around food and land has been about developing a sense of place; "we just wanted to use space", one resident says (Cialdella 5). Issues of disinvestment and land ownership, however, are not unique to Detroit: many scholars note that land acquisition and preservation are some of the "fundamental problems with agriculture and urban gardening in Black communities" (Cialdella 21). For Detroit more specifically, residents have described land acquisition for urban agriculture as a persistent and vexing issue and "one of the root causes of food insecurity throughout the world" that is "dispossessing people of their lands and thus their ability to feed and otherwise provide for themselves"—trying to find steady, affordable access to land is the first barrier that residents who want to grow their own food face (Sherrod 2017 & Yakini 2013). Beyond limited land access, systemic divestment and unenforced antitrust laws have produced areas where only commodified, heavily processed food is available, denying residents access to autonomy over their food. Driven by an industrialist boom and disregard for community authoring, divestment produced "so many neighborhoods that are depopulated, so there aren't viable grocery stores and places to get food in those neighborhoods," says Kathryn Underwood, a retired city planner involved in urban agriculture policy work (Barrett 2023). Underwood goes

on to advocate for increased autonomy of local food supplies, namely produce and food that's culturally relevant to the community. This is all rooted in a move towards spatial justice—working to reconsider who and what has access to space.

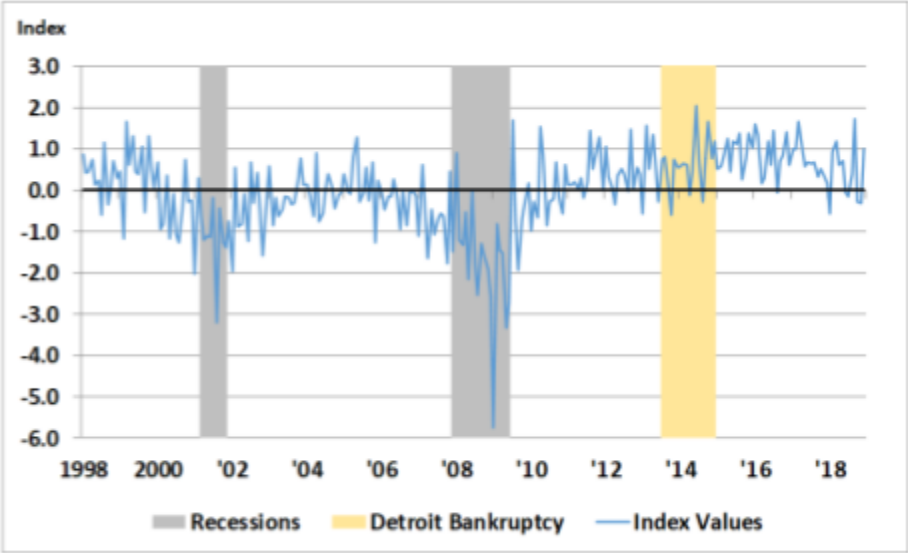
Despite, despite, despite—the residents of Detroit continue to cultivate (land, policy, activism) as a form of resistance. Indeed, "connections between histories of food production, Black fugitivity, and food culture [become] a site of resistance and practice of self-reliance" (Newman & Jung 17). Maps are powerful tools for recognizing patterns, however, they can also be used to perpetuate harmful definitions of land ownership or be weaponized to uphold systems of oppression. The graphs that I have chosen to include are not to serve as commentary on who deserves to be where, as Sackey warns against, but rather to visualize the historical changes and context that have shaped Detroit's current food and guerrilla gardening scene.



This is the most recent, publicly available map showing rates of vacant lots throughout Detroit, post the economic changes of 2008 that impacted Detroit's land and livelihoods (Data Driven Detroit 2010).



This very colorful, information dense graph (putting my Data Science minor aside for a minute) visualizes that access to fresh food is not highly correlated with areas of the city that are densely populated. I also want to point out the use of the term food desert, which I unpack on page 40 as an inadequate and harmful term (Hill 2012).

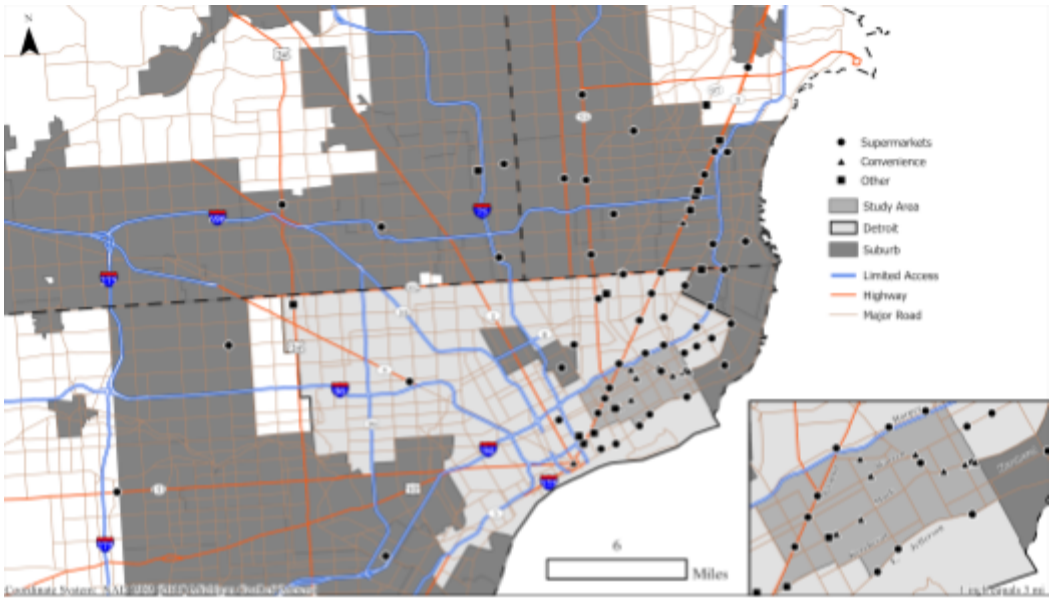


		Averages	
Current	Previous	3-month	12-month
0.99	-0.33	0.12	0.43

This line graph shows Detroit index values from 1998 to 2018, highlighting periods of recession and city-wide bankruptcy. The index values themselves are not critical to my argument, but the recurrence of economic downtown are direct results of community divestment (Traub 2019).

I also want to include a couple of figures from the 2020 research article “The dynamics of food shopping behavior: Exploring travel patterns in low-income Detroit neighborhoods experiencing extreme disinvestment using agent-based modeling” to help demonstrate the demographic, geographic, and economic changes Detroit has undergone in recent decades.

Vojnovic et. al created these panels to show the change in Detroit demographics from 1970, to 1990, to 2010 (Vojnovic et. al 2020).



This map overlays transportation routes with types of food procurement stores within Detroit, painting a very clear picture of inequitable food access (Vojnovic et. al 2020).

In 1974 a program named “Farm-A-Lot” was developed with the aim of “aiding Detroiters in accessing vacant lots for gardening” (Cialdella 138). Over and over again the city has seen residents turn towards green spaces as a way to “ameliorate the negative social and environmental consequences of industrial capitalism” (Cialdella 10). Artists and activists have all contributed to the city’s relationship with food systems, from Dudley Randall's “Vacant Lot” poem to Grace Lee Boggs’ organizing, Detroiters see more in the city than a place for an industrial cityscape (Randall 1942). Cialdella talks about the city’s change makers as finding “ways to connect with urban gardening and used the practice to give meaning to their larger visions of social change and justice in a city with a long history of injustice and discrimination” (Cialdella 144). There seems to be a causal mechanism at play here: when there is urban disinvestment there is a corresponding urban gardening movement. Guerrilla gardening, for those in Detroit and elsewhere, is a form of “radical activism and protest, sometimes with explicitly stated political goals and often inherent (if entirely theoretical) critical transformative potential” (Douglas 24).

Other accounts of Detroit’s generational changes have this to say about the inherent connection to food: “it seems that every tough economic time hailed a return to growing food” (Cialdella 12). There is something about the explicit “return to food” that I want to focus on. As discussed in Chapter One’s history of guerrilla gardening, people who were enslaved returned to the seeds and foods of their cultures as they illicitly cultivated land to restore a sense of their humanness. Recent dialogue amongst BIPOC folks who are cultivating land is full of a complex understanding of what it means to be a person of color growing food, heavy with the memory of abuse and oppression of their ancestors. Many, however, had recalled that the return to the land is

about empowerment, reverence, and autonomy—a very distinctly different position than that of their ancestors (Penniman 137). Leah Penniman describes this in a 2019 article:

> "The truth is that for thousands of years Black people have had a sacred relationship with soil that far surpasses our 246 years of enslavement and 75 years of sharecropping in the United States. For many, this period of land-based terror has devastated that connection. We have confused the subjugation our ancestors experienced on land with the land herself, naming her the oppressor and running toward paved streets without looking back. We do not stoop, sweat, harvest, or even get dirty because we imagine that would revert us to bondage. Part of the work of healing our relationship with soil is unearthing and relearning the lessons of soil reverence from the past" (Penniman 2019).

Guerrilla gardeners, of whatever identity, often find themselves returning to food as they illicitly cultivate land. Reverence for the soil and for their histories offers a healing For those in Detroit, they are resisting the economic disinvestment and political abandonment of their communities, planting seeds to immediately increase their own autonomy.

This complex, injustice-ridden history means the soil is often full of toxins and memories of past lives. Consequently, Detroit guerrilla gardeners need to be vigilant about remediation, particularly when they're interested in growing food for consumption. This is a chance to offer a reminder: guerrilla gardener is not reserved for those explicitly growing crops for consumption, it is an all encompassing title for anyone illicitly cultivating publicly owned land as a form of resistance and creating immediate change (Miles & Fagborun 2023). While aesthetic planting is

certainly a viable form of guerrilla gardening, I am focusing on the cultivation of edible crops to better understand how this specific practice can be a tool for beginning to move local governments along the spectrum towards a holistic embodiment of food justice. With that, remediation is important for any kind of growth, but it is particularly important for those wanting to plant edible crops. Those who post in Reddit's r/GuerrillaGardening acknowledge this need (as does Cialdella in Motor City Green) and offer each other support, resources, and reminders about soil remediation:

> "Make sure you are careful about remediation. I would suggest playing it safe unless you have access to the lab equipment needed to test the soil for things such as heavy metals" (y0nm4n 2015);

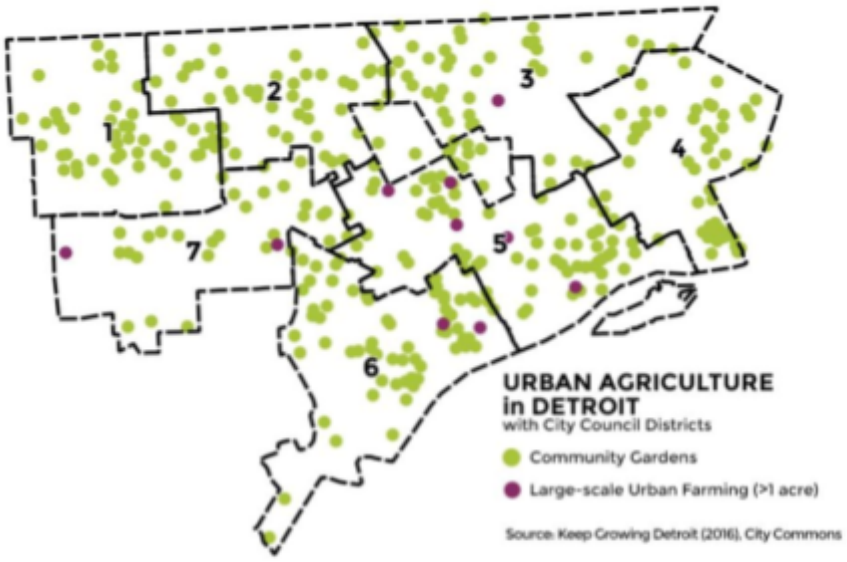
> "Grow sunflowers and lupine for a year or so. They will remediate the soil!" (AmericanRonin 2015);

> "It's also good practice to check Google Street view or other photography resources to make sure you aren't planting in street or utility ROWs [right of ways]" (Kitchen-Reporter7601 2023);

> "I would plant grasses like blue fescue, which are great for absorbing toxins in the soil like lead, plus are low to no maintenance compared to flowers. There is a non-profit in Detroit [greeningofdetroit.com] that may be of help. They help supply trees, etc on abandoned lots" (Zen_Rachel 2015);

"'Abandoned' lots are rarely totally abandoned. However infrequently it's likely someone will come round and spray chemicals to control growth. You do not want to eat from a location which uses chemical herbicide control so make sure your abandoned lot is really abandoned"; (Caylus 2023)

"What was at the building site before? I would be worried about some toxic gick getting into the plants if it was like a gas station or something" (calskin 2015).



This is the most recent, publicly available map showing legitimized community garden and large-scale urban farming, some of which are extensions of guerrilla gardening on vacant lots (Detroitography 2017).

Furthermore, visions of a more equitable, food secure future for Detroit are echoed by many leaders in the city's urban agriculture scene. One such community champion is Malik Yakini, executive director of the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network (DBCFSN), who says:

> "We are trying to create a city where Detroiters are producing significant quantities of our food and where we have the infrastructure to be able to process and distribute that food—and where we change this shameful situation where Detroit's majority Black population has money extracted from our community every time we go to purchase food" (Yakini 2023).

Marginalized, exploited, and oppressed communities are not ignorant—they are often incredibly conscious of the intentional forces operating against them, and it is often a lack of voice, access to policy, and economic influence that prevents them from adequately advocating for their communities' needs. As Yakini's quote demonstrates, external, big box, inaccessible grocery stores that come into communities do not revitalize local economics but, rather, continue to build the wealth of those who operate greedy, capitalistic companies (Vojnovic et.al 2020). But let those with power beware: the people will not be silenced, and together, they make the change. DBCFSN is one organization that has roots in illicit cultivation of land as a form of resistance, as does Keep Growing Detroit, and Arise Detroit. While these are only a sample of powerful, active city-based organizations that I will discuss in the context of guerrilla gardening and cultivation as resistance, they are pivotal players in Detroit's food scene. What is undeniable, and what I hope to demonstrate, is that Detroit is a "deeply human terrain" (Cialdella 12).

GUERRILLA GARDENING IN DETROIT

There appears a collective consciousness amongst Detroit residents that the city will see land as valueless until the community turns it into something empowering, then, suddenly, the land is a

commodity ripe for development and economic investment. Reddit users in the r/GuerrillaGardening space articulate this understanding, too, and although this might be seen as a deterrent for guerrilla gardeners, Detroit-based growers instead take this as an opportunity to legitimize their cultivation, sometimes by choice and sometimes by force. As Joseph Cialdella says in his book, "activists in the city found ways to connect with urban gardening and used the practice to give meaning to their larger visions of social change and justice in a city with a long history of injustice and discrimination" (Cialdella 144). While the individuals and organizations that I will focus on in subsequent paragraphs are now a part of more formally recognized practices, their origins and experiences are rooted in the illicit cultivation of land.

In 2011, Grist published an article titled "New Agtivist: Edith Floyd is making a Detroit urban farm, empty lot by empty lot" which details the work of Floyd, a school-worker-turned-guerrilla-gardener who cultivates empty lots near her home that are a direct result of the city's disinvestment and economic devaluing of communities of color. A recipient of TSOP Michigan's 2023 "Soul of Detroit" award, Floyd appreciates the recognition but is not impressed by the city's perforative action (TSOP Michigan 2023). Floyd wants a different kind of spotlight: she has things to say to Mayor Mike Duggan about the plans for her neighborhood and her unanswered calls about buying the now-vacant land that she grows on. While she waits, she continues to plant strawberries, collard greens, kale, okra, eggplant, and whatever other seeds Floyd can access. And Floyd, like many guerrilla gardeners, is not in it for the money. While all guerrilla gardeners have different motivations and origin stories, Floyd does it out of love and a desire to see autonomy restored to her community.

Edith Floyd in her home with the Soul of Detroit Award (TSOP 2023).

Floyd embodies Monica White's notion of "prefigurative politics". Her nearly four decades in the northeast side neighborhood of Detroit have been riddled with changes. When she and her husband first moved there, she described the town as "beautiful", but then describes how racism, the exit of industrial job sources, and a call for an airport expansion dramatically altered the landscape, reducing her neighbors from around 66 to 6 on her street (Crouch 2011). These changes, Floyd notes, were not accidental or purely circumstantial—her community (a predominantly black community) was intentionally left out of political conversations and ignored during decision making processes. Equipped with this knowledge, Floyd was determined to build her own autonomy right where she is, saying "I'm still here and I'm gonna stay here, 'cause I don't want to go somewhere and start all over again" (Floyd 2011). As a part of this resistance, she was determined to grow for the joy of it, for herself, and for her community. If nothing else,

she says, she wants to send a message to her government that there is value in the land and that her neighborhood is worth investing in.

However, Floyd is still waiting: “I’m really hoping the city will give me some answers. I want to buy the land, but I don’t know” (Floyd 2011). Because Floyd is growing on public land, she’s constantly at risk that the long-awaited airport expansion project finally happens, claiming the soil she’s stewarded for decades. In the meantime, Floyd is creating the possibility “to move from conditions of oppression to conditions of self-sufficiency and self-determination” (White 4). Her form of resistance is a bridge between both the traditional form of democratic change (calling her representatives and voting for legislators) as well as the non-traditional, immediate ways of change (planting season after season and investing in her community). Floyd wants control over her food access: in an interview she laments the loss of a grocery store at the center of town before the city came and bought everything, and the ability to make decisions about what happens to her neighborhood. And if that means illicitly planting seeds on public land as her physical and immediate form of resistance, then so be it, Floyd says: “I’m doing this because I love it” (Floyd 2011).

Love is an incredible motivator. The members of DSNI saw love—for their neighborhood, themselves, and the land—as a reason for their work in securing vacant land for community growing. And they aren’t the only neighborhood group working to increase access to land and what can be grown with it. Those who now cultivate the Stoepel Community Garden in downtown Detroit have a similar experience: four homes burned down when a transformer caught fire and there were no plans to rebuild the homes (Talley 2021). The lot was vacated and

turned into an unofficial dumping site, particularly for abandoned vehicles. Community members who believed that there was a different use for the land collectively decided that a garden—with raised beds since soil remediation would be too resource and time intensive—should be the next chapter in the plot's story. The space has now transformed into a community hub: there are benches in shaded canopies, toys spread throughout the tall grass and scattered plots of flowers, a resident-painted sign, and beds of vegetables that represent the desires and cultures of the community. It would seem that love, in addition to food, is grown at the Stoepel Community Garden. While they are now supported by the non-profit ARISE Detroit, a strategic move in order to keep their land as community growing space, the initial phase of cultivation was certainly an act of guerrilla gardening and resistance. Residents were saying to the city/those treating the land as a valueless space that they wanted access to growing space and that they would have an immediate say in how and what they feed themselves.

Members of the Stoepel Community Garden pictured with their collectively made sign, garden infrastructure, and pollinator bed (Talley 2021).

Keep Growing Detroit (KGD), an organization with the mission to "promote a food sovereign city where the majority of fruits and vegetables consumed by Detroiters are grown by residents within the city's limits", is noted by the Detroit Food Policy Council as one of the leading initiatives for pushing food justice forward in the city (KGD 2023). Their initiatives are continuously adapting to the needs of the community, from establishing an online farm store at the onset of the pandemic to extending their land access program as a tool to preserve vacant lots for community growing, KGD epitomizes the "from the community for the community" model (Behnke et. al 164). They directly address the barriers that guerrilla gardeners face: "growers that don't own the property that they're cultivating face an increased risk of losing the time, energy, and resources that they've invested" (KGD 2021). KGD offers this non-comprehensive list of supports for growers: figuring out who owns the property, understanding city programs and the process to purchase, supporting growers with filling out a property applications, developing plot plans, changing the land use to urban agriculture, and understanding city ordinances that relate to urban agriculture (KGD 2021). All of these are about working alongside the grower—not taking over their work or forcing them into a pre-set plan of how to continue cultivating. KGD's commitment to accessibility, collective empowerment, community food sovereignty, and reverence for the land is evident in their resources and programming.

True food sovereignty requires autonomy over the entire growing process, which also means consistent access to community-managed land. A 2015 interview with one of KGD's co-director articulates the importance of land access: "making space available–large or small–to grow food can really contribute to more resilient, stable communities and a high quality of life" (Atkinson 2015). Guerrilla gardeners throughout history and by whatever name have similarly understood

this: their cultivation is promoting the immediate autonomy of the growing process and saying to their governments “we are here and valuing this land in ways you aren’t, we deserve the space to grow our food, our way”.

The Detroit Black Community Food Security Network (DBCFSN) is an organization that understands the city’s complex history with food and has their own history of acting in ways that send clear messages to the city’s government. Joseph Cialdella, in his 2020 book Motor City Green: A Century of Landscapes and Environmentalism in Detroit describes the mission of the DBCFSN as “a fundamental shift in power” (Cialdella 155). The organization themself describes their mission working “to build self-reliance, food security and justice in Detroit’s Black community by influencing public policy, engaging in urban agriculture, promoting healthy eating, encouraging cooperative buying and directing youth towards careers in food-related fields” (DBCFSN 2006). Malik Yakini first’s seed of cultivation as resistance was planted in his childhood, when he grew a garden in his backyard (much to the chagrin of his guardians)—a start not too far from the work of many guerrilla gardeners. His vision for Detroit is deeply rooted in the return of the land to those whose exploited labor and knowledge have stewarded it for generations. Many of Yakini’s media appearances and quotes discuss the importance of city-wide food sovereignty and the ability for residents to have autonomy over their own food supply, in one interview he describes this as “critically important” (Abdellatif 2023).

The DBCFSN, a well recognized force for city-wide change, acknowledges its embedded positionality within the community and uses this to advocate for increased land access and protection of existing initiatives. A 2020 article from Click On Detroit highlights this work in

which the DBCFSN along with two other agricultural organizations led a campaign to raise over $40,000 to help black residents purchase land (Johncox 2020). “This is what revolutions are about”, Cialella says, “they are about evolving to a higher humanity, not higher buildings” (Cialella 147). The DBCFSN, informed by community knowledge and experiences, are actively working to redirect funds into their spaces, seeking spatial justice via social and economical justice. Donnie Johnson Sackey’s work on spatial justice and the role of the guerrilla gardener holds relevance within the DBCFSN and their community impact—both he and Yakini consider the historical context of what makes a place. Edward Soja’s book and the DBCFSN’s work is a reminder that location will always be more than simply a longitude and latitude, nothing exists in a vacuum. Location determines one’s access and privilege and, as Soja says, “the (social) inculcation of injustice into our geographies (and histories) arises in a most basic way from the inequalities that are produced from the uneven geographical effects of every individual action and all social processes” (Soja 71). Despite Soja’s verbose tendencies, his sentiments that the history of the land and geography play a critical role in understanding guerrilla gardening and food agency. Malik Yakini has even worn a shirt to a media day that reads “I am because we are”—his own experience and Detroit-based knowledge makes him well positioned to advocate for his city through direct action and political organizing (Louya & Lewkow 2022). The DBCFSN works alongside—not in an overpowering or outwardly hierarchical way—community members who want to cultivate land, especially when they’re doing it as resistance against the cycles of marginalization and disinvestment Detroit residents have experienced.

Two other initiatives I want to highlight are the Detroit Land Back Authority (DLBA) and the Detroit Food Justice Task Force (DFJTF) as they are both directly engaged with community

empowerment through the redistribution of vacant lots. It's prefigurative politics all over again, this time in less formal language. The DLBA operates under the mission to "return the city's blighted and vacant properties to productive use" (DLBA 2013). Land bank, a term they define as "a public entity with unique powers to put vacant, abandoned, and deteriorated properties back to productive use according to community goals", coincides well with the interests of many guerrilla gardeners. The final clause, "according to community goals", is a subtle, yet incredibly intentional way of shifting the power to the people. It's allowing for change over time and a dynamic definition of "productive". Right now, many Detroit residents would say that productive use of these lots would be remediated soil that can become growing hubs of culturally relevant, community-grown food: guerrilla gardening on the more formalized and protected side. I'll bookmark this practice—and its potential for feasible, governmental change—until Chapter Three where I'll add it as a tool for my proposed framework.

The Detroit Food Justice Task Force (DFJTF), a group who is most active on Facebook, regularly posts and re-posts different updates, infographics, and celebrations of all things food justice in the city. The origins of the DFJTF demonstrate an initiative that formed without governmental support, structure, or approval. Instead, the DFJTF is a

> "consortium of People of Color led organizations and allies that share a commitment to creating a food security plan for Detroit that is: sustainable; that provides healthy, affordable foods for all of the city's people; that is based on best-practices and programs that work; and that is just and equitable in the distribution of food and jobs" (Rivera & Stewart 2012).

Self-organized and operated, the DFJTF statement of values recognizes the complex social histories of power imbalance that shape their reality (articulated in their tenth principle: "we recognize that hunger in our community, across the nation and around the world exists as a result of neo liberal socio-economic policies and agricultural practices") as well as acknowledge that the most equitable way forward is through community led change (Rivera & Stewart 2012). All fourteen points could be unpacked here, but I'll highlight only a few with the added encouragement to read the entire statement and their corresponding commitments.

Principle #3: We are aligned with the principles of land sovereignty as they relate to ownership of land for food production and we stand in solidarity with movements toward food sovereignty both locally and globally (Rivera & Stewart 2012). The DFJTF's call for land sovereignty formalizes the call for many guerrilla gardeners—they want to challenge the commodification of land through direct, reciprocal relationships with the land and each other. Reddit and Facebook posts that highlight recent bouts of guerrilla gardening or update viewers on the progress of a project often begin by talking about the land, and do so with language that is vastly different from how land titles or other corporate-written material talks about land. This subtle, yet intentional, reverence for the land is echoed in the DFJTF's thirteenth principle, which states "we value two way relationships with those we work with and those for whom we work" (Rivera & Stewart 2012). While many organizations imply two-way relationships in their mission and work, the DFJTF's formalized space for such a practice challenges dominant (capitalistic) narratives around exploitative and transactional relationships. The DFJTF is one non-profit that can "serve as [a] buffer that protects autonomous movements from government repression"

(Smith 15). The non-profit is not co-opting the work and motivation of guerrilla gardeners, rather, the organization is using its positionality as a recognized group with resources and voice to help amplify the calls for land and food sovereignty.

These individuals, organizations, and initiatives are actively practicing prefigurative politics—"the construction of alternative political systems that are democratic and include processes of self-reflection" (White 3). Building the conditions of possibility for change in an underground, rhizomatic way is not finishing the work, nor is it a step-by-step guide to implementing the change. What it is, however, is an intentional reconstruction of what it means for the personal to be political and how collective understandings of land, cultivation, and resistance can shift in radical, root-grasping ways. Guerrilla gardeners are not changing everything, they are demonstrating a different way to understand our relationship to the land and how to build possibility. One might consider this a proof of concept, guerrilla gardeners are showing communities and governments the necessary conditions to make large (in scope and scale) change. What these Detroit-specific cases show are the tangible, active frameworks shaped by conditions of history in order to altair their own reality, and this happens through planting seeds in the ground, building raised beds, painting signs together, and staying in a neighborhood as a form of resistance—this is work on the small, immediate scale that is setting up the large, time-spread impact. Change has to start somewhere. And starting with love and a few seeds is a pretty meaningful way to begin.

CULTIVATION & ECOFEMINISM

Monica White, a long-time scholar and active community member of Detroit, completed a theory-in-action project she titled “Sisters of the Soil: Urban Agriculture in Detroit” in which she, after developing reciprocal relationships with women engaged in cultivation (as resistance), “present[s] Black women farmers’ attempts to transform vacant land to create a community-based food system” (White 208). Early on, White defines community food security as “a condition in which all community residents obtain a safe, culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet through a sustainable food system that maximizes community self-reliance and social justice” (White 211). While the following analysis relates her conclusions to the impact of guerrilla gardening more broadly, I want to take a moment and acknowledge her selected title, “Sisters of the Soil”. Reciprocal relationships mean that there is value given to both sides, in this case the humanness given to women of color and the reverence given to the life in the soil. To speak of the soil as a living being that stewards the people who cultivate all aspects of the soil is a continuation of afro-indigenous practices that do not see land simply as a commodification or economic asset.

Applying an ecofeminist lens, White amplifies the perspective of women-identifying residents who have a variety of experience and motivations for restoring life—in more than one sense—to vacant land. None of these power dynamics or social forces can exist in isolation: economic disinvestment is a product of racist beliefs and gendered views of the world. The intersectionality of identities and oppressions is not missed on White’s account of urban agriculture in Detroit, and her decision to prioritize the voices of women-identifying community members of color is an explicit recognition that the most marginalized often are left out of conversations. In between

personal narratives, White offers nuanced analysis of the language participants use to describe themselves, their situations, and their hopes. I offer a few excerpts from White's chapter in Black Food Matters: Racial Justice in the Wake of Food Justice as a way of continuing these conversations and emphasizing the interconnectedness of different injustices, especially as a tool for connecting with the land.

> "Gardening in the City of Detroit is saying, 'Fuck it!' It says, I can grow my own food *and* I can feed my community" (White 217);

> "Resistance [and food] started before enslavement ended…youu resist when you grow" (White 217-218);

> "The garden is a gathering place. It's like the earth takes up your problems…you're weeding the earth and it's like you're pulling out problems in your mind. You are venting your anger and it feels like you leave it there…you gotta go out and weed; it's a stress reliever" (White 221).

White, and others, often relate the act of growing to exercising self-determination and political agency. For women of color, it is a direct and immediate "response to their initial feelings of abandonment and helplessness" (White 216). Here is a community defining and creating their own empowerment—they aren't waiting for governmental programming or outside funding. White describes this kind of food system transformation as "an example of what can happen when the community controls those social institutions with which it comes into contact, such as

with community-controlled education, community-based policing, and so on" (White 214). Belonging to a community that has seen the compounding effects of economic, gender, and environmental degradation from outside forces creates the possibility of change that, by starting with the most marginalized, creates room for all—after all, only we will keep ourselves safe. As Dr. Crystal Jones said in a 2019 Tweet, "there's a huge difference between 'you are welcome here' and 'this space was created with you in mind'", and those at the intersection of gender, racial, and economic marginalization are, historically, used to hearing the first (Jones 2019). White, however, wants to use her positionality and community embeddedness to re-distribute the power and center these identities, making space for the latter declaration (that these spaces are designed with them in mind) to become reality and taking it a step further in that these women are the ones designing their own future (Smith 4). White articulates this phenomenon on page 214 of "Sisters of the Soil" where she emphasizes gender roles in the food system (for "political, liberatory reasons"), and turning gardening spaces into safe spaces as a place where "they are able to define their behavior as a form of resistance, one in which their resistance is against the social structures that have perpetuated inequality" (White 214).

SOLIDARITY VS. CO-OPTION

I want to make a distinction between solidarity and co-option. In sociology, solidarity is thought of as mutual support for a group (either from members within or outside of a the group), often for political action or identity (Bell 2014). Co-option, on the other hand, is typically (politically and socially) thought of as taking something from another group or identity—this could be an idea, practice, term, or behavior—and claiming it as one's own without proper accreditation (Bell 2014). This generally means that a dominant group is co-opting something from a marginalized

group, making it acceptable for the group with more power while continuing to oppress those who practice it in the original group (e.g. when a white woman celebrity wears a hijab as a fashion statement but when women of color/muslim women wear it they are criminalized or targets of violence). There is overlap with (cultural) appropriation, but I'm talking about co-option in the sense of power dynamics and taking up community-led action.

The earlier example of realtors taking photos of guerrilla gardening to increase property rates demonstrates how the dominant structure of late stage capitalism co-opts the work of guerrilla gardeners for the personal gain of those with concentrated amounts of power (Todd 178). Guerrilla gardening is often implicitly about challenging dominant capitalism in ways that don't prioritize transactional relationships. Rather, those who engage in guerrilla gardening create a resistance that is more political in implication, changing conversations about economic value and land ownership. Solidarity models focus on collaboration, proper recognition, and amplification of those engaged in the work. Realtors capitalizing on the labor of those who are intentionally practicing outside of and resisting dominant capitalism through their work creates an intriguing irony.

Reddit users are talking about this, too. One poster in r/GuerrillaGardening has this to say about it: "if anything is too successful in Detroit, the city (and state) wa[nt]s a slice of it" (JamesCarlin 2011). It's hard to deny the reality of this: when communities (whether or not they're in Detroit) turn devalued or vacant land into a safe space of collective empowerment and neighborhood autonomy, city governments seem to suddenly remember that those pieces of land exist and that they had grand plans or development proposals that have mysteriously been on hold for years.

The reasons for such development range from increasing community wealth to economic empowerment for the city, but the reality is that these plans are the interest of the powerful, external members of government or corporations who have a hand in the city's decisions. In many cities, including Detroit, it is council members who are endowed with the exclusive power to determine how land is used. For guerrilla gardeners, this means that just when they're beginning to create a sustainable model for their cultivation and really establishing themselves as a community hub, the city will co-opt the land, enforcing their control of the land to commodify it and strip it of its newly acquired, community-defined purpose. Land becomes a tool for economic development and profit as opposed to a place for enrichment and collective belonging.

This happens in scholarship, too. Authors can have positive intentions of amplifying the voices of community leaders and action-takers, but the language and methods they use can actually co-opt the work of others and transition practices like guerrilla gardening into a scholarship-only term that furthers the disconnect between on-the-ground communities and the world of academia. We're seeing a trend of everything turning into academics: there's a shift towards connecting with the people who live and know things (this is positive), but then people, whether intentional or not, begin to take these cosmologies, co-opting experiences for academic purposes. Over time, it begins to take the shape of a conglomerate model where something grows in popular discourse until it becomes so discussed that it suddenly belongs to someone else—it's a good thing to talk about until it gets talked about by other people so much that you lose who was actually talking about it and living it. As a relevant, tangible example, afro-indigenous cultivation practices are, at exponential rates, being co-opted for academic conversations about "regenerative agriculture". There are, however, ways to minimize or entirely avoid this impact.

From investing time in developing reciprocal relationships to co-authoring pieces with community members, the academic community can work alongside the spaces that are often excluded from scholarship to create a new space that prioritizes solidarity and a mutual commitment of support rather than co-option that perpetuates systemic harms. It requires an intentional centering—in institutions of power and academics—of the people doing the work and de-prioritizing profit or personal gain. As Robin Wall Kimmerer reminds us, "all flourishing is mutual" (Kimmerer 46).

CULTIVATION AS RESISTANCE

While it has appeared here and there, I want to take a moment to explicitly discuss a throughline of this chapter, the previous one, and the upcoming one. While many guerrilla gardeners—by whatever name—often grow for the joy of it or as a way to spend their time (particularly during a pandemic), many cultivate as a form of resistance. I try to articulate some of the forces, policies, and power dynamics that are the target of this resistance, but there are unidentifiable forces, internal motivations, and implicit interactions that will not find their way into any discussion of guerrilla gardening. Nonetheless, the motivations and silent resistances are valid and worth amplification, support, and celebration. This work of consistent recognition and progress is summarized well in a reminder from Angela Davis in her book Women, Culture and Politics: "you have to act as if it were possible to radically transform the world. And you have to do it all the time" (Davis 56).

CELEBRATION AS A TOOL FOR FOOD JUSTICE

ARISE Detroit, a city-based organization with the goal of "unit[ing] the entire community", is committed to celebrating the good things happening in Detroit all the time (ARISE 2023). Whether it's a new affordable housing project, a neighborhood trash pick-up, or a school fundraiser, ARISE wants to be there to support their community and highlight those who are a part of the change (Talley 2021). I want to take a moment to appreciate the value of celebration. When working in deeply flawed and highly-functional systems, it can be easy to just move on to the next project after making progress, but sustainable movements and holistic initiatives understand the importance of celebration and do so intentionally, regularly, and proactively.

Nothing blooms year round—nature, the land, crops all pause and have seasons of rest. If we are committed to redesigning our lives and communities in ways that reflect the structures and relationships of nature, then we, too, need seasons of rest. Corporate capitalism and inherited structures of imperialism rely on constant accumulation, productivity, and movement. However, other cosmologies and Indigenous ways of knowing operate in different structures, channeling the patterns of nature in their political organization, systems of work, and relationships. While guerrilla gardening is a form of resistance, pauses and celebration are another. I admire ARISE Detroit for their commitment to celebration. They are doing important, systems change work and are a good model for how other community-led organizations can pause, acknowledge, and be with each other in moments of progress and change.

Amplifying the work of these deeply imbedded and intentional organizations is a way of supporting the continued work of guerrilla gardeners in Detroit while also acknowledging that

this practice of cultivation as resistance is a first-step—a powerful one, but a first-step nonetheless—towards moving local governments in the direction of holistic practice of food justice. A 2022 Eater Detroit Article from Winona Bynum articulates this necessity of governmental support: "over the last few years, new and well-established nonprofits and urban farms have been responding to food insecurity in Detroit. But to keep the momentum, organizers need support in the form of proactive government policy" (Bynum 2022).

DETROIT'S GOVERNMENTAL ACTION

In less formalized accounts of Detroit's food (in)security scene, the opinions of current Detroit residents are not always reflected in policy and governmental spending. One resident spoke about this in Reddit's r/GuerrillaGardening thread, commenting "I think that Detroit can be a major hub of organic growing and sustainability. Why aren't they focusing on that in the government sector?" (wildernessexplorer 2011). Bynum's article sums these feelings up well, saying, "our community deserves a better food system" (Bynum 2022). This section discusses some of the city-supported initiatives, their community involvement, and how guerrilla gardening can move their agendas forward.

In 2009, the Detroit City Council unanimously approved the formation of a Detroit Food Policy Council (DFPC), equipped with the mission

> "To influence policy which ensures the development and maintenance of a sustainable and equitable food system, resulting in a food-secure City of Detroit in which all of its

residents are hunger-free, healthy, and benefiting from a robust food system" (DFPC 2023).

And if they're looking for immediate, community-led action that helps advance this mission? Then they might look into who is cultivating vacant lots throughout their city, listen to their stories, and amplify their wishes for Detroit's future. All aspects of CACR (commons as praxis, prefigurative possibility, and economic autonomy) are addressed both by guerrilla gardening and the DFPC's mission. Through investing in localized farm land within areas of diminished density—a tool that Dan Carmody says can "lower the costs of re-using those parts of Detroit…and create a path to increased household wealth"—DFPC is creating the groundwork (quite literally) for sustainable, long-term community food autonomy (Carmody 2013). For guerrilla gardeners, legality is necessary but insufficient, but the support DFPC, as a policy-based group, offers to Detroit based cultivators makes the institutionalizing accessible land possible. Working towards a "sustainable and equitable food system" requires the acknowledgement that, systemically, Detroit has seen an incredible amount of disinvestment from food procurement opportunities and that routes to economic autonomy have to come from within the community, not from exploitative contracts with big-box stores that have alternative, self-motivated priorities.

The DFPC practices a "consensus decision making model" in which "all voices are heard and all those making decisions are willing to fully support implementation of decisions made" (DFPC 2009). Consensus decision making, a tool practiced by social justice movements that became mainstream during the Occupy Movement, often relies on horizontal leadership that is both

inclusive and democratic (Cornell 2). Consensus is not about achieving unanimity, but more about looking for a solution that everyone involved is okay with. While there are limitations to such a process (such as stagnancy without a new decision or how time consuming it can be), it often reflects a "participatory, egalitarian, self-determining movement and a society with the same characteristics" (Cornell 3). For a local government-supported group to explicitly practice such a process is suggestive of systems level change—but the talk needs to be followed by action, a pitfall that many organizations experience when they try to connect their mission with their work.

Encouragingly, the conversation around land use and access is happening beyond the DFPC. Community members who have talked to Planet Detroit, The Michigan Citizen, and Eater Detroit all demonstrate a nuanced awareness of the proposal and development process, as well as how their voices are often ignored in these decision making spaces. One article notes that "all sorts of proposals have been floated to return the land to productive use. Most of them require great investment or benefit few people" (Carmody 2013). Another clearly articulates what systemic change must involve, particularly for residents of Detroit: "any serious efforts at solving food insecurity and injustice and promoting food sovereignty must address the issue of land; who "owns" it, who controls it and who benefits from it" (Yakini 2013). Guerrilla gardening, however, is an already-in-practice tool for changing the conversation of land ownership—fundamentally disrupting how an over-commodifying, amoral capitalist thought process considers the concept of land ownership. In addition, it offers a (relatively immediate) way to minimize the cost of repurposing some of this vacant land.

While my argument advocates for the recognition of guerrilla gardening as a tool for changing these conversations and moving local governments to pursue a more equitable, food just future, I want to also acknowledge that, as Malik Yakini said in 2013, “this is perhaps the most difficult social justice because making things right would involve massive land and wealth redistribution” (Yakini 2013). Indeed, truly radical justice of this kind would require extensive decolonization—an entirely separate (but ever-relevant) paper that I, unfortunately, do not have the capacity to engage with here. However, I want to make some space to mention that decolonization theory, land-back movements, and spatial justice are some of my most reliant guides in this work and I pull heavily from them in how I articulate my understanding and argument for guerrilla gardening.

As proof that this is a fast evolving topic, Detroit made a major governmental change in the city months after I began this project. In September 2023, Mayor Mike Duggan named Tepfirah Rushdan the city’s first Director of Urban Agriculture (Barrett 2023). While Detroit wasn’t the first city to do this, it’s still a significant indicator that local governance is considering the interests of the residents. Director Rushdan recalls the moment Mayor Duggan understood the value of urban agriculture as well as the many steps and setbacks growers faced, urging him to create this role. She describes the context of Mayor Duggan’s realization:

> “It was during a recent meeting between city officials and leaders in Detroit’s vibrant agriculture community about a new land value tax proposal championed by the mayor. Farming advocates successfully pushed for changes that would save city farms and community gardens from paying higher taxes but also

> brought the mayor a list of other warriors preventing residents from growing food despite the availability of vacant land across Detroit" (Rushdan 2023).

The power struggle is evident: those cultivating land are consistently advocating for the right to keep access to their land and pushing the government to acknowledge the important, yet difficult, work of growing food. This position would not be possible without the decades of work and advocacy from previously discussed—and many not discussed—organizations. Their initiatives and models of collective agency were the catalyst for creating this kind of governmental shift. Rushdan herself admits to this frustration, expressing her anger over learning how complicated the process of finding land and obtaining permits is. The solution for her seems clear: "at the end of the day, rather than me problem solve with 100 farmers who were having trouble with the bureaucracy, it seems simpler to bring somebody in to fix the bureaucracy" (Rushdan 2023). Here is radical change in action—it's grasping the issue at the root, reimaging processes and procedures proactively instead of addressing challenges retroactively.

Tepfirah Rushdan in a DBCFSN community garden on her first day as Director of Urban Agriculture for the city of Detroit (Barrett 2023).

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Director Rushdan's position offers her a unique positionality: she is able to serve as a liaison between grassroots organization and the city, advocating for those doing on-the-ground work and working within local governance to make tangible change (Barrett 2023). Director Rushdan, however, is not the only advocate for the people working for the city. Council member Fred Durhal III acknowledges the role urban growers who cultivate vacant land play in feeding Detroit: "urban farmers also bring abandoned properties into productive use and improve neighborhoods" (Barrett 2023). The power of having community members in positions of power to advocate for their neighbors can never be understated. Collective food sovereignty is a product of community-led, connected work, and Director Rushdan's embeddedness within Detroit's urban-growing scene demonstrates her deep commitment to a food secure future.

Representation and a voice for the people has a tremendous impact on individuals and organizations engaging in social impact, counter-mainstream work. The appointment of a Director of Urban Agriculture is one of many initiatives local governments can take to support (guerrilla) gardeners and advance their communities towards a future that incorporates (food) justice on all levels of operation. I take this momentum into the next chapter where I work through other actions, many influenced by collective action and community resilience, that local governments—specifically the hyper-local context of Easton, Pennsylvania—can undertake and support their residents on. Guerrilla gardening, and its more licit counterparts, are not the solution to widespread community autonomy, food security, and collective decision-making power, however, they are a viable first step in working towards a more food just future.

CHAPTER THREE

**"You cannot change any society until you take responsibility for it,
unless you see yourself as belonging to it and responsible for changing it. "**
-Grace Lee Boggs, Founding of Detroit Summer, 1992

FROM DETROIT TO EASTON

The past four years of my life have been spent almost exclusively in what, since 1752, has been known as Easton, Pennsylvania. Since long before that, however, this has been Lenni-Lenape land, soil stewarded by an Indigenous community that was forcibly removed from the land and who, through the inequity of the Walking Purchase of 1737, lost a majority of the earth that they had developed generations worth of reciprocal relationships with. My experience has been multi-layered: as a student at the on-the-hill institution with a billion dollar endowment and as a community grower offering resources to the most food insecure parts of our city, I've seen contrast in the most literal sense. I have also spent four years developing my own understanding and then advocating for increased Indigenous rights, awareness, and sovereignty both at Lafayette and in the city. This is what any revolutionary work requires of us: to consistently engage with the change we want to see and move the work forward, even if we don't finish it. As Robin Wall Kimmerer says in her work, "all flourishing is mutual" and must be done together (Kimmerer 46).

I am grateful for the grace of those who have guided me in this work, offered their knowledge, and allowed me to work alongside them. I hope that this chapter offers frameworks—but not solutions—for not only the hyper-local context of Easton, but also for any city or community that wants to reimagine land sovereignty and how guerrilla gardening can be a tool for policy-based

food justice. Resistance is not confined to urban areas: rural communities have long bred activists and growers of all kinds. Collaborating on new futures means making room for everyone, and even though my framework is informed by my experience in the city of Easton, elements and redefining land ownership can be applied anywhere.

While I focus on Detroit as my main case study and use Easton as my example for policy influence, these are not the only urban areas in which guerrilla gardening—or the illicit cultivation of land as a form of resistance—is taking place. My own entry point to guerrilla gardening was through the work of Ashanté Reese in Washington D.C., namely her book Black Food Geographies. In her work, I found encouragement about the impact an empowered community can have, her words emulating those of Vandana Shiva: "the only way to build hope is through the Earth" (Reese 2019 & Shiva 2014). As I discussed in my Introduction, the work of Ron Finley in Los Angeles showed me that asking for forgiveness rather than permission is often what's required of those engaged in radical, root-moving work. Further, I've had the privilege of bearing witness to on-the-ground work of guerrilla gardeners and community cultivators in Philadelphia, inspired by their belief in neighborhood autonomy and consistent resistance. I have no doubt that all of these places could have entire anthologies dedicated to documenting and discussing the work that the people—and those who stewarded the land before US colonialism and industrialization developed urban centers—have done to maintain access to growing space and different avenues of increasing food security for themselves. However, this work in particular is about Easton's existing structures as well as the city's potential for new frameworks, definitions of success, and networks of support. The core of this chapter asks the question: what would it actually mean for guerrilla gardening to be revolutionary?

Before I get into a reimagining of land sovereignty and guerrilla gardening turned food justice, I want to offer a brief—and, likely incomplete—overview of Easton's different food-related programs (all of which are included in the Additional Resources section). Thinking about on-the-ground food justice work, Easton has some really incredible programs and people working to increase local food security and land sovereignty.

The eight community gardens that Easton Garden Works manages are all sites that were, at some point and in some way, sites of guerrilla gardening. In 2018 the Greater Easton Development Initiative (a non-profit) consolidated the coordination of the different gardens and now houses them in a city-supported program that still prioritizes community ownership, access, and input for all resources and events. The formalization of guerrilla gardening has allowed Easton, and its residents, to maintain growing space where they have the ability to cultivate fresh, culturally relevant food for themselves. Over at the Easton Urban Farm, an extension of the Easton Area Neighborhood Center, the non-profit house initiative grows food with and for the community, keeping growing space within the city's urban space. The Easton Hunger Coalition (EHC), which was at its pique involvement at the onset of the pandemic, is a landing point for all things food-access and support for the city's residents. Their resources document all of the food hubs, gardens, and pantries, helping to direct folks to the support that's available. In past conversations with some of the EHC coordinators, they've expressed that their biggest goal is to one day not exist, saying that they envision a food secure Easton. This is often a desire for many non-profits working in short-term, immediate services. Social services, as scholar Paul Kivel writes, are necessary. He says:

> "We need to provide services for those most in need, for those trying to survive, for those barely making it. We also need to work for social change so that we create a society in which our institutions and organizations are equitable and just, and all people are safe, adequately fed and sheltered, well educated, afforded safe and decent jobs, and empowered to participate in the decisions that affect their lives". (Kivel 130)

It is both, and. EHC, and other organizations, work to balance being responsive to the real needs that people have right now and being proactive in envisioning and working towards social change in the future, particularly when it comes to securing food sovereignty for Easton's residents. Social services are immediate prevention, just as guerrilla gardening is immediate food access. Social change is thinking about how future generations will not perpetuate harm, just as guerrilla gardening is an indication that empowered communities break out of oppressive systems (Kivel 140).

On the more political side, Easton is the county-seat for Northampton County and a city covered by the Lehigh Valley Food Policy Council (LVFPC). Composed of impact and community-driven individuals, the LVFPC works from four pillars: food access, advocacy, aggregation, and collaboration (LVFPC 2022). While land access is not explicitly defined, it plays a role in all of their initiatives and is often a statistic they highlight when sharing reports of their work. Now in their ninth year, this is a group ready for a reimagining of how we think about land sovereignty and food justice. The LVFPC coordinator is also the regional representative on the Pennsylvania Food Policy Council (PFPC), a statewide collective that discusses all things PA

food. The PFPC is a step up in scale from the local impact that the LVFPC might have, but there is something to be said about the resources and reach of the PFPC that is useful in considering alternative forms of change and advocacy—particularly when I'm interested in thinking about people-informed policy.

PEOPLE INFORMED POLICY

Winona Bynum, the executive director of the Detroit Food Policy Council, writes about the necessity of work beyond emergency responses to food insecurity. I will use her Detroit-based analysis as a transition to consider how other cities might develop and implement more effective policy. Bynum's article gets at the critical roles of both nonprofits and governmental support. She acknowledges that to keep the momentum moving towards food justice we need "support in the form of proactive government policy" (Bynum 2022). The guerrilla gardeners and similar cultivators I discuss are operating within a food system that relies on hunger, poverty, and systemic racism to uphold the pillars of abundance, wealth, and white supremacy that created and continue to dominate our national food system. Racist practices in land loans, exploitation of black and brown bodies, supermarket contracts that perpetuate spatial injustice, and contaminated soils and waterways all make it clear that the government and respective policy makers/enforcers play a critical role in shaping the food system. Therefore, the government and respective policy makers/enforcers are fundamentally critical in developing a more equitable and just food system that centers the voices, knowledge, and experiences of those most impacted by historical injustices. However, and as Bynum points out, there is still a need for the immediate pillars of support and social services given the well-functioning and deeply exploitative food system, but they often don't "address the root causes of the issues that lead to food insecurity,

like low wages, the lack of affordable housing, and limited neighborhood access to food sources — all of which are often linked to systemic racism" (Bynum 2022). Bynum's call to action requires people-informed and people-led policies, saying "we need governmental bodies and representatives who are committed to making sure federal, state, and local policies and programs not only provide frameworks for equitable food access but also leave space for the initiatives we want to see in our communities to evolve" (Bynum 2022). I admire Bynum's acknowledgement of her positionality within her city, and argue that those engaged in guerrilla gardening—and any kind of cultivation as resistance—are the people who can inform these policies and programs.

Land sovereignty is often not included in the mission statements of emergency food relief organizations, however, guerrilla gardening serves as bridge between both the immediate increase of access to fresh, local, and culturally appropriate food as well as a motivator for designing more inclusive and effective policies that can promote ideas such as land sovereignty and community autonomy.

THE ROLE OF LOCAL

There has been a theme of local governance and the role this level of support can have on increasing community growing autonomy and space. I am not the only one who shares this sentiment: many scholars, community organizers, and policy makers advocate for the inclusion of local governance in the fight for food justice. Simply put, "local authorities are the key players in such a process as they have the resources and the power to lead the change" (Delgado 146). Reddit users also echo this sentiment with one user posting in response to an urban agriculture

initiative: “Hell yeah this is awesome! Food sovereignty on a local level is paramount for healthy communities” (SpydySnake 2023).

Beginning with scale, one group of authors demonstrate how “policies that maintain local decision-making power, while maintaining channels for financial incentives, can cater to local contexts and demands, particularly if infrastructural and service provisions are met” (Baker et. al 7). Their research is focused on mixed-farming system adaptation and climate change—which guerrilla gardening can be a tool for mitigating via reducing concrete and urban heat effect, increasing carbon sequestration plant populations, and minimizing carbon emissions from importing produce. It is difficult to challenge the idea that local governments hold unrivaled, context-specific knowledge about their constituents and spaces. With incredible variation among ordinance enforcement, zoning laws, and property taxes, each localized site ought to be supported by the government that is the most familiar with, and directly influential to, their situation. Cecília Delgado, in her article “Accessing Common Land for Food: Prospective Policies for Local Governments” also speaks to this, saying “local authorities should have a more proactive role regarding land needs for local organic farmers to fulfill the needs of local communities” (Delgado 145). I want to emphasize her use of the word “proactive”, which contrasts with the copious amounts of reactive policies and programs we are currently seeing. From Dean Spade’s Mutual Aid, I echo the sentiment that “governance and innovation remain local, but knowledge, support, and solidarity are networked and shared” (Spade 41).

There are other benefits to local governance and involvement in food policy. Another group of scholars, in their work on local innovation in food system policies, describe the “increasingly

important role" local governments should have in food system governance, particularly around the development of "formal and informal rules, norms and processes that shape policies and decisions'" (Carrad et. al 116). They attribute this to high levels of innovation in food policy at the local level—a result of societal shifts in consumer understanding, promotion of the slow food movement, and increasing dissatisfaction with larger levels of government. Regardless of how local governments go about envisioning and implementing food policy, they need to put the people with knowledge and lived experiences (who are often at the bottom of the power hierarchy) in contact with the policymakers and outside knowledge (those who are often at or near the top of the power hierarchy) (Lieberman 2002).

Policy often requires three components: lived experience and relevant context, deep knowledge of the mechanism and tools for change, and the power to enforce different initiatives and agendas. I advocate for a framework that begins with the people who have the lived experiences and knowledge (and not just the academic kind), allowing them to drive conversations and programs that would benefit those who have been the most historically oppressed—after all, designing something with the most marginalized in mind creates space for everyone (O'Donovan 548). I then suggest that those with power come to meet those with lived experiences where they are at, using their platforms to amplify the voices, desire, and work of the most impacted. Liberation and radical change is generally motivated by a desire to completely uproot existing structures of power, restructuring who gets what and why through a non-hierarchical empowerment of intersecting identities. Guerrilla gardening is the (literal) groundwork of this change: illicitly cultivating land without permission, often in communities that are a product of

historical disenfranchisement, is sending a message of resistance that suggests where the power should—and does—actually lie.

I want to acknowledge that local government is not always the best scale to incorporate food policy for food justice. Ann Lieberman, in her lectures on policy, talks about how "the local is full of all kinds of variability" (Lieberman 2002). There are certainly strengths to this variability—stagnancy is rarely the solution to systemic change—and there are also weaknesses that many people cite as a reason for reinforcing the role of larger, more scaled out governments.

Moving out a degree, to the regional level, Marco Ginanneschi and Finanza Futura Srl note that "thinking regionally can help change the current food system in a strategic way" (Ginanneshi & Srl 14). Many conversations about arable land, farmland preservation, and land development happen at the regional level. Ginanneschi and Srl offer the idea of a "regionally oriented food industry" which can serve as an alternative model that is situated "between the corporation model delivering standardized food and our idealized imagery of vegetable growers and home chefs" (Ginanneshi & Srl 16). They offer a perspective of the food system model in which the local is engaged with the production, procurement, consumption, and disposal of food but where the distribution of food is controlled by large, corporate actors. For them, a regionally oriented food system helps connect these groups and offers the opportunity for a power shift from the corporate to the local.

There is discussion about what constitutes a regional versus central government, and while I won't linger on these distinctions, I will say that a central government is the next degree out from

regional in terms of governance scale. Sounman Hong, in his article "What are the Areas for Competence for Central and Local Governments? Accountability Mechanisms in Multi-Level Governance" talks about the positionality of the central government in supporting initiatives that are less visible to local constituents and/or require timelines that exceed the election season and term limits of local government. He concludes that the most effective forms of accountability and competency, both from historical and contemporary examples, "display a mix of state-centered political tactics and such marketplace weapons as boycott, buycotts, and consumer education" (Hong 169). I would add resistance with immediate results to this list. If local governments are concerned about the timeline of different initiatives or policies, they might consider existing work that their community members are employing—and why. Guerrilla gardening, as I have argued, is valuable for the immediacy of possible change. By the next harvest, as Delgado points out, there can be an increase in available land for community growing and access to people-grown, culturally relevant food (Delgado 146). Even though many policies that protect arable land are a result of state-centered tactics, Hong discusses, at the local level, the immediacy of boycotting outside-of-the-community food and cultivating the soil for more intentionally, autonomously produced food (Hong 171). Outside-of-the-community food, which Malik Yakini critiques in an earlier passage, often comes from corner stores strategically supported by cash-centric politicians and big box grocery stores that are profit, not people, driven.

There are, however, differing opinions about how arable land should be managed, tracked and used. I want to pause here and point out that these verbs, which are those used by scholars, politicians, and developers, are heavily economical. They speak about the land in a commodified, lifeless way. I want my argument and language to reflect a deeper reverence for

the land, one that encompasses all of the life contained within and upon the soil, prioritizing reciprocal relationships and allowing the land to lead. Although much of Delgado's article employs economic language to discuss the land, I still value her takeaways and include them here as pieces of the framework for reconsidering land access and guerrilla gardening as a tool for holistic food justice. She argues that local authorities are the most equipped for identifying and mapping out "idle common land" (Delgado 145). The article goes on to discuss, in a very economic way, how idle common land that goes unused (I will substitute uncultivated in hopes or prioritizing a more relational discussion of the land) bears additional maintenance costs that are "indirectly supported by taxpayers" and doesn't use valuable "public resources" (Delgado 145). There is no point in rewording something that is already articulate, and so I point to Delgado's conclusion as piece of the argument for local governance:

> "According to our research field, cooperation across city departments and local stakeholders is possible, and could spearhead an integrated food policy to turn [uncultivated] land into a decisive element of the local food system" (Delgado 146).

Understanding the importance and viability of local governance is a piece of my proposed framework, but I also argue that more attention—but not co-option—should be given to guerrilla gardening as a proposal for what a more food just future might look like.

All of this is not, however, to imply that the only path to achieve food justice is through local government and policy—quite the contrary. Food justice is a broadly defined concept, and there is no one model outcome that suggests "achieving" food justice. What any initiative must

include, however, is a commitment to prioritizing those who have been the most historically marginalized, a radical belief in liberation for all—which means *all*—, and the incorporation of many voices and identities. I am suggesting frameworks and ways of thinking about change that can be implemented at the level of local governance and policy as well as within community organizing spaces that operate beyond governmental influence.

FOOD SECURITY VS. SOVEREIGNTY VS. CITIZEN

In Mark Winne's Food Rebels, Guerrilla Gardeners, and Smart-Cookin' Mamas: Fighting Back in an Age of Industrial Agriculture, he breaks down widespread perceptions of food security, food sovereignty, and the food citizen. I have used the two former terms throughout to discuss the potential guerrilla gardening has as an immediate increase in food security in addition to it being a practice for achieving community-wide food sovereignty. As I start to set up a framework for what inclusive, proactive, and equitable food policy might look like, I think it's important to explicitly define these terms. From an earlier section, I use Monica White's definition of food security: "a condition in which all community residents obtain a safe, culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet through a sustainable food system that maximizes community self-reliance and social justice" (White 211). This concept has very tangible implications: it means finding and then growing varieties of crops that matter to the cultures and histories of community members, it means supporting the growth of nutritionally-dense and non-genetically modified food, it means having neighborhood weeding days where recipes are exchanged and the desired plants are prioritized, it means community policing and clean-up, and it means so much more that cannot be contained on a page. While earlier sections and narratives discuss the motivations of guerrilla gardeners—many which are

summed up in the fact that they "just can't get farming out of my system"—ideas of food security are often motivators for cultivating the soil (Cialdella 142).

Food sovereignty is more nuanced and different groups, initiatives, and governments apply varying definitions, adjusting it in ways that make the most sense for their context. I pull from Malik Yakini's discussion of food sovereignty in relation to land. He says, "food sovereignty must address the issue of land; who 'owns' it, who controls it and who benefits from it" (Yakini 2013). The DBCFSN define black food security, more specifically, as

> "the right of people of African descent to access healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems. Food sovereignty is, therefore, a holistic, healthy and sustainable approach for communities to address chronic food insecurity" (DBCFSN 2006).

Guerrilla gardening fundamentally disrupts the concept of ownership, challenging ideas of control, worth, and development. Those who illicitly cultivate publicly owned land are resisting the notion that only certain, powerful entities (who are often corporations, not specific individuals, and are rarely from within the community) can "own" land and deem it as an economic entity. Guerrilla gardeners resist the narratives of lifeless dirt and, instead, actively contribute to narratives of soil that is full of life, memories, and love. While I've already included Robin Wall Kimmerer's quote about reciprocity in the garden, I will bring it back here as I think it's an important reminder for framing the work, motivations, and outcomes of guerrilla

gardeners. She says, “something essential happens in a vegetable garden. It’s a place where if you can’t say ‘I love you’ out loud, you can say it in seeds. And the land will reciprocate, in beans” (Kimmerer 127). At risk of generalizing all land developers, I don’t imagine many land surveyors or real estate agents enter into pieces of land, offer reverence, or utter “I love you” to the soil. And while guerrilla gardeners might not explicitly express their affection for the land, their cultivation is enough for the land to hear, and reciprocate in its own kind of language.

Other definitions of food sovereignty point to the policy sphere as a place where community autonomy—which has been described as “critically important”—is possible (Abdellatif 2023). In the introduction of Black Food Matters, Hanna Garth and Ashanté M. Reese define the food sovereignty movement as one that is grounded “in the people’s right to determine their own agricultural and food policies” (Garth & Reese 7). Winne echoes this in his introduction, saying “food sovereignty addresses the right of all nations to make their own food policies in order to feed their people because food is central to human and national survival” (Winne 153). Power to the people *means* power to the people. If those with the experiences, knowledge, and desire for collective liberation and autonomy are not a part of the conversations, policy making, and enforcing, then food sovereignty is not even a possible outcome. Guerrilla gardeners are sending a clear message to the policy makers and enforcers, they are saying that “we are here and we demand to be a part of the conversation”. It is in their space that they challenge how land is cultivated and what it means to own life.

In the food system spaces I’ve been in, I’ve heard the term food citizen less frequently, but the policy forums seem to hold on to this concept as different governing or lobbying bodies advocate

for certain food policies. Mark Winne defines a food citizen as "the person who sees the connection between the food [they] eat and the laws, budgets, and regulations that make up what is called public policy" (Winne 157). Within this seems to be an unspoken requirement of deep understanding—a type of knowing that situates historical systems of power alongside empowered examples of resistance.

EXISTING FORMS OF DEMOCRATIC CHANGE

Recently, it seems that democratic is synonymous with slow and unequal. Consistently those with power overrule the majority, disregard the voices of the people, and employ their own agendas. Promises of improvement are disguised "through liberal tropes of freedom and democratic belonging" (Garth & Reese 10). In reality, policies and programs will be approved with haste only when it benefits the most powerful. And if it's something designed for the most marginalized? Well, then it seems to magically disappear from the desks of the supposed democratic leader. This is why grassroots, non-hierarchical actions—like guerrilla gardening—are necessary for reimaging how change happens, and on what timeline. Before I lay out my proposed framework influenced by guerrilla gardening, I want to discuss some of the current practices of so-called "democratic change". Some scholars advocate for explicitly operating within the realm of democratic intervention, as Michael Pollen urges food activists to focus their efforts by "turning voting with forks into voting with votes" (Obenchain & Spark 124). Others maintain honest belief in the system of democracy, calling the "government, in other words, our collective expression of democracy" (Winne 47). Those who continue to trust that the current "expression of democracy" will restore land and power to the people are typically either enabled by intentional ignorance (often as a result of existing as

highly-privileged identities) or benefit from the existing structures (again, often a result of immense privilege). They encourage reforms "premised on the assumption that the systems we seek to dismantle are fundamentally fair and fixable" (Spade 38). Guerrilla gardeners do not share this sentiment.

In many justice movements and social service spaces, brainstorming sessions often include ideas of attending city council meetings, organizing community forums, staging a protest outside of government buildings, developing food policy councils, increasing voter participation, facilitating education events, and hosting call-bank sessions to phone representatives (Berlow 80 & Reynolds 57). This is not to say that these forms don't enact change—we've seen that soft-blocking a genocide-funding bank branch can shut it down for a day of business. Additionally, we've seen how "the lifting of a ban on hoop houses allows farmers to extend the growing season, collect additional rainwater for irrigation, and grow crops in areas that do not have access to city water" (Kerry & Ard 17). This latter example was done partially in attempt to "curb the spread of 'guerrilla' farms, where residents farm without the appropriate permits"—an example of reactive policy that is informed by the presence of guerrilla gardeners signaling to their governing bodies that they desire more accessibility and autonomy over their food sources (Kerry & Ard 17).

While there is undeniably positive change that comes from following democratic procedures, the widespread practice of guerrilla gardening and other illicit cultivation of land indicates that there is a need for external, reimagined forms of change. With acknowledgement of these viable, mostly legal forms of "democratic change", I am choosing to echo one of Winne's other

sentiments: “putting control back in the hands of the people is rough business. But so is democracy” (Winne 170). I argue that guerrilla gardening is a tangible example of change that exists outside of the realm of typical democratic change and it, instead, is putting control back into the hands of the people. As a set-up for my proposed framework, I want include a section of the mission statement from Dream Green—a community that helps people get guerrilla gardening:

> “Under the shadow of an irrelevant government, we were planting the seeds of a society where ordinary people are in control of their resources, their food and their decision-making... a world that encourages cooperation and sharing” (Miles 2023).

A NEW FRAMEWORK

Equipped with a robust context of guerrilla gardening, its many forms, nuances, and potential as well as current, on-the-ground examples, I want to transition into thinking about how guerrilla gardening can inform elements of holistic food justice. While I am positioning this within the hyper–local context of Easton, I believe there to be pieces of the following framework that are useful for any level of engagement with this work. Change is not linear or static, nor is my proposal of how groups and individuals might utilize the messaging and impact of guerrilla gardening. It begins with people and land—forming reciprocal relationships based on a mutual recognition of lived experience and validation of knowledge. This lays the groundwork for people-informed policy that alters commodifying and exploitative language into a vocabulary of respect and solidarity. With a blend of immediate *and* long-term structure, this work needs time and intentional conversation around how to define success and what it means for intersectional

identities and an understanding of historical oppressions. Other elements, in any order and any amount, include community buy-in and community authoring, outlining criteria, proactive design, setting up dynamic guidelines, prioritizing mutual aid, thinking outside of the budget(line) and listening in meaningful ways. Often, it will mean talking about what this work does *not* look like: reactive, top-down, economically-driven, over-commodification, disregard of the past, designed for the most privileged identity groups, only short-term, etc. I argue that guerrilla gardening is a way to reimagine food sovereignty through disrupting fundamental concepts of land ownership. At the heart of this framework is a call to prioritize reciprocal relationships, believe in the possibility of collective liberation, and embody the idea that we shouldn't "wait for anybody to give you permission" (Douglas 40).

Before design and implementation processes can take place, there needs to be intentional conversations about who is a part of these stages. Hanna Garth and Ashanté M. Reese articulate this requirement well in their introduction:

> "Who has the power to name and define? Who is creating policy? In what ways are Black and other people of color framed as the recipients of aid but rarely the theorists, creators, and experts, even though there is a long history of Black, Indigenous, and other people of color-led community-based activism that forms the crux of contemporary food justice movements?" (Garth & Reese 6)

As I worked through iterations of a framework for equitable policy and practice, I asked myself these questions and I now encourage any group or organization to also ask—and then listen—to

what community knowledge, historical context, and lived experience informs their work then, now, and moving forward. What other identities might be absent from the design process? Who is getting credit? Why are resources being distributed the way they are? How are we envisioning a future for all? And why, in 2024, is food still not recognized as a human right?

One critical way to enter into these spaces is through the prioritization of reciprocal relationships. Robin Wall Kimmerer's work is the basis of much of my own understanding and calls for such interactions:

> "Reciprocity helps resolve the moral tension of taking a life by giving in return something of value that sustains the ones who sustain us. One of our responsibilities as human people is to find ways to enter into reciprocity with the more-than-human world. We can do it through gratitude, through ceremony, through land stewardship, science, art, and in everyday acts of practical reverence" (Kimmerer 190).

Reciprocal relationships are built on active, intentional work; "the stage is set to discuss the relationships between selves and others, and between community and individuality, without replicating inaccurate ideas about humans " (Warren & Zalta 2005). We cannot do this work if we come at it through a lens of the transactional: guerrilla gardeners do not begin illicitly cultivating land as an exchange, they do it as a way of helping themselves and each other (human or not).

We, also, cannot come to this work without holding space for all the grief, anger, hope, and love that it requires of us. Grief is a critical part of systems change work, and guerrilla gardeners often grieve too—whether it's the loss of a crop from chemicals applied by city maintenance crews or from developers converting gardens of life into inaccessible housing. The land holds the grief that has come from violent histories of slavery, settler colonialism, and genocide. And yet, the land holds all of the love, care, and attention that is also a part of these histories. We must, collectively, create space for the range of emotions that the revolution brings.

I advocate for a dual-pronged approach: one that recognizes the value of immediate change while also considering long-term structure. This portion of the framework calls back to Paul Kivel's distinction between immediate, necessary social services and long-term, system-altering social change. Dylan Johnson-Sackey, who I use in my discussion of spatial justice and cultivating without permission, recognizes guerrilla gardening as "a form of direct action that gives citizens immediate control over space" (Sackey 373). Returning to a theme, I want to highlight how important it is that there is immediacy to guerrilla gardening—within the next season communities have food that they produced while maintaining agency throughout the entire process. They had autonomy over what seeds they planted, how they grew them, when they harvested, and how they accessed/consumed their crops. This is Monica White's community food security in action and temporary food sovereignty. Due to its unsustainable nature, the current widespread forms of guerrilla gardening are not a solution to food justice and the answer to how a community achieves food sovereignty. While it offers immediate, hand-held outcomes, it can also be an indicator of what long-term policy and structure should include. "Guerrilla

gardens—which are almost always grassroots, collaborative efforts" do, however, "reconfigure social and political relations within unequally distributed crises" (Dimick 2).

As an organizational component of the proposed framework, I challenge post-guerrilla gardening actions to practice non-hierarchical leadership. Thomas Gehring and Johannes Marx discuss this in their work on group actors, saying "non-hierarchical group actors may gain autonomy, which reflects a group-specific rationale and typically distances their internal decision-making from a mere aggregation of members' preferences" (Gehring & Marx 27). Other scholars and disciples also recognize the efficacy and equity of non-hierarchical organization. Karen Warren and Edward Zalta, two feminist environmental philosophers, talk about the risk of hierarchy and "the logic of domination [that] provides the (alleged) moral justification for keeping Downs down", is a "superiority [that] justifies subordination" (Warren & Zalta 2015). Relationships are the basis of our interactions, "*how* humans are in relationship to others (including nature) matters morally" (Warren & Zalta 2015). Guerrilla gardeners enter into a relationship with the land and with their own food systems when they cultivate soil. They must not see themselves, humans, as morally superior to the land but rather as agents alongside the mycorrhizal, microbial networks beneath the surface that cultivates the conditions necessary for growth and life. Above the surface, guerrilla gardeners and other community members working towards collective liberation need to foster reciprocal, non-hierarchical relationships in order to cultivate the conditions necessary for change and empowerment.

Despite Rachel Bezner Kerr's argument being a little heavy on the academic jargon, I believe she presents sentiments worth pursuing when arguing "maladaptation can be prevented using

planning methods such as community-based anticipatory adaptation that uses different adaptation pathways with risks for different groups under a range of future scenarios" (Bezner Kerr 9). I've come across this idea in the non-profit sector under the term Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD). Essentially, it's when a development team, organizing force, or governing body evaluates existing resources, strengths, and support within their communities and uses that as the base of creating new practices, policies, and programs (Bynum 2022). ABCD is very different from a one-size fits all model and, instead, says this will fit here, now and hopefully be well-adjusted for the future. It is the inclusion of contextual knowledge, prioritizing those who know the risks and want to be a part of the path towards better, whatever that looks like for them and their community.

Communities and individuals should be equipped with the autonomy to create dynamic definitions of success. And while I do not want to prescribe a static, narrow definition, I suggest that guerrilla gardening can be an invitation to recognize the importance of siloed interventions but to also move beyond one-time vacant lot transformations or radical uprising. Longterm, sustainable movements have infrastructure that don't rely on one or two (or even three) leaders and have a clear mission that guides the group's actions over time. Sarah Dimick, in her piece on Guerrilla Gardening, defines infrastructure as "the flexible and temporally unstable structures that organize biological and social life: the assemblages that ground the living nexus of modernity as an ongoing project of racialization, affective embodiment, and environmental praxis" (Dimick 2). Infrastructure is literal, physical, and everything else, it is ongoing and ever changing. Guerrilla gardening often operates without sanctioned, traditionally recognized (colonizing) infrastructure; it is an embodiment of biological and social life, offering alternative

organization that might sustain communities beyond a one-time harvest. “Guerrilla gardens are what we might think of as DIY infrastructure, infrastructure cobbled together by collectives disproportionately exposed to the combined forces of state power, environmental degradation, and colonial accumulations” (Dimick 2). Dimick acknowledges the intersection of historical context and existing power forces as she similarly advocates for guerrilla gardening to be seen as a first step towards a more rooted and structured food just future.

Mutual aid, as defined by Dean Spade, “is collective coordination to meet each other’s needs, usually from an awareness that the systems we have in place are not going to meet them” (Spade 7). Mutual aid prioritizes well-being of all members, addressing root causes of why people don’t have what they need (i.e. access to growing space and fresh, culturally relevant produce), and de-colonial, Indigenous cosmologies. This connects back to the solidarity vs. co-option section from Chapter Two—solidarity is necessary for building robust, sustainable movements that operate outside of existing structures and governance. Revolutionary non-profits and land owners can show solidarity to guerrilla gardeners through advocating for land access and agency in their food production. Non-profits and other foundations can have “deleterious effects on radical social justice movements” (Smith 1). It is critical that organizations who want to act in solidarity with root-altering guerrilla gardeners follow the lead of those actively resisting and cultivating the soil. Trying to entirely make change from within existing systems is deradicalizing and demoralizing—unearned power rests on the apparent powerlessness of those historically marginalized. Guerrilla gardeners from generations past have cultivated soil to resist those who have co-opted their labor, bodies, and knowledge. Guerrilla gardening, as I and many others

argue, is one of the "beautifully disruptive rebellions" that foster mutual aid and social change (Spade 29).

Mutual aid is often criminalized in hopes of quelling strong movements towards collective liberation, just as guerrilla gardeners who "illicity" cultivate are criminalized for growing food on public land. As Spade points out, it can be "hard for us to imagine a world where we meet core human needs through systems that are based on principles of collective self-determination rather than coercion" (Spade 39). Widespread guerrilla gardening and proactive efforts to guarantee community food security (and sovereignty) show us that this future is "possible and emancipatory" (Spade 39). To bring back the theme of root-altering work, mutual aid is an opportunity to engage in the radical act of caring for each other while working to change the world. Many who embody and enact mutual aid speak to the immediacy of it: mutual aid "helps us grow our movements and build people power, because it brings people into coordinated action to change things *right now*" (Spade 42). Much like guerrilla gardening, the immediacy of it brings in those who recognize that we need revolutionary, root-mending change now. Whether it's promoting neighborhood vacant lot cultivation or not, I encourage mutual aid to play a prominent role in the redesign of our (food) systems. After all, "mutual aid cultivates the practices and structures that move us toward our goal" (Spade 40).

Gordon C.C. Douglas, in his book The Help Yourself City: Legitimacy and Inequality in DIY Urbanism, discusses what it means to operate without permission and why reimagining what is public space is necessary for place-making and community empowerment. He defines unauthorized urban space intervention as "the ways that people challenge the proscribed uses or

meanings of urban space" (Douglas 18). Motivation for such an intervention is a product of encountering something that needs, as Douglas calls it, "xing, improving, or enlivening" (Douglas 22). Vacant lots with contaminated soil and a lack of access to fresh, culturally relevant food seems to be the kind of thing community members might encounter and then change, without permission. Douglas spends a lot of time talking about place-making and how place-based direct actions "challenge the usual or regulated uses of particular urban spaces" (Douglas 22). Scholars, geographers, and intersectional activists all return to the idea of place: the historical narratives, memories of the soil, and situated knowledge that come together to create what is the conditions of now. Place-making is often a product of "pure resistance and contestation", a result of people choosing to empower themselves by means outside of existing structures of power and support (Douglas 25).

Public policy—that is actually public—can be a "practical vehicle" for accessing farmland and protecting land across generations, not just until the next election cycle (Winne 94). Additionally, "public policy is being used to promote the development of the alternative food system" (Winne 152). Policies (as well as programs and practices) need to be sustainable and able to adapt to new challenges and conditions. The word 'sustainable' is "derived from two Latin words: sub (from underneath) and tenere (to have, hold, possess), thus sustainable means to 'uphold from underneath' or be able to endure" (Obenchain & Spark 71). This is not to say that once a policy is in place it must always be—new, radically different types of guidelines are often required in order to correct historical injustices and adapt to shifting populations and interests. I encourage envisioning and creativity that considers sustainability, while building in the potential for adjustment and redirection. I have already expressed that current forms of guerrilla gardening are

not designed for the long term, however, equitable and viable food justice futures require consistent land access and autonomy of one's food supply. As robust, hyper-specific definitions of success are developed, incorporating metrics such as sustainability, community buy-in and authoring, and recentering of those most marginalized is critical towards moving towards long-term collective liberation.

WHAT IS ALLOWED TO REMAIN

An alternative way of saying "history is written by the winners" is to ask what is allowed to remain. Experiences, communities, and entire ways of being are often left out, silenced, or appropriated as a part of current systems. There is a risk that comes with sharing or resisting. The soil is a place where these things remain, but the pain also remains. Toxicity and generations of violence are all contained within the composition of the land, and to begin recultivating the land is reckoning with what has been allowed to remain. Erasure poetry, "referred to as 'a salvaging operation', attends to scraps or remains. It is a practice of recovery performed in the wake of violence" (Dimick 7). Planting seeds and reaping their harvest is recovery—it is remembering the women who braided seeds into their hair, honoring the Indigenous cosmologies of relation with the land, and going back for the hurt, the love, and the autonomy that the soil holds on to.

The garden, for many, becomes a space where this essential work happens. "People need a place to heal", shares a community member, "[w]e got 400 years of PTSD . . . .what we did was we beautified this ugliest situation in the world" (Dimick 9). Cultivating the soil, growing beans and feeding one another is saying that we—our histories, our culture, and our humanness—are allowed to remain.

CULTIVATION AS RESISTANCE

I have discussed how the act of guerrilla gardening is often born out of a desire to incite change and resist overlapping forms of oppression, openly challenging the lack of access to land which directly affects access to fresh, local, and culturally relevant food. However, I am now arguing that cultivating relationships and movements of reciprocity and intentionality is its own kind of resistance: "you resist when you grow" (Garth & Reese 218). It is resistance against a food system that relies on the exploitation of land, labor, and bodies and narratives of stagnancy and complicity that say "this is just how it is". Planting seeds of radical reimagining continues the work of those who have cultivated land and recognizes the relationships that have laid the groundwork for desperately needed change.

BRINGING IT BACK TO EASTON

This framework and these suggestions are not a prescription or a solution, it will not work at every scale or in every community. What it is a well-informed, people-grounded framework for how we might all work towards a more food just future. Guerrilla gardening—the illicit cultivation of land—is a launching point for the suggestions and takeaways that I share. However you build, "build with wisdom…build your program, policy, law, or infrastructure to respect all people, all members of your community, the environment, and food" (Berlow 67).

For the hyper-local context of Easton, I encourage a leveraging of community knowledge, collaboration between different food justice and growing organizations, and the development of a governmental position that can serve as the liaison between grassroots initiatives and policy

planning. As the county seat for Northampton Country, Easton is well-positioned to host invaluable conversations and implement pilot programs that build off existing work and cultivation of vacant lots. The LVFPC can help shift power into the hands of the people and house archives that allow for the sustainability of guerrilla gardening and similar work. Existing relationships between Easton Garden Works, Easton Urban Farm, and the Easton Hunger Coalition can continue to facilitate reciprocity towards each other and the land. There are murmurs calling for repatriation of some land to the Lenni-Lenape and I encourage these conversations and actions: allowing those who have been systemically displaced and historically exploited to return invites new opportunities for collaboration and intentionality.

Easton is home to beautiful people, land, and work and I believe in the potential for the city to leverage guerrilla gardening in shifting from social services to social change and long lasting impact that prioritizes situated knowledge and designing with the most marginalized in mind. Regardless of how the city and surrounding areas choose to move forward towards food justice, it is also important to listen to the people who know what is not working: the space to reconsider, rebuild, and reconnect is also critical to this work. Recognizing these relationships, committing to engaging with the root changing work of revolutionary reimaging, and adjusting as needed are ingredients that will look different for every community, but are already seeded in Easton.

I now turn to offering reminders of what has been discussed, the things I hope anyone can walk away with, and recognition of alternatives that were not able to be included. It is not meant to feel like an ending, because those who keep showing up, cultivating the soil, and growing their own food are not ending. The intention is to ponder, and maybe apply, some of these components

in any space that we might find ourselves in: reciprocal relationships and reverence for the land does not require a degree in environmental studies or decades of vegetable production experience—it just takes a little dirt and a lot of love, which is what all of this work contains.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

"Gardeners come every morning to tend to [the] garden, another way of saying: Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow"
-Sarah Dimick, "Guerrilla Gardening" 2023

WHERE WE'VE BEEN

My path into this work was not linear, nor was this piece itself. What it is, however, is an honest discussion of what guerrilla gardening is, how we are seeing it around us, and the potential it has for pushing forward holistic food justice. The Introduction serves as a chance for me to introduce myself, this work, and important themes throughout. Intentionally recognizing the ongoing genocide in Palestine, I connect violence to the land. It covers recurring terminology, accessibility, and reverence for the land.

The first chapter is all about guerrilla gardening: the who, why, where, when, what, and how. I unpack nuances—such as the inherent unsustainability of guerrilla gardening, what separates community gardens, and food production versus beautification—through a historical approach to the term. With a deep desire to recognize those who have cultivated and resisted for generations, I pause to honor the women who braided seeds into their hair and the Indigenous relatives who cherish all life above and below the earth. I end the chapter by introducing my two supplemental frameworks, collective action and community resilience (CACR) and ecofeminism, as tools that I will incorporate in addition to the theoretical framework of food justice.

Once a well-grounded understanding of guerrilla gardening in all of its forms is established, I turn to focus on Detroit as a current, on-the-ground example of guerrilla gardening and

governmental action. Led by people and land centered organizations, I explore the city's historical landscape and recent changes. CACR and ecofeminism guide my understanding of how the cultivation of vacant, disenfranchised land is indicative of a resistance and community-wide desire to prioritize access to fresh and culturally relevant food. I emphasize the importance of solidarity over co-option and celebration in systems change work. None of this was, or will ever be, done alone.

Chapter Three explores how, in the hyper-local context of Easton, guerrilla gardening can tangibly transform spaces, conversations, and practices to help shift governmental—and non-governmental—action towards more holistic, community-informed food justice. I apply this through the introduction of a new framework that prioritizes people-informed policy, the value of local, reciprocity, mutual aid, and fluctuating infrastructure that is not a one-size-fits all prescription, but rather informed suggestions of how to recognize guerrilla gardening and turn it into proactive change. As bell hooks articulately summarized in her book Black Looks: Race and Representation "a political process is always a struggle to define ourselves in and beyond the act of resistance to domination, we are always in the process of both remembering the past even as we create new ways to image and make the future" (hooks 5). Redefining the very concept of land ownership is a process built on cultivation, collaboration, and resistance.

And here we are now, making space to remember and reflect. I encourage you to linger for a moment, think of the land, and any guerrilla gardeners you might know. They, and you, are welcome here and in this work.

WHAT WENT WELL

I really tried to be intentional about including sources and voices that were beyond the academic realm and, with that, I wanted to be mindful about spaces where I could amplify the voices of those who are engaged in this work rather than summarizing their points or risk speaking for them. While I have done some guerrilla gardening myself, I recognize that I do not understand every motivation, action, or outcome. I am also not a policy expert, however, I wanted to emphasize that you don't have to be one in order to radically reimagine how communities feed themselves. I am grateful for my interdisciplinary education—which I acknowledge is a result of immense privilege that granted me access to such opportunities—and I incorporated many components of my multi-layered, disciplined understanding into how to recognize and interpret guerrilla gardening. Furthemore, and I hope this came through, I am deeply passionate and committed to guerrilla gardening, community food sovereignty, and radicalizing power systems. This motivation allowed me to explore nuances of cultivation as resistance and to continue advocating for tangible, scaleable change.

WHAT ELSE COULD HAVE BEEN DONE

I want to be mindful about using the word limitations as I don't feel held back by what limited this work. I want to simultaneously celebrate what I have produced and acknowledge what could have gone differently. As I imagine most (undergraduate) thesis students feel, time was a major determinant of what I was able to include. Despite the literal limitation time brought, I do not consider that or the following paragraphs to be limitations in the sense that I feel regret or mourning. Certainly this could have looked a lot different, but I am choosing to celebrate and

acknowledge what was done, and still be honest about other angles or information that can continue these ideas and arguments.

In alignment with my calls for reciprocal relationships, I would value the opportunity to develop intentional connections with people from Detroit and the guerrilla gardeners who are out there planting seeds and harvesting beans. Based on the timeline and scope of this project, I did not feel that seeking interviews with organizations or those engaged in this work would achieve the mutual relationships that many sought on their contact forms. I heed Robin Wall Kimmerer's reminder from Braiding Sweetgrass: "if we allow traditions to die, relationships to fade, the land will suffer" (Kimmerer 204). All relationships require sustained, intentional effort, not in transactional but reciprocal ways. In all of this, we must remember the land, the land, the land.

There is certainly more to understand about guerrilla gardening as a tool for policy influence and social change, such as examining relationships between land developers and community gardeners or large-scale programs implemented by governments. While I focused on Detroit as a case study of current, on-the-ground guerrilla gardening, there are numerous other spaces and contexts that are worth exploring. Philadelphia, Los Angeles, Washington D.C., and countless other cities (large or not) that are on unceded land are ripe with histories of divestment and cultivation as resistance. As an extension of these inquiries, I still wonder if certain types of growing practices (i.e. chemical usage, intercropping, food forests) impact a city's reaction to guerrilla gardening. Additionally, I am interested in some of the more detailed components of different policy mechanisms and understanding which groups or positions of power can influence them. I've included Reddit comments and other takeaways from public discussion

forums, however, I feel that other personal accounts would help shape the analysis of guerrilla gardening as a tool for promoting holistic food justice. There are countless other quotes, individuals, and projects that I could cite or analyze or acknowledge. This is part of why I have included the Additional Resources section—I do not want this work or these people to exist only on these pages. I want to offer options for anyone to continue engaging and learning.

GRATITUDE FOR THE LAND AND LIFE

"We are the land and the land is us". I heard this at a recent conference and the simplicity of it struck me as a reminder of why I keep coming back to the land. I have found it increasingly difficult to separate this work from that of my own life: thinking about, talking about, and dreaming about the land is integral to much of who I am. And I really do think that there is something intrinsically powerful about being with the land and in the soil. I am eternally grateful to all of the patches of earth that have allowed me to serve as a temporary steward, and for all of the life below and above that heals, nourishes, and protects.

TOMORROW, TOMORROW, TOMORROW

While my time with this specific project may be ending, my work on guerrilla gardening and desire to form reciprocal relationships will not. Guerrilla gardening itself will continue, and it will likely change name and form. And so will the land. I hope that those with the power will change, too. That they might go into their communities a little more often, might divest from self and extraction-motivated places and invest in collective well-being and land protection, might redistribute the power back to those who have, for so long, had it taken from them over and over and over again.

I find inspiration from Pueblo of Acoma poet Simon Ortiz's words: "only when the people of this nation, not just the Indian people, fight for what is just and good for all life, will we know life and its continuance. And when we fight, and fight back against those who are bent on destruction of land and people, we will win. We will win" (Ortiz 363). The people—and land—united will never be defeated. Edith Floyd will continue to advocate for the protection of her community, Richard Reynold's "troops" will continue planting daffodils along highways, the Food Project will continuing stewarding alongside their Dudley Street neighbors, the mycorrhizal networks will continue forming, and the land will continue holding memories. Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow we will tend to the gardens, and to one another.

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- Philadelphia Chefs Combat Hunger Through Guerrilla Gardening, AXIOS Philadelphia
- South Phila Guerrilla Gardening
- Guerrilla Gardeners Take Charge of City Lots, Philadelphia Inquirer
- Philadelphia's First-Ever Urban Agriculture Plan

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BOSTON

- Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative
- Guerrilla Gardening in Greater Boston, First Literacy
- The Histories of our Boston Community Gardens, The Trustees

EASTON

- Easton Area Neighborhood Center & Easton Urban Farm
- Easton Area Neighborhood Center Food Programs
- Easton Garden Works
- Easton Hunger Coalition
- Lehigh Valley Food Policy Council
- Pennsylvania Food Policy Council

- Project of Easton

MORE ON GUERRILLA GARDENING

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- Artists Against Apartheid —> public resources curated by artists for collective liberation
- BDS (Boycott, Divest, Sanction) Toolkit
- Ceasefire Tracker —> see if your reps are calling for a ceasefire
- CeasefireToday.com —> list of US actions and links for getting involved
- Divest Action Public Toolkit
- Know Your Rights as a Protester, CAIR Philly
- Palestinian Feminist Collective
- Stop Gaza Genocide: Ceasefire Now! (Public Toolkit), US Campaign for Palestinian Rights