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**“ABOLITION AS PRESENCE”: AN EAST BAY CA CASE STUDY OF BLACK  
FOOD GEOGRAPHIES**

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April 20, 2022

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

[excerpted from “Church/Liquor Store” by Saba ft. Noname]

[Verse 3: Noname]

They kept the melting pot inside the slave plot—watch  
 They gentrified your neighborhood, no need for cops—watch  
 Look at the yoga pants, coffee shops and yogurt stands  
 Consumerism, holy land  
 And on the other hand, my mama land

[Chorus: Saba & Akenya]

It look like funeral home, church, church, liquor store  
 Corner store, dread-head, deadly—...

In a 2016 interview with *The Fader* about the track’s release, Saba says the inspiration for the song came from a bus ride to his home in the Westside of Chicago. He’s quoted as saying,

A few stops in screams gentrification. Further west than that you see abandoned fields, abandoned buildings, just an area that seems forgotten about. The chorus to the song was quite literal. Funeral home, church, church, liquor store, corner store.<sup>1</sup>

Noname and Saba describe a Black geography. They depict mass incarceration, gentrification, police violence, and organized abandonment inscribed into the landscape.

I pulled the excerpt above because of its attention to food—Noname contrasts “coffee shops and yogurt stands”, symbols of gentrification, to the chorus sung by Saba and Akenya, “funeral home, church, church, liquor store, corner store”. This contrast may conjure familiar images of poor Black and Brown neighborhoods across U.S. cities, communities that are

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<sup>1</sup> Saba, “Saba And Noname Paint A Portrait Of A Chicago Block On “Church/Liquor Store”.

frequently described as “food deserts”. Listening to “Church/Liquor Store”, I often think about how my home in the San Francisco Bay Area is famous for its abundance of great food, yet its reputation hides contested landscapes of gentrification, poverty, accumulation, and abandonment. Noname and Saba’s words bring me to think critically about “food deserts”, the structures of racism and capitalism that create them and the radical resistance that’s needed to make food present in a “food desert”.

It’s widely accepted that “food desert” is a phrase used to describe a place with low or limited access to nourishing and affordable food.<sup>2</sup> The term was originally used in the 1990s by a Scottish resident of public housing to describe her neighborhood to an ethnographer.<sup>3</sup> “Food desert” is a descriptive phrase, but since its coining, it has grown into a phenomenon of health and development initiatives, government and institutional research, academic research, and public debate. By and large, research on, and representations of “food deserts” focus narrowly on food access, or the proximity of residents in a geographic area (i.e. census tract, neighborhood, county) to a supermarket. These analyses often observe other dimensions of access, including the low-income status and the vehicle availability of households in the study area.<sup>4</sup> The USDA Economic Research Service (USDA-ERS) has created an interactive mapping tool to visualize census tracts with low supermarket access and low income,<sup>5</sup> originally called

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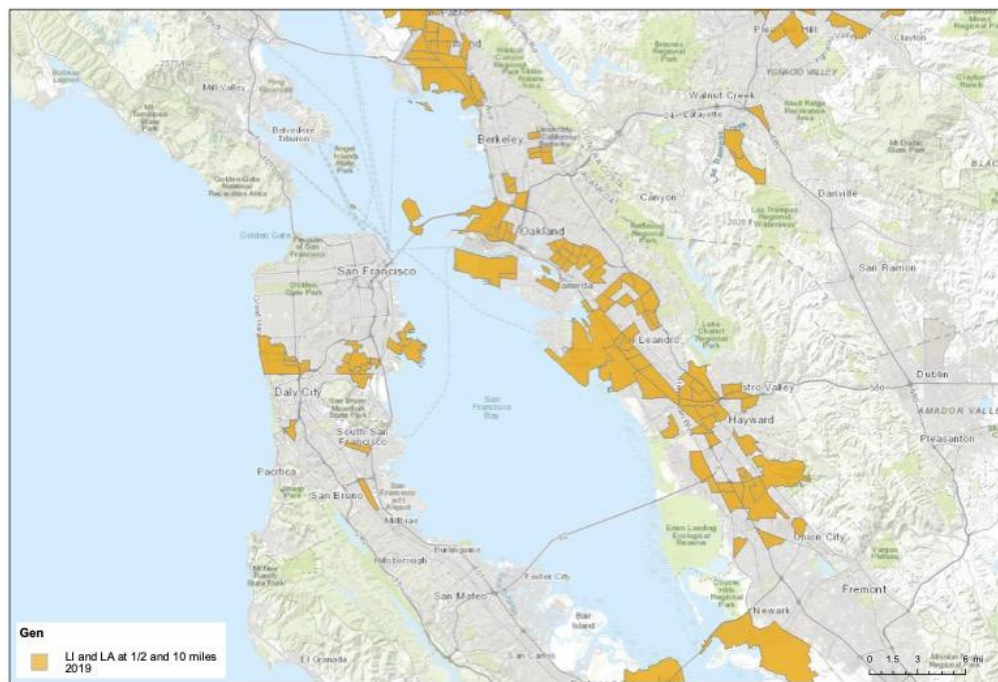
<sup>2</sup> this research seeks to decenter “food deserts” as a term to describe, and especially research a place. I keep the term “food desert” in quotes to refer to the idea while disrupting the phrase’s descriptive use;

<sup>3</sup> De Master and Daniels, “Desert wonderings: reimagining food access mapping.” 241.

<sup>4</sup> Wrigley et al., “Assessing the Impact of Improved Retail Access on Diet in a ‘Food Desert’”; Wright, “Interactive Web Tool Maps Food Deserts, Provides Key Data”; USDA ERS, “USDA ERS - Documentation.”

<sup>5</sup> as well as low vehicle access and high group quarters (dormitories, assisted living facilities)

the Food Desert Locator in 2011, and is now called the Food Environment Atlas (see Figure 1).<sup>6</sup>



Low Income and Low Access at 1/2 mile in the San Francisco Bay Area

Date: 3/30/2022 Source: USDA Economic Research Service, ESRI. For more information: <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-access-research-atlas/>

**Figure 1.** Typical “Food Desert” Map of the San Francisco Bay Area (Source: USDA Economic Research Service, ESRI. Online. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-access-research-atlas/>)

This research project is critical of these mainstream and institutional perspectives on “food deserts”. At a granular level, why should supermarkets be the sole determinant of a community’s access to food? At a structural level, how do usages of the term “food desert”

<sup>6</sup> the choice to remove the phrase “food desert” from the name and all of the resources attached to this tool is likely no coincidence as the phrase and the USDA-ERS usage of it has come under scrutiny, i.e. Sadler, Gilliland, and Arku, “Theoretical Issues in the ‘food Desert’ Debate and Ways Forward”; Shannon, “Food Deserts”; MacNell et al., “Black and Latino Urban Food Desert Residents’ Perceptions of Their Food Environment and Factors That Influence Food Shopping Decisions”; Deener, “The Origins of the Food Desert”; Howerton and Trauger, ““Oh Honey, Don’t You Know?”; Washington, Food apartheid; Reese, Black Food Geographies; De Master and Daniels, “Desert Wonderings”

impose or reinforce damaging narratives and positions about racialized poverty on people and the places they live in? Mainstream perspectives are damaging because they assume people do not nourish themselves or people struggle immensely to to nourish themselves. Research by the USDA-ERS, for example, does not think historically or structurally about how or why inaccess to food has been constructed. But what happens when we think historically, structurally, or transformatively?

Using abolitionist methodologies, I argue that food activism contests “food deserts” by making food present in sources alternative to supermarkets. The project can be broken into two central inquiries: (1) How do race and class formations in the East Bay generate landscapes of food inaccess that are labeled “food deserts”? and (2) How does food activism in the East Bay generate lasting alternatives to supermarkets?, which I explore through three case studies of food justice organizing in the East Bay. I’ll explain my focus on the East Bay on the next change (A note on place and positionality).

My approach is to expand upon the growing body of research challenging the concept of “food deserts”. In particular, I build on resistance to implications that “food deserts” have no food at all,<sup>7</sup> as well as critiques that “food desert” stigmatizes and pathologizes the people living in them, reinforcing racialized and anti-poor narratives of social deficiency and fail to recognize the agency people have and the potential of place.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Taylor and Ard, “Research Article”; Short, Guthman, and Raskin, “Food Deserts, Oases, or Mirages?”; Reese, *Black Food Geographies*.

<sup>8</sup> McClintock, “From Industrial Garden to Food Desert”; Sadler, Gilliland, and Arku, “Theoretical Issues in the ‘food Desert’ Debate and Ways Forward”; Shannon, “Food Deserts”; MacNell et al., “Black and Latino Urban



I bring these critical perspectives on “food deserts” into conversation with scholarly and activist work on carceral (prison-industrial complex) abolition, which is defined by the organization Critical Resistance as a “political vision with the goal of eliminating imprisonment, policing, and surveillance and creating lasting alternatives to punishment and imprisonment”.<sup>9</sup> This research does not equate food inaccess or food insecurity to experiences of imprisonment, policing, or surveillance. Rather, I observe the historical and structural roots of “food deserts” in relationship to carceral formations, largely through interconnected forces of structurally-racialized and capitalist abandonment. I focus particularly on the notion of abolition as lasting alternatives to violence, in line with Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s assertions that abolition is presence in place.<sup>10</sup> The abolitionist ideas and organizations written about in this paper: abolitionist discursive analysis of “food deserts”—urban Indigenous feminist activism and the Sogorea Te’ Land Trust, and the Black food movement and Mandela Grocery Cooperative—make food present in “food deserts”.

### **A note on place and positionality**

I mentioned above that I’m originally from the East Bay. Until coming to Macalester College, I’ve spent most of my life living in a small town called Albany, which borders the city of Berkeley to the south and is a few miles from the northern border of Oakland, the region’s

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Food Desert Residents’ Perceptions of Their Food Environment and Factors That Influence Food Shopping Decisions”; Deener, “The Origins of the Food Desert”; Howerton and Trauger, ““Oh Honey, Don’t You Know?””; Washington, Food apartheid; Reese, *Black Food Geographies*; De Master and Daniels, “Desert Wonderings”; Jones et al., “Household Food Insecurity in an Urban Food Desert.”

<sup>9</sup> Critical Resistance, “What Is the PIC?”

<sup>10</sup> Gilmore, *The Case for Prison Abolition*.

economic center. My family has lived throughout the Bay Area for multiple generations and continue to take part in processes of African American and Asian American placemaking in the region. This project has, in many ways, been a process of forming and strengthening my relationship with the place I call home, the ancestral and diasporic, as well as the interpersonal and coalitional. This project attends to my life on unceded Lisjan Ohlone land and seeks to be a good guest by cultivating co-conspiratorial work to return land to Indigenous care. Lastly, my learning with Sogorea Te' Land Trust as well as many other aspects of my research have centered my thinking on food and land as distinctly feminist. I've sought to consider the queer and gender politics and resistance embedded in food cultivation, preparation, and care work. This writing is indebted to and grounded in the insurgent intellectual and ecological traditions of Indigenous and Black feminists.

## **Literature Review**

The balance of this introductory section describes my approach using a literature review. This section offers background on the discourses I bring into conversation: (1) critical perspectives on "food deserts" and (2) abolitionist discourse focused on food and land. Next is the "Background and Context" chapter, which considers an environmental history of racial formation in the East Bay focused on food environments and "food deserts" as well as a critical analysis of "food deserts" as environmental or spatial crises. The following chapter "Case Studies" describes three case studies of abolitionist food activism to argue that abolitionism

makes food present in a “food desert”. The concluding chapter gives insight to what could lie beyond “abolition beyond the food desert”.

### **Research Approaches: Discourse and Literature Review**

This subsection of the introduction attempts to ground this research in its disciplines and methods. This is a thesis in Environmental Studies, and for this reason, is interdisciplinary. In particular, my approach and methods are rooted in Black and Indigenous studies, especially the radical geographic, environmental, and historical elements of these fields.

My approach is to bring literature from two discourses into conversation: critical scholarship on “food deserts”, and abolitionist discourses on geography, ecology, and food systems. My analyses of these texts consider how the two discourses speak to each other.

### **Critical Perspectives on “Food Deserts”**

As discussed above, this project critiques the ways that “food deserts” pathologize or describe the wrongness of the people living in “food deserts”. Mobilizing geographic and environmental frames of abolitionism, this project disengages from what’s missing in favor of what’s present in a “food desert”. The texts analyzed below have informed this project’s commitment to disengage “food deserts” as a metaphor of dispossession and absence while engaging radical abolitionist presence. They form a textured critique of institutional perceptions and interventions on “food deserts”, calling for greater methodological breadth

and depth when studying “food deserts”, and think structurally about the food landscapes that race and class hierarchy create, and they think about and speak to real people and their lived experiences.

Broadly speaking, the “food desert” literature varies enormously by the approach, method, and discipline of the researchers, with distinct focuses on everything from determinants of health, nutrition and diet, public policy, economic development, urban planning, etc. Because “food desert” is a spatial metaphor and is used to describe places, many studies validate their positions against the case study of a place (neighborhood, municipality) or a project (food justice org, mapping project, grocery store). Many papers conclude by acknowledging and affirming further support for projects of presence in “food deserts”, which include organizations, but also radical participatory and structural methodologies. This includes discussions of the persistence of non-grocery store community food assets,<sup>11</sup> targeted policy and development support for existing community-based interventions,<sup>12</sup> and calls for more thorough examinations of food in cultural politics and racist economic development histories.<sup>13</sup>

By examining the complexity of the food system in Detroit, Dorceta Taylor and Kerry Ard critique traditional institutional failures to look at food options beyond grocery stores in

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<sup>11</sup> De Master and Daniels, “Desert Wonderings.”242.

<sup>12</sup> Ekenga and Tian, “Promoting Food Equity in the Context of Residential Segregation.”accessed online.

<sup>13</sup> Short, Guthman, and Raskin, “Food Deserts, Oases, or Mirages?”352-364; Howerton and Trauger, ““Oh Honey, Don’t You Know?” 740-760; Deener, “The Origins of the Food Desert.”1285-1309.

favor of structural and granular analysis of food access.<sup>14</sup> The researchers building a comprehensive review of all food options, including corner stores, subsistence practices like hunting, fishing and foraging, and community-based farms and projects to show that traditional "food desert" (number of full-service grocery stores in neighborhoods and census tracts) doesn't fully capture people's lived experiences of accessing nourishing food, much less the spatial politics of food systems in a place. Taylor and Ard expose how the "food desert" is a term imposed on the people of Detroit and many of its neighborhoods to promote reformist stop-gaps, such as a corporate grocery store that's not affordable or prone to closing. The paper exemplifies for other researchers and institutions not only that methods must be textured and granular, but also that inquiries about "food deserts" must be founded in people's daily resistance against food inequities.

### ***Black Food Geographies by Ashanté Reese***

Ashante Reese's *Black Food Geographies* has influenced this project in many ways and will be referenced throughout, but especially salient in this section is Reese's ethnographic methods.<sup>15</sup> *Black Food Geographies* is rich with the words of Deanwood residents speaking on their experiences, their food culture, and their geographies. Reese's historical analysis of the Deanwood neighborhood explores food's relationship between economy and environment through ethnographic interviews with residents and document analysis. Especially salient to

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<sup>14</sup> Taylor, Dorceta, and Kerry Ard. "Food Availability and the Food Desert Frame in Detroit: An Overview of the City's Food System." 102-133.

<sup>15</sup> Reese, *Black food geographies: race, self-reliance, and food access in Washington, D.C.*

this research is the closure of large grocery stores in Deanwood, which began in the 70s and hit its peak by the late 80s. This transition is important to contextualize food with other social-determinants of health and environment, particularly the expansion of addiction, low access to healthcare tied to joblessness, poor quality/deterioration of housing stock (especially public housing).

Reese distinctly attends to residents' perspectives, experiences, and memory of change in their food landscape. This is a fascinating contrast to retellings of the change focused on institutions—corporate-managed grocery stores left or did not build in Deanwood, whereas Reese analyzes what people thought of the lack of grocery stores in their neighborhood, and what they did instead to get the food they needed. By establishing strong relationships to the community and her interviewees, Reese allows her “subjects” to articulate their own agency and food cultures. She defies assumptions commonly made when Deanwood is labeled a “food desert”: that residents are not nourished, or that residents have no agency in sourcing nourishing food. Rather, Reese articulates the Black food geographies of Deanwood residents, people practicing and continuing their food cultures despite inequities, and beyond the “food desert”.

### **What is abolition, and how does it relate to food?**

I wrote earlier in this chapter that abolition is a political vision for eliminating carceral violence and creating lasting alternatives. I relate this vision to the lasting alternatives created by

organizing work that is done to make food present in a “food desert”. The idea that carceral (prison-industrial complex) abolition can be about food and land and environments comes from the ideas of Abolition Geography and Abolition Ecology, which this section provides a short background on. These are developed by Ruth Wilson Gilmore and Nik Heynen, respectively. These ideas are the disciplinary center of my research project as I think specifically about how abolition relates to space, land, water, air, and of course, food.

In her essay “Abolition Geography and the Problem of Innocence” Gilmore describes how racial capitalism can be analyzed geographically as carceral geographies, or the use of prisons to extract value from abandoned places and people and deemed surplus by the state and by capital.<sup>16</sup> Her notion of abolition geographies starts with the premise that “freedom is a place”, and considers how lasting alternatives to carceral violence involve processes of placemaking. She articulates abolitionist geographies and their creation by mobilizing W.E.B. Dubois’ writing on abolition democracy, which was itself a record of freed people “mak[ing] where they were into places they wished to be”, a destruction of the geographies of slavery to change the world and therefore themselves. From this discussion of Reconstruction, she turns to four contemporary cases of abolition geography, noting the persistence of people to create precious, life-giving places. “Abolition geography and the methods adequate to it elaborate the spatial—which is to say human-environment processes—of Dubois’s and Davis’s abolition democracy”<sup>17</sup>. These are the human-environment processes of newly freed people building

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<sup>16</sup> Gilmore, “Abolition Geography and the Problem of Innocence.”

<sup>17</sup> Gilmore.236.

their worlds, homes, gardens. They are the human-environment processes of creating lasting alternative violence otherwise addressed and perpetuated by carceral violence. They are the presence of food in and despite and beyond the "food desert".

Nik Heynen has written several essays articulating a notion of abolition ecology. His 2021 paper "A plantation can be a commons": Re-Earthing Sapelo Island through Abolition Ecology" presents notions of abolition driven by the late Ms. Cornelia Walker Bailey and her abolitionist and emancipatory re-Earthing<sup>18</sup> work for the Saltwater Geechee (Sapelo Island, GA) community to replant sugarcane on their land. For Bailey, replanting the principal crop that enslaved people on Sapelo Island were forced to cultivate is a way of re-orienting history, experience and knowledge that have always belonged to Geechee descendants. It is an acknowledgement that sugarcane is an object representing oppression and, at the same time, a bold claim that it will be a driver of reparation for the Geechee people. By detailing the history he had learned about Sapelo Island, Heynen articulates a critique of racist-capitalist land relations that abolition ecology seeks to address. He writes,

Abolition ecology is in part an effort to reclaim and amplify radical abolitionist politics about land redistribution and continue the struggle for emancipation in the face of dispossession and exploitation of the value much Southern land has come to contain through the knowledge, labour and generational care of enslaved peoples and their descendants.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Cornelia Walker Bailey describes Re-Earthing in Nik Heynen's 2021 paper "Bailey's politics inspired... her to build a commons out of the ruins of the plantation that could sustain her community. It was through her vision of re-creating an agricultural commons, which she discussed as a process of "re-Earthing", that one day in 2016 she asked me if I would help re-establish sugarcane on Sapelo Island, the staple crop of the plantation previously owned and operated on the island by Thomas Spalding during the early 1800s."

<sup>19</sup> Heynen, "A Plantation Can Be a Commons." 111.



By focusing his notions of abolition ecology on Southern land, on former plantation sites, on the geographies of specifically Saltwater Geechee people and broadly of enslaved peoples and their descendents is at once distinct from, and bound to the body of writings and activism advocating the abolition of prisons and police<sup>20</sup>. These considerations for Black geographies and Black sense of place are reminders that the land contains relations of dispossession, necessitating co-conspiracy and engagement with Indigenous assertions of abolition. Abolition beyond "food deserts", is also bound to these concepts because it is an emancipatory politics of presence, the presence of good food in community. These considerations for Black geographies and Black sense of place are reminders that the land contains relations of dispossession, necessitating co-conspiracy and engagement with Indigenous assertions of abolition.

Nick Estes thinks through the connections between anti-colonial practices of placemaking and abolition geography in his 2018 essay "Freedom is a Place"<sup>21</sup>. Estes offers an Indigenous anti-colonial perspective on Ruth Wilson Gilmore's claim that abolition geography "starts from the homely premise that freedom is a place.". Indigeneity in the US is deeply connected to constructions of carceral society. As such, Estes considers Indigenous practices of placemaking as resistance to settler colonialism within an abolition geography frame. He argues that Indigenous practices of radical relationality and kinship with other humans, nonhuman

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<sup>20</sup> Katherine McKittrick does enormous work to bind prisons and plantations in her papers "On plantations, prisons, and a black sense of place" (2011) and "Plantation Futures" (2013) as carceral and anti-Black geographies. I will refer to McKittrick's work several times throughout this paper as her writing has been instrumental to so much of my thinking in this project.

<sup>21</sup> Estes, "Freedom Is a Place | Versopolis Review."

organisms, and the land, water, and air are deeply-embedded forms of placemaking in resistance to the US settler-colonial and carceral state. Moreover, cultural traditions and protocols of resistance advance placemaking, both sovereign tribal places and homelands as well as sites of anti-colonial solidarity, such as the Standing Rock pipeline resistance camps and the occupation of Alcatraz in 1969.

Estes attends especially to histories of Black and Indigenous solidarity in the Americas and Caribbean to advance the interconnectedness of Indigenous and Black abolition struggles. Conceptually, he bridges Indigenous theories and cosmologies of radical relationality and kinship that foreground anti-colonial placemaking with the Black Radical Tradition that foregrounds abolition. This is significant because the United States is a physical place established through unfreedom, most originally the unfreedom of Indigenous peoples and enslaved African people, then the re-making of Black and Indigenous space is a practice of freedom, of abolition.

This idea radiates across the cases that Estes introduces in the essay. Especially salient to my paper is less the physical reclaiming of land from Alcatraz to Standing Rock, but the attention to survival and wellbeing that held the space. Speaking on the camps of water protectors formed against the Dakota Access Pipeline, he writes,

Access to food, education, health care, legal services, a strong sense of community and community security were guaranteed to all... The camps were designed according to need, not profit. Their threat to an oil pipeline was not the greatest threat to the settler state — the greatest threat was that the camps represented an unrelenting revolutionary

tradition that was simultaneously international and local, that will rise again to action to create and recreate places, spaces, and histories of freedom.<sup>22</sup>

These pipeline resistance camps were and continue to be abolition on and through the claiming of Indigenous land, and Estes articulates the material presence of so many resources contained in the creation of these spaces. Sogorea Te' Land Trust,<sup>23</sup> one of the case studies in Chapter 3, centers their work on “rematriating Indigenous land”, meaning Indigenous peoples guide the healing of relationships to the land and one another. Rematriation is the life, vibrancy, and potential of places labeled as “food deserts”.

### **Carcerality, Abolitionism and “food deserts”**

This final portion of literature review brings “food deserts” and abolition into conversation with one another. I break this convergence down into two sections: first, the relationship between carcerality and food systems broadly, then more narrowly, understanding “food deserts” as carceral geographies.

On its website, the organization Critical Resistance uses a diagram of concentric circles (Figure 2) to help answer the questions, “what is the prison industrial complex (PIC)?” and “what is abolition?”. The rings explain how a set of interests in incarceration (i.e. law enforcement, private prison companies, developers) in the inner ring engages with a series of actors, ideologies, and crises to form an interconnected complex. The outer ring describes the results that the PIC produces, which are vast and range from the breaking of families to

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<sup>22</sup> Estes. “Freedom is a Place”.

<sup>23</sup> Indigenous women-led organization to facilitate the return of Ohlone land in Huchiun/Oakland-East Bay CA

environmental injustices, to inadequate social and life-giving services. This is where food connects to abolition. Abolition of the prison industrial complex, of carceral society, engages all of the rings. Ruth Wilson Gilmore describes it as presence, a theory of change, a transformation of social and material existence.<sup>24</sup>



**Figure 2:** Prison-Industrial-Complex Concentric Circle Diagram (Source: Critical Resistance <https://criticalresistance.org/mission-vision/not-so-common-language/#:~:text=PIC%20abolition%20is%20a%20political.alternatives%20to%20punishment%20and%20imprisonment.>)

I'm not as interested in relating "food deserts" and carceral geographies as I am in relating Black and Indigenous abolitionist resistance to the "food desert" frame. Ruth Wilson Gilmore relates abolition geography as the "antagonistic contradiction" to carceral

<sup>24</sup>Gilmore, Prisons and Class Warfare.

geographies<sup>25</sup> as both theoretical and pedagogical context for her work in *Critical Resistance* and teaching on the prison industrial complex. She articulates often in her essay that because carcerality is big and ugly, and because ontologically, it is and reproduces white supremacist and capitalist logics, it's easy to not think about or even dismiss abolition's antagonistic, imaginative power. I've struggled throughout this writing process to name both carcerality and abolition in the same breath, in the same geographic frame as antagonistic contradictions, when the placement of the two in opposition is awkward and often feels disconnected.

Food deserts are distinctly connected to carceral geographies, yet, reflecting on the writings of Ruth Wilson Gilmore and Katherine McKittrick as well as conversations with my mentors, I'm only interested in describing these carceral geographies and their wrongness in a limited capacity. Many writings on carcerality and abolition explore the genealogical and spatial expansiveness of carcerality. Rather, my interest lies in the radical imagination, construction, and spatiality of abolition as the presence of nourishing food in community. In order to articulate abolition, I seek out insubordinate geographic and environmental traditions:<sup>26</sup> (1) the Black Radical Tradition and Black method, which McKittrick describes as “precise, detailed, coded, long, and forever”<sup>27</sup> and (2) writing on stolen land, the traditions of Indigenous resistance and relationality.

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<sup>25</sup> Gilmore, “Abolition Geography and the Problem of Innocence.” 226.

<sup>26</sup> thinking with Tomlinson and Lipsitz *Insubordinate Spaces*

<sup>27</sup> McKittrick, *Dear Science and Other Stories*. 5.

## Section 1: Food and Carcerality

Food systems are embedded in and perpetuate carceral logics, therefore institutional approaches to "food deserts" follow patterns of carceral reform and must be confronted with abolition. Carcerality is a core feature of labor exploitation throughout industrialized food systems as well as the food eaten by incarcerated peoples, and the carceral geographies that are explored in this project. Carcerality and food are broadly explored in the 2022 paper "Food and Carcerality: From Confinement to Abolition" by Ashanté Reese and Joshua Sbicca.<sup>28</sup>

Reese and Sbicca's analysis of carceral logics embedded in US food systems is a rich and spatially-expansive analysis of dimensions of both food production and food consumption. On food production, they follow carceral economic geographies invoking especially Katherine McKittrick's 2011 work that connects plantations to prisons. They also conceptualize how plantations persistently structure land relations, including relations of food production around settler colonialism and the dispossession of Black and Indigenous peoples and place. Reese and Sbicca go on to describe how plantation logics structure agricultural production and policy noting the economic, spatial and bodily violence embedded in food's intimacies labor, land tenure, and incarceration. I will also explore McKittrick's writings in a later section with specific attention to "food deserts".<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Reese and Sbicca, "Food and Carcerality."

<sup>29</sup> Reese and Sbicca, "Food and Carcerality." 7.

Thinking through carcerality in the food we eat, the above authors turn first to the food that's eaten in prison and the ways that it is a form of punishment. Carceral society asserts that incarcerated people do not deserve basic necessities for being alive, much less well<sup>30</sup>. This materializes in prison food that is consistently low in nutritional value, prepared in unsanitary and uncompensated conditions, and controlled by industrial-capitalist institutions.

This analysis of food eaten by incarcerated peoples is vital to an abolitionist analysis of "food deserts". Reese and Sbicca describe this idea by connecting state-sponsored food sources and programs inside carceral facilities and to those outside them<sup>31</sup>. State programs seeking to mitigate food insecurity engage "food desert" landscapes, landscapes that produce carceral landscapes extend far beyond prisons as carceral systems are economic systems in part supplied by the criminalization of people living in landscapes of organized abandonment<sup>32</sup>. "Food desert" demarcates a landscape of organized abandonment based on the lack of affordable and nutritious food in an area. The social and economic practice of incarceration is intimately connected to social and economic practices of divestment in racialized and poor communities. They belong to interconnected carceral geographies.

In abolitionist terms, "food deserts" exist within a reformist frame—the "food desert" is seen by institutions as incidental to geographic space, to racialized and working class geographies, to environmental injustice. Therefore, institutional solutions are also incidental to

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<sup>30</sup> Reese and Sbicca, "Food and Carcerality." 8.

<sup>31</sup> Reese and Sbicca, "Food and Carcerality." 8.

<sup>32</sup> Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*. 64-70, 107).

the context and structures of "food deserts"—that of racialized and working class status, of the history of a place, of the environment (built and nonhuman living), of culture. Maywa Montenegro de Wit's piece "Abolitionist Agroecology" mobilizes abolitionism to consider radical transformation and possibility in agricultural systems brought on by the covid-19 pandemic.<sup>33</sup> Montenegro de Wit offers a model of analyzing food systems by learning from abolitionism. In particular, this essay modeled an application of abolition as opposition to institutional reform. In this case, the author condemns piecemeal reforms offered by major food and agricultural governance organizations and corporations to begin to think sustainably or agroecologically, pointing to their continued and seemingly perpetual abuse of food workers and the land.

In the case of "food deserts", there are many pathways to conceptualize reform. It's not so simple to say that building a supermarket in a "food desert" is purely reformist, but it's also not so simple to say that it would fix everything. In fact, building a supermarket in a "food desert" wouldn't do anything about racist and anti-poor structures denying access to food in the first place. Herein lies the red herring of traditional "food desert" perspectives. If a place is bad to live in because it has no large supermarkets, then the solution must be to just build a supermarket. A reductive perspective on the problem leads to reductive solutions. The "grocery store in a food desert" solution also fails to consider how the grocery stores themselves figure into racist capitalist systems. Reese, in *Black Food Geographies*, details how food is

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<sup>33</sup> Montenegro de Wit, *Abolitionist Agroecology, Food Sovereignty and Pandemic Prevention*.



low-quality and overpriced in the few supermarkets in the ward containing the Deanwood neighborhood.<sup>34</sup>

Building a new supermarket in a "food desert" can also represent a shift in capital and class hierarchy of a place. Many argue that new food offerings such as supermarkets are a critical aspect of gentrification when these businesses are inaccessible to residents/intended for wealthier and whiter residents, and when the existence of these businesses increases property values.<sup>35</sup> A study of shopping behaviors in Portland's gentrifying Alberta neighborhood found that shoppers at a new organic and sustainably-focused supermarket were disproportionately white, highly-educated, and middle class.<sup>36</sup> Structures of redevelopment and reinvestment that bring supermarkets and other urban amenities to "food deserts" serve to dispossess poor and BIPOC residents when they perpetuate asymmetrical power relations. Reform can only maintain existing asymmetries. Abolition in this case, is the use of food to resist gentrification and to build food systems by and for community members. Activists in many major cities protest businesses seen as contributing to displacement while also implementing community-focused food initiatives.<sup>37</sup> Considering the focus of abolition to generate space and nurture life outside of racist-capitalist formations and structures, the construction of a grocery store that's inaccessible to residents is a reform to food inequities that may not improve food

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<sup>34</sup> Reese, *Black Food Geographies*. 44-50, 66-7.

<sup>35</sup> Sullivan, "From Food Desert to Food Mirage". 30-35; Alkon, Sbicca, and Kato, "In Changing Urban Neighborhoods, New Food Offerings Can Set the Table for Gentrification.". accessed online.

<sup>36</sup> Sullivan, "From Food Desert to Food Mirage". 30-35.

<sup>37</sup> Alkon, Sbicca, and Kato, "In Changing Urban Neighborhoods, New Food Offerings Can Set the Table for Gentrification.". accessed online.

access and even lead to displacement. Communities build capacity for food access through lasting alternatives.

### **“Food Deserts” as Carceral Geographies**

This section relates the “food desert” frame to understandings of carceral geographies that are embedded in systems of racial capitalism. Within carceral geographies, I’m particularly interested in Ruth Wilson’s idea of organized abandonment and Nathan McClintock’s idea of demarcated devaluation, which both conceptualize capital flows and state actions as “unfixing” space. Geographies of systematically depriving affordable and nourishing food are carceral, abandoning, and devaluing geographies. This section first examines organized abandonment through the work of Ruth Wilson Gilmore, then considers Ashanté Reese’s (2019) ethnographic and historical approach to understanding abandonment in the Deanwood neighborhood of Washington D.C. I close by incorporating a few different scholars’ work thinking through spatial and environmental facets of racial capitalism.

Food deserts are spatial frames that describe a lack or an absence of available, affordable, and nutritious food options. But they don’t describe a process or a network of interactions. “Food desert” is a descriptive or demarcating term for a place, indicating an experience or an interaction with that place and the food, or lack thereof, in that place. Contained in those engagements of a place, of a “food desert”, are a complex of interrelated systems that provide or

deny food in space—denying food is part of greater politics of disinvestment, devaluation, and abandonment.

Ruth Wilson Gilmore writes on the California political economy, theorizing that the prison economy was and is interconnected with, and dependent on, coupled urban and rural abandonment across the state of California. Although *Golden Gulag* follows the explosions of prisons in California. Gilmore also unravels a complex geography that binds seemingly distinct places and politics together: water disputes and agglomeration in the agricultural sector,<sup>38</sup> political and economic suburbanizations schemes,<sup>39</sup> and urban austerity and racialized anti-poverty policies.<sup>40</sup> Organized abandonment by state and capital creates "food deserts", which is why they are a part of a larger carceral geography. But that's not all. As Gilmore explains the how and why of abandonment, which she more specifically calls "unfixing", she attends specifically to what's left behind. She writes,

The unfixing is not, however, an absolute erasure; what's left behind is not just industrial residue—devalued labor, land made toxic, shuttered retail businesses, the neighborhood or small city urban form—but, by extension, entire ways of life that, having been made surplus, unfix people: women, men, "the kids." In the course of crisis, ordinary people do not abandon themselves but rather renovate already existing activities.<sup>41</sup>

Gilmore argues that from abandonment springs carceral policing and prisons. In the quote above, Gilmore is explaining how the landscapes of policed and imprisoned people and the

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<sup>38</sup> Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*. 38,67.

<sup>39</sup> Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*. 46.

<sup>40</sup> Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*. 39, 45.

<sup>41</sup> Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*. 179.

landscapes where prisons are located both experience organized abandonment. “Food desert” is a specific description of organized abandonment resulting in a low access to nourishing and affordable food. Gilmore’s last sentence in the quote is especially salient because abandonment is coupled with renovation.

Reese’s historical and ethnographic research on the Deanwood neighborhood of Washington D.C. shows how food systems are in a complex relationship between abandonment and self-reliance. Gilmore’s idea of renovation is similar to the Reese’s analysis of self-reliance, that, where state and capital abandoned Deanwood residents—during the initial settlement of the neighborhood after the Civil War,<sup>42</sup> and very recently due to a lack of fresh produce options in the neighborhood<sup>43</sup>—they created self-reliant food systems and projects. This is not to discount the reality of abandonment and devaluation in Deanwood—Reese makes clear that because most consumers rely heavily on grocery stores, it’s vital to analyze how residents navigate the lack of supermarkets in their immediate neighborhood—but rather to reiterate agency in the face of abandonment. People continue to eat.

Other scholars also analyze spaces of abandonment through racial capitalism. Laura Pulido and Malini Ranganathan consider the disproportionate poisoning of Black children through the water in Flint, MI in two papers. They consider racial capitalism<sup>44</sup> and racial

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<sup>42</sup> Reese, *Black Food Geographies*. 20-5

<sup>43</sup> Reese, *Black Food Geographies*. 109-126.

<sup>44</sup> Pulido, “Flint, Environmental Racism, and Racial Capitalism.”

liberalism<sup>45</sup> as the historical and structural foundations of the poisoning of Flint's water. The financial crisis and austerity measures that catalyzed the poisoning of the water is understood by these scholars as abandonment by state and capital (deindustrialization and suburban flight). These writings are critical for conceptualizing settler colonialism and anti-Blackness as having material, spatial, and environmental genealogies—food, water, air, housing, etc.

Katherine McKittrick<sup>46</sup> intertwines plantations and prisons through analytic frame of Black geographies to assert the continual relevance of anti-Blackness to the US geographic form through land and labor exploitation, abandonment, and socio-economic repression, but also the relevance of a Black sense of place, Black geographies to places of survival, resistance and the geographies of abolition.

These Black senses of place, which often connect and relate to Indigenous senses of place in their insurgency, are contradictions of urbanization, settler colonialism and slavery that perpetually demarcate places of devaluation around subjugated peoples such as the "food desert". Plantations and prisons have food inside them, but are also inscriptions of plantation and prison logics into anti-Black/carceral geographies of food systems. McKittrick's writing on a Black sense of places shows in and of itself a cartography, a landscape of struggle against the "food desert"—evident in the gardens and mutual aid projects and food distribution persisting in Oakland and East Bay.

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<sup>45</sup> Ranganathan and Bratman, "From Urban Resilience to Abolitionist Climate Justice in Washington, DC." 115-137.

<sup>46</sup> McKittrick, "On Plantations, Prisons, and a Black Sense of Place." 947-963.



## Chapter 2: Background and Context

### Introduction

This chapter on background and context attends to the “how” and “why” of “food deserts”, focusing on the histories, current contexts and futures of the East Bay. As I assert in the introduction, racialized class formations in the East Bay have generated landscapes of food inaccess that are historically and actively contested through abolitionist food activism. This section establishes background on Oakland and the East Bay as a spatial frame and a brief discussion of Lisjan Ohlone people who first and always have belonged to the land called Huchiun. I then argue that the history of racialization (group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death<sup>47</sup>) through urban development is a history of the creation of “food deserts”. Understanding “food deserts” genealogically informs a wider abolitionist critique because it undermines the idea that “food deserts” are totalizing and therefore unchangeable.<sup>48</sup>

The chapter then turns to a contemporary analysis of food systems in Oakland and the East Bay. I argue that the histories of dispossession and abandonment in the East Bay have

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<sup>47</sup> Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*. 247.

<sup>48</sup> I use genealogy in the way I was taught by people who have read, understood, and applied Foucault’s writing on genealogy. A reference for my application is Garland “What is a “history of the present?””, 365-384. On Foucault’s genealogies and their critical preconditions”, which discusses Foucault “using history as a means of critical engagement with the present”. I use genealogy throughout this paper in reference to Foucault’s approach to contemporary problems through their genealogies. I consider the genealogies of food inaccess as a set of relationships, some of which are informed by the past, but do not formulate a definitive history of food inaccess in a way that, for example, an historical study of food sources in the East Bay from 1810-present might. Genealogy notes the fragments with wide gaps in the history that I pull together in this chapter and the next. Rather than being a thorough historical analysis, I’ve assembled these fragments to consider the past in order to be critical of contemporary methods and approaches to “food desert” research.

continually generated environments of low food access. I contextualize these data on food insecurity today with historical analysis because most mainstream analyses of “food deserts” don’t consider how and why racialized poverty is concentrated in these places, much less the constant resistance of communities for environmental justice and the presence of food. I turn to the environmental justice movement in the East Bay and critical perspectives on the Anthropocene to argue that “food deserts” are not isolated or contemporary crises. Rather, they are landscapes continually abandoned and devalued by the state and capital, continually in crisis while also continually contested by people organizing resistance and organizing abolitionist presence. As a whole, this chapter considers the past through histories of environmental racism, the present through contemporary “food desert” data, and the future by discussing the insurgency of Indigenous and Black abolitionism beyond the world of “food deserts”.

**A note on spatial framing:**

My framing of the East Bay and Oakland is inconsistent. I’m interested in contextualizing and critiquing settler colonialism and the resurgence of Lisjan Ohlone people, who belong to Huchiun (see Figure 3), which includes several cities in the northern side of the East Bay. The term “food desert” belongs to a broader vocabulary of white supremacist and capitalist descriptions of space (I elaborate on this in Case Study 1). More narrowly, my research argues that “food deserts” perpetuate settler colonialism in the United States. This research observes “food deserts” as products of settler cities, although there is significant



research and activism against “food deserts” through settler colonialism in non-urban Native spaces, including Indigenous lands recognized as sovereign by the US government.<sup>49</sup>

Lisjan Ohlone people do not belong only to Oakland or any singular settler geography that has been imposed upon their lands. Likewise, Black people have never been singularly confined to the city of Oakland within the East Bay region, much less individual neighborhoods in Oakland. These uneven geographies bear blurry and often arbitrary boundaries. So, I emphasize Oakland because the vast majority of my site-specific sources are focused there, even though I have a broader interest in the East Bay region that has Oakland as its economic center. Where I can, I will speak to the region as a whole, and where I analyze Oakland as a single municipality, I do so with a critical eye toward urban regional dynamics as well as the limitations of thinking within borders.

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<sup>49</sup> For research on “food desert”s and food insecurity in Indigenous tribal lands, I suggest Mihesuah and Hoover, *Indigenous Food Sovereignty in the United States*; Doherty, “Research Guides”; Sowerwine et al., “Reframing Food Security by and for Native American Communities.”

## Histories of Environmental Racism in the East Bay/Oakland

### Lisjan Ohlone and Huchiun Background



**Figure 3:** Map of Unceded Indigenous Lands in the Greater East Bay Region (Source: Sogorea Te' Land Trust n.d. online. <https://sogoreate-landtrust.org/lisjan-history-and-territory/>)

“Food deserts”, for the purpose of this research, exist within a settler colonial project and state.<sup>50</sup> An abolitionist practice of making food present in a “food desert” engages land

<sup>50</sup>I'm referring to US “food deserts”

relations, in particular relations of settler colonialism and often the return of stolen Indigenous land.

Lisjan Ohlone people belong to a region of land that they call Huchiuin (see Figure 3), now known as the northern cities of the East Bay, including Oakland, Berkeley, Alameda, Piedmont, Emeryville and Albany. They have always lived and belonged to Huchiuin, historically across multiple villages organized as the Confederated Villages of Lisjan.<sup>51</sup> Their language is called Chochenyoy.

Ohlone is the name used to describe a diverse group of people living across at least 50 villages in the San Francisco Bay Area and bioregion. Ohlone people share cultural practices, similarities in language, and geographic proximity but never belonged to a single distinct political and cultural entity. Spanish conquerors falsely labeled the Native peoples they encountered living around the San Francisco Bay belonged to one nation that they labeled “Costanoan”, or people of the coast – in the 1960s and 70s this diverse group of people renamed themselves Ohlone as a recognition of shared political history and struggle for sovereignty.

The Sogorea Te’ Land Trust (STLT) “Lisjan (Ohlone) History and Territory” page reads, “We did not own the land, we belonged to it. Generation after generation, we cultivated

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<sup>51</sup> From here, I’ll refer primarily to Lisjan Ohlone as the people and the Confederated Villages of Lisjan as the organizational body and nation of Lisjan Ohlone. Lisjan also refers to six nations who belonged to land in the East Bay: Lisjan (Ohlone), Karkin (Ohlone), Bay Miwok, Plains Miwok, Delta Yokut and Napien (Patwin). These nations were enslaved at Mission San Jose in Fremont, CA and Mission Dolores in San Francisco, CA (Sogorea Te’ Land Trust, n.d.-a)

reciprocal relationships with the plants and animals we shared this place with and developed beautiful and powerful cultural practices that kept us in balance”.<sup>52</sup> These land relationships and in particular, food systems relationships, are the history of Oakland and the East Bay. Ohlone peoples, as well as several other nations in their coastal regional network, created shellmounds—burial sites that could be acres wide and as high as 30 feet where people buried their dead under layers of shells and earth for centuries. The shellmounds were cultural centers for the many peoples who built them, serving as sites for ceremony and trade. These monuments were also critical to daily life as people built their homes on and around these monuments to be connected with ancestors and the afterlife and to build them up with the shells from the shellfish they had eaten and ashes from their fires.<sup>53</sup>

### **Settler Colonialism in Huchiun**

This history of settler colonialism in Huchiun is a history of the persistence and survival of Lisjan Ohlone people, language, and relations against multiple brutal settler regimes. Returning to the writing of Nick Estes, settler colonialism can be understood as generating and imposing carceral geographies.<sup>54</sup> In Huchiun, settler colonialism involved and involves carceral practices against Lisjan Ohlone peoples and the land.

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<sup>52</sup> Sogorea Te’ Land Trust, “Our History.” This notion of belonging to the land as an Indigenous spatial ontology that is distinct from and resistant to settler notions of space, particularly as property invokes the argument made widely in Moreton-Robinson, *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty*.

<sup>53</sup> Save the West Berkeley Shellmound and Village Site, “Learn More.”

<sup>54</sup> Estes, “Freedom Is a Place | Versopolis Review.”

Beginning in 1776, the Spanish empire enslaved many Indigenous peoples including Lisjan Ohlone people across their settler colonies in missions which were created to be sites of spiritual, cultural, linguistic, and economic subjugation.<sup>55</sup> After Mexican independence and the secularization of the missions, Huchiun, as with much of the land in Alta California, was reorganized as a land grant belonging to a Mexican military official, a ranch that enslaved many Ohlone peoples.<sup>56</sup> Broadly, settler colonialism is organized to collapse and destroy Indigenous ways of being, including but not limited to Indigenous food systems as relations with the land, water, and air.<sup>57</sup> The missions and land-grant ranches proliferated invasive species, including disease ecologies, and many plants and animals raised using extractive land practices and forced labor.<sup>58</sup> This frames the shift in food systems that settler colonialism generates on people's lifestyles as well as the physical landscape.

At the time of US conquest in the Mexican-American War and the subsequent Gold Rush in 1850, the US and California state government adopted genocidal policies against California Native peoples.<sup>59</sup> Ohlone peoples as well as nearby tribes such as the Coast and Bay Miwok and Yokuts faced extreme violence and land dispossession as their land was stolen and developed on to form the cities of Oakland, San Francisco and San Jose. Urban development involved the destruction and flattening of shellmounds as well as significant destruction and

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<sup>55</sup> Sogorea Te' Land Trust, "Lisjan (Ohlone) History & Territory"; Akins and Bauer, *We Are the Land*. 392 (accessed in ebook).

<sup>56</sup> Akins and Bauer, *We Are the Land*. 392 (accessed in ebook). 391-2.

<sup>57</sup> Whyte, "Food Sovereignty, Justice and Indigenous Peoples." 12-13.

<sup>58</sup> Sogorea Te' Land Trust, "Lisjan (Ohlone) History & Territory"

<sup>59</sup> Sogorea Te' Land Trust, "Lisjan (Ohlone) History & Territory"; Akins and Bauer, *We Are the Land*. 391-2 (accessed in ebook).

development on the land and water (creeks and the Bay itself).<sup>60</sup> These Ohlone geographies are of resistance, escape, of forced marriage of Indigenous to Spanish and Mexican people, of hiding identities and making traditions, language, and spirituality secret.<sup>61</sup>

The Confederated Villages of Lisjan as well as other Ohlone nations and many other California Native nations are not federally recognized, systematically denying Lisjan Ohlone people of land bases, rights, protections of sacred sites, funding, and other resources provided under US federal Indian policy and law. Contextualizing the high urban density and property values of the Bay Area and many other urban places is also critical to understanding state violence through settler colonial structures of property.

In 1954, the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) opened a relocation office in Oakland. The relocation office was a part of federal Indian policies grouped as “Relocation and Termination”.<sup>62</sup> Relocation brought many Indigenous peoples to Oakland and the Bay Area, as well as many other major cities<sup>63</sup>. Relocation services were presented by the BIA as an effort for Native peoples to pursue economic opportunity in US cities and as relief from manufactured economic apartheid and resource deprivation put on reservation communities.<sup>64</sup> Combined with efforts toward tribal termination, relocation was a project of assimilation

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<sup>60</sup> Save the West Berkeley Shellmound and Village Site, “Learn More.”; Sogorea Te’ Land Trust, “Lisjan (Ohlone) History & Territory”

<sup>61</sup> Sogorea Te’ Land Trust, “Lisjan (Ohlone) History & Territory”; Akins and Bauer, *We Are the Land*. 391-4 (accessed in ebook).

<sup>62</sup> briefly explain and provide links for more info

<sup>63</sup> Vernon, “Food Systems Among Native American Peoples in Oakland, California: An Examination of Connection and Health”. 51,59; Fixico, *Termination and Relocation: Federal Indian Policy, 1945-1960*. 135-138.

<sup>64</sup> Fixico, *Termination and Relocation: Federal Indian Policy, 1945-1960*.136.

through urban settler colonialism, as relocated people consistently encountered racism in housing and employment access.<sup>65</sup>

Subsequently, the American Friends Service Committee created the Intertribal Friendship House, opened initially, “as a paternalistic organization seeking to integrate and assimilate the newcomers”<sup>66</sup>. Today, under Indigenous leadership, the Intertribal Friendship House is a community center for Indigenous peoples of Oakland and the Bay Area. It is a site where urban Indigenous food sovereignty is struggled collectively for through various food programs and gatherings.<sup>67</sup>

Many Lisjan Ohlone descendents remained in hiding through the mid-twentieth century<sup>68</sup> and participated in intertribal activism and sacred site preservation in the decades that followed, which I will discuss further in the next chapter. Today, Lisjan Ohlone people continue to fight for the preservation of shellmounds and other sacred sites with Indian People Organizing for Change (IPOC) and are leading efforts to have land across the East Bay returned to their care and to revitalize their culture and language through Sogorea Te’ Land Trust.<sup>69</sup> Settler colonialism in Huchiun violently altered the land and the people who belong to

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<sup>65</sup> Vernon, “Food Systems Among Native American Peoples in Oakland, California: An Examination of Connection and Health”. 51,59; Fixico, *Termination and Relocation: Federal Indian Policy, 1945-1960*. 135-138.

<sup>66</sup> Vernon, “Food Systems Among Native American Peoples in Oakland, California: An Examination of Connection and Health”. 59.

<sup>67</sup> Vernon, “Food Systems Among Native American Peoples”. 63-67.

<sup>68</sup> Ixierda and Brown-Almaweri, “The Return of Rammay.”

<sup>69</sup> a process Sogorea Te’ Land Trust calls rematriation

it, indivisible. The history and current context of dispossession and resurgence are inscribed into the landscape.

### **History of Oakland Racialization through Urban Development**

Urban development in Oakland and the surrounding East Bay follows industrial expansion and resource extraction on land settled by the US during the Gold Rush only a few decades before. In 1869, the Transcontinental Railroad was completed with its terminus in Oakland. Sitting opposite the Bay to San Francisco, Oakland exploded into an industrial and shipping center, with residential expansion to provide labor for industry. By the early twentieth century, industrial particularly military capital concentrated in Oakland, drawing in African American, Latine, and Asian migrants seeking work. After the start of World War II, even more new workers entered military industrial production lines in Oakland<sup>70</sup> and Richmond<sup>71</sup>, with Black residents especially encountering severe housing shortages and racist housing policies.

Oakland developed along the following patterns of segregation – West Oakland confining Black residents (west of Telegraph Ave.), Chinatown confining Asians (starting in late 1800s), Fruitvale confining Mexicans (E 14th St.). McClintock notes that Black, Indigenous and people of color were environmentally confined near industrial areas in poor quality and inadequate housing stock, rather than single family homes of the “industrial garden” that were incorporated and developed for white residents.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> McClintock, “From Industrial Garden to Food Desert.”15-16. Summers, “Untimely Futures.”

<sup>71</sup> Rothstein, *The Color of Law*. 30-31 (in ebook).

<sup>72</sup> McClintock, “From Industrial Garden to Food Desert.”17-18.



Berkeley, the city directly north of Oakland, has a similar history of racial confinement. Like Oakland, white and wealthy residents have and continue to concentrate in the hills neighborhoods to the east. Berkeley historically confined Black, Asian, and Latine residents to flatlands neighborhoods that started in Southwest Berkeley and expanded as working class white residents left the city and people of color moved in.<sup>73</sup> In Richmond, the federal government was desperate for Black workers to fuel military industrial production during WWII, yet confined them to segregated public housing and the still-unincorporated territory of North Richmond that provided no city services.<sup>74</sup> Richmond, like the Oakland flatlands, would also become a site of demarcated devaluation that confined Black and poor communities.

This systematic economic apartheid or “ghettoization” was deprivation/lower quality provision of vital amenities: food, water, energy, transportation, healthcare, education, green space—much like many US cities.<sup>75</sup> Katherine McKittrick also theorizes that urbicide and racial capitalism occurs through the abandonment of capital in and because of Black geographies such as the growing Black population in Oakland.<sup>76</sup>

White supremacy is embedded in the industrial abandonment and suburban expansion of the East Bay and attends to the ways that capitalism is a racial system. McClintock explains that the flow of capital that developed Oakland’s industrial suburbs starting in the late 1940s

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<sup>73</sup> Owens, “The History of Gentrification in Berkeley.”

<sup>74</sup> Rothstein, *The Color of Law*. 33 (in ebook).

<sup>75</sup> Massey and Denton, *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass*. 74-80.

<sup>76</sup> McKittrick, “On Plantations, Prisons, and a Black Sense of Place.” 950-953.

offered homeownership and well-paying blue collar jobs to working class white Oakland residents. This process excluded working class people of color from accessing these suburban residential developments through racist Homeowners Loan Corporation (HOLC) “security” maps and Federal Housing Act (FHA) lending and funding practices. People of color were confined to demarcated areas within urban centers that were being abandoned by capital, resulting in declines in employment in the Oakland flatlands despite massive growth in employment for the Bay Area region overall in the same time period.<sup>77</sup>

McClintock argues that the devaluation of capital in Oakland –caused by industrial abandonment of the city in favor of East Bay suburbs– was confined and concentrated around Oakland’s communities of color. Ruth Wilson Gilmore details in *Golden Gulag* how the devaluation of capital is addressed through the “prison fix”.<sup>78</sup> McClintock’s discussion of the devaluation of capital in Oakland and the East Bay points to the work of another “fix”, that of urban renewal replete with highways, the Port of Oakland and its railroads, and the Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) system. Although *Golden Gulag* meticulously analyzes how the boom of prison construction in California in the 1980s connected distinct shifts in the political economy of land and water particularly in California’s Central Valley, reading urban renewal with abolitionist and critical geographic focus on capitalism’s “fixes” offers a distinct

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<sup>77</sup> McClintock, “From Industrial Garden to Food Desert.”22.

<sup>78</sup> Gilmore conceptualizes mass incarceration as the “prison fix” based on David Harvey’s *Limits to Capital*, where he argues that capitalism contains “spatial fixes”. To put it too briefly, the spatial fix is when capitalism displaces its contradictions and crises of accumulation to another or different place or time.

Petitjean, 2018. Prisons and Class Warfare: An Interview with Ruth Wilson Gilmore. Blog. VersoBooks.

environmental justice perspective on the impact of racial capitalism on urban landscapes.

Urban renewal in Oakland connected its expanding industrial suburbs to the region's economic centers, bypassing and incising the flatlands.

As for Oakland's food systems, McClintock describes how the devaluation of capital—consistent with nearly all other aspects of social, economic, and environmental wellbeing—worsened food access in the flatlands. The post-war rise of corporate supermarkets wiped out most small grocers across US cities but few were built in “inner cities” due to the lack of purchasing power that was caused by the aforementioned racist devaluation of capital in poor and racialized zones.<sup>79</sup>

Robert O. Self details a place-driven history of African American politics and social movements in Oakland in two texts analyzed here: “‘Negro Leadership and Negro Money’: African American Political Organizing in Oakland before the Panthers”, a chapter in the 2003 book *Freedom North* and “‘To Plan our Liberation’ Black Power and the Politics of Place in Oakland, California, 1965-1977”.<sup>80</sup> In contrast to the way that McClintock follows the flow of capital and its impact on flatlands residents (including a thorough history of their responses to continued dispossession), Self articulates how multiple Black politics and the Black Power Movement in Oakland developed with and against the racial capitalism of Oakland's urban

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<sup>79</sup> McClintock, “From Industrial Garden to Food Desert.”. 26; Deener, “The Origins of the Food Desert.” 1286-88.

<sup>80</sup> Self, ‘To Plan Our Liberation’. 759-792; Self, “‘Negro Leadership and Negro Money.’” 93-123.

development. It's a different perspective on a very similar historical, geographic and critical race analysis of Oakland. In "Negro Leadership and Negro Money" (2003) he writes,

...historians see Northern and Pacific Coast cities... as places where the postwar black freedom movement took unique forms and trajectories, where African American politics overlapped with the racialized logic of urban industrial and postindustrial capitalism, and where a dynamic black political culture nurtured multiple strategies and ideologies of resistance, accommodation, and liberation.<sup>81</sup>

Both Self and McClintock situate West Oakland as the cultural and political center of Black life starting in the 1930s, primarily due to legal and economic segregation of the City of Oakland mentioned above. Self argues that early on, Black political power in Oakland was concentrated in Black labor organizing<sup>82</sup> and would remain in a complex relationship to struggles for racial liberalism of national civil rights organizing that rose to prominence post-WWII.

McClintock's focus on the 1930s-50s history of planning and capital flows shaping the race and class geographies in Oakland demonstrates how West Oakland and the other flatlands neighborhoods were systematically confined to overcrowded poor-quality housing stock and racist FHA and private lending practices for home loans. In contrast, Self follows growth and change in West Oakland as a geographic space containing most Black political power in the East Bay, including longshoremen's labor organizing, women's political organizing across domestic labor and social spheres, and the NAACP's work in local politics and coalition-building. Self articulates that despite and because of political and economic

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<sup>81</sup> Self, "Negro Leadership and Negro Money." 94.

<sup>82</sup> railroad workers early on, then longshoremen, waiter, maybe talk about coalition of Black and white trade unions in 40s and 50s

apartheid, West Oakland, in many ways, built Black economic autonomy through the 1950s<sup>83</sup>.

For food systems, this means local independent grocery stores in West Oakland serving its residents. Both perspectives foreground the devaluation and abandonment of capital from West Oakland and the other flatland neighborhoods.

The proliferation of Oakland's Black population through the post-war era is a history of geographic confinement through segregation, redlining, and racial covenants. Brandi Summers recontextualizes this history by following the where and how of Black life to reveal "patterns of Black dispossession laying the foundation on which the present crises of displacement would occur".<sup>84</sup> She juxtaposes processes of containing Black Oakland residents to West Oakland with cycles of clearance–slum clearance, the construction and destruction of public housing, and demolition to clear the way for transportation infrastructure. This history foregrounds Summers' arguments that a wider and interconnected anti-Black geography of state and capital abandonment has designed Oakland's housing and homelessness crises. This historical and Black geographic analysis of housing offers greater depth as to West Oakland as a landscape repeatedly and systematically demarcated for devaluation.

Writing on the 1960s, Self follows the shift from the Black middle-class-led and bureaucratic "War on Poverty" for fair housing and employment reforms toward the growing movement for Black power, which is a discourse and group of strategies seeking to redistribute

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<sup>83</sup> Self, "Negro Leadership and Negro Money." 100-101.

<sup>84</sup> Summers, "Untimely Futures."

the power asymmetries perpetuating anti-Blackness in metropolitan geographies<sup>85</sup>. Black power's critique and attention to political economy was a response to lived contexts of Black people in Oakland that were disrupted and harmed by strategic devaluation and redevelopment activities by white Oakland elites and their institutions.

### **Contemporary Crises and Continuities of Struggle**

A 2021 investigation from a local news service in the Bay Area reported that there are roughly six hundred neighborhoods in the San Francisco Bay Area that are "food deserts", 171 of which are also considered low-income. The article coupled their data analysis with a map of "Bay Area Food Deserts", testimonies of residents struggling to access and afford their groceries as well as resources to access relief services.<sup>86</sup> By and large, "food deserts" are represented as crises of food access. Mainstream analyses consistently rely on metrics of supermarket proximity, the aforementioned investigation using "at least one-third of the area's population is living more than a half-mile away from the closest supermarket or large grocery store".<sup>87</sup> The data and rhetoric are wielded to articulate "food deserts" as places of significant and alarming struggle for food. The historical analysis above, however, documents how political and economic efforts to concentrate racialized poverty in distinct areas of the East Bay have rendered these places as having low access to supermarkets.

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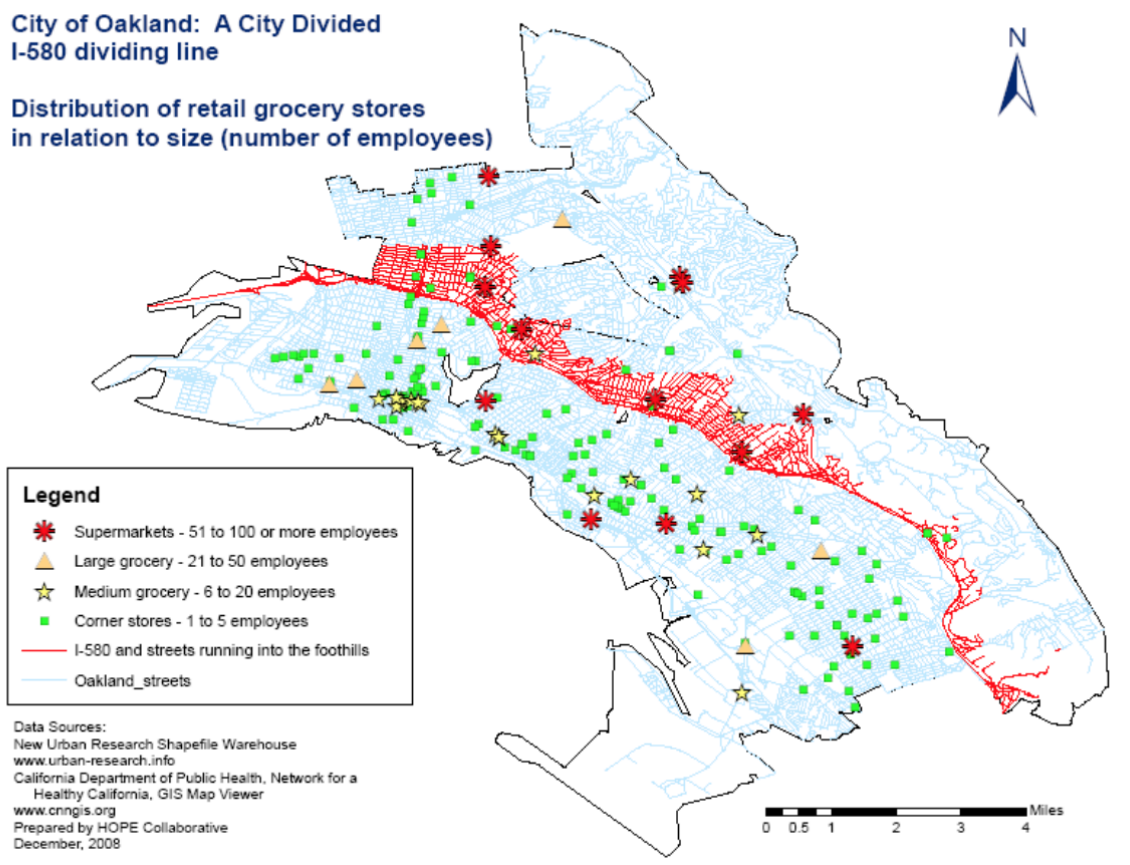
<sup>85</sup> Self, "Negro Leadership and Negro Money." 111-112; Self, "To Plan Our Liberation". 760-61

<sup>86</sup> Sierra and Feingold, "Food Deserts."

<sup>87</sup> USDA ERS, "USDA ERS - Documentation"; Sierra and Feingold, "Food Deserts."

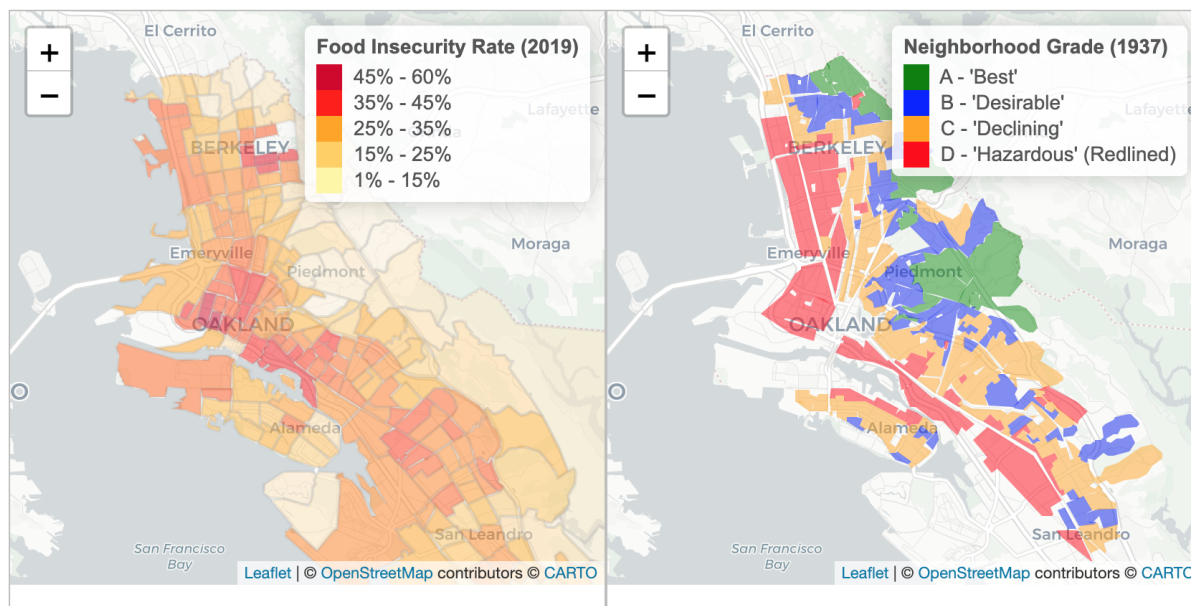
The following section discusses East Bay "food deserts" in their contemporary context and with a contemporary critique, arguing that the persistent nature of the "food desert crisis" creates spaces for food sources alternative to supermarkets. I start with a relatively familiar set of data articulating food inaccess as a consequence of organized abandonment/demarcated devaluation of working class BIPOC neighborhoods. I then approach the data critically to consider how abandonment by the state and food retail capital generates radical possibilities. First, by considering food inaccess as converging with environmental racism, I argue that environmental justice (EJ), including the abolitionist theoretical approaches and the EJ movement in the East Bay, makes food present through coalitional grassroots organizing. Next, I consider "food deserts" in relationship to Black and Indigenous critiques of the Anthropocene to argue that food inaccess is not a novel environmental crisis but a continual and structural one, and the possibilities generated by working outside of such crises.

## Environmental politics and food access data in Oakland/East Bay



**Figure 4:** Map of Oakland retail grocery stores by size and location relative to I-580 (Source: Hope Collaborative, 2009, [https://www.hopecollaborative.net/uploads/1/3/9/1/139138175/hp\\_aplacewithn-sidewalks\\_1.pdf](https://www.hopecollaborative.net/uploads/1/3/9/1/139138175/hp_aplacewithn-sidewalks_1.pdf))





**Figure 5:** East Bay food insecurity rate by census tract 2019 vs. HOLC residential security map 1937 (Source: Denney, n.d. Online. <https://www.accfb.org/redlining/>)

I now turn to food systems today in Oakland and the East Bay as continuities of the historical struggles detailed above for the radical presence of food and life on devalued and abandoned land. The data below articulate a specific perspective on "food deserts"; rarely are data of this type coupled methodologically to thorough structural and historical analyses. The problem with making evaluations on these "traditional" "food desert" data without a more contextual approach, which I'll explore more deeply in the first case study, is that they pathologize and impose damaging narratives on communities labeled "food deserts". As explored above, the lack of food across Oakland's flatlands as well as other sectors of the East Bay concentrating poor communities of color has been constructed over time, but not without constant resistance to make food present. The structure of food inaccess, the roots of "food

deserts" is a series of interactions and shifts across space in a wider regional economy and beholden to a global political economy.

Exploring this process as demarcated devaluation, McClintock traces data on the development of the East Bay to argue that capital, including supermarket capital, left Oakland for East Bay suburbs, demolishing and building infrastructure over abandoned places and people under the doctrine of urban renewal.<sup>88</sup> Industrial zones and transportation infrastructure, especially highways, are severe environmental hazards that expose nearby residents to toxic environments and disproportionate vulnerability to environmentally-determined health problems.

In 2008, there were no supermarkets in West Oakland and four in East Oakland for a ratio of one supermarket in the flatlands per 93,126 residents (4 supermarkets for 372,504 people). Meanwhile the hills had nine supermarkets for a ratio of one supermarket per 13,778 residents (9 supermarkets for 124,002 people), see Figure 4.<sup>89</sup> In 2009, Mandela Grocery Cooperative, a major focus of one of the case studies in the next chapter, opened and remains the only full-service grocery store for West Oakland's ~25,000 residents at the time of this research. A study mapping 2019 food insecurity rates over HOLC residential "security" maps

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<sup>88</sup> McClintock, "From Industrial Garden to Food Desert."27.

<sup>89</sup> Hope Collaborative, "A Place With No Sidewalks: An Assessment of Food Access, the Built Environment and Local, Sustainable Economic Development in Ecological Micro-Zones in the City of Oakland, California in 2008." 40.

of Alameda County (Figure 5) found that the median food insecurity rates were the highest among historically “redlined” neighborhoods at 32%.<sup>90</sup>

Residents of Richmond and the unincorporated territory of North Richmond, almost ninety percent of which are non-white, also face significant food inaccess with a poverty rate around 18% and child food insecurity rates ranging between 14-20%, with metrics exacerbated by COVID-19<sup>91</sup>. 2011 research showed the City of Richmond containing only three full-service grocery stores for the city’s population of just over 100,000 in 2011, two of which sit on the border of the neighboring city of El Cerrito.<sup>92</sup>

Low food access in areas of demarcated devaluation<sup>93</sup> connects consolidation of the food retail industry to declining purchasing power through economic determinants of poverty such as inflation, falling wages, joblessness.<sup>94</sup> The result is no supermarkets, and an influx of cheap, low-quality foods and food sources taking advantage of the abandoned food landscape. Naa Oyo Kwate argues that racial residential segregation drives high fast food density in Black neighborhoods.<sup>95</sup> “Food deserts” are commonly believed to both lack healthy and nutritious food but contain, often disproportionately, fast food and other low-quality processed food sources (liquor and convenience stores). West Oakland has four times the density of corner

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<sup>90</sup> Denney, “Roots of Hunger: A Look at Current Food Insecurity in Historically Redlined Neighborhoods - Alameda County Community Food Bank.”

<sup>91</sup> Fancher, “Food Justice a Way of Life for Richmond Nonprofit Urban Tilth.”

<sup>92</sup> Mock, “Why few grocery stores come to Richmond”.

<sup>93</sup> McClintock, “From Industrial Garden to Food Desert.” 39.

<sup>94</sup> McClintock, “From Industrial Garden to Food Desert.” 22

<sup>95</sup> Kwate, “Fried Chicken and Fresh Apples.”

stores licensed to sell liquor than the city overall, and many families rely on these food sources when they cannot access full-service grocery stores.<sup>96</sup>

McClintock substantiates demarcated devaluation with data on contemporary socioeconomic and health indicators, citing disproportionately high rates of unemployment, homicides, share of the population below the poverty line, as well as heart disease, cancer, and diabetes in the flatlands. Oakland flatlands residents often reach full-service grocery stores in suburbs adjacent to their neighborhood using public transit,<sup>97</sup> a testament to the inconvenience of accessing food as well as the movement of capital out of devalued neighborhoods to access food<sup>98</sup>.

These data are intended to be read and interpreted through the critical perspectives on racialized urban history and development in the East Bay that I argue above. "Food deserts" are often demarcated using only specific types of data such as food insecurity, poverty, and multiple indicators of poor health. The history of settler colonialism, development, and urban racialization articulate why "food deserts" exist, but also indicate a much broader, abolitionist mode of understanding the problems of food inaccess. Because these problems are systematic and historical, survival and resistance are also systematic and historical, which isn't indicated by snapshot data points on food insecurity. Nevertheless, people eat, people live their lives, and in

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<sup>96</sup> Mandela Marketplace, "Healthy Neighborhood Store".

<sup>97</sup> Emeryville for West Oakland residents and San Leandro for East Oakland residents. McClintock, "From Industrial Garden to Food Desert."29.

<sup>98</sup> Luu, "An Inconvenient Story"; McClintock, "From Industrial Garden to Food Desert."28-29.

thinking with Ruth Wilson Gilmore's many writings on what people do in places abandoned by the capital and the state, people generate abolition through presence.

### **Environmental Justice in Oakland/East Bay**

As I've argued throughout this section, the history and politics of "food deserts" in Oakland and the East Bay are environmental histories and environmental politics. Often, these Black, Native, Asian American, Latine, and working class narratives are not considered by mainstream environmental interests of disciplines operating for white supremacist and capitalist hierarchy. I repeat this idea not to argue that these stories and struggles should or do belong to environmentalism or environmental research, but rather that they are insurgent to a reformist white supremacist and capitalist modes of environmental thinking. Nowhere is this clearer than in the environmental justice (EJ) movement, which has always been critical of mainstream environmental disciplines and interests.

Environmental justice foregrounds the abolitionist struggle to make food present in a "food desert", both as a concept for analysis and as an organizing principle for a lot of activism in the East Bay relevant to this project. Environmental justice, in the context of this project, is the struggle to make places life-sustaining despite abandonment and violence by the state and capital. For methodological background, environmental justice is a framework for considering convergences that link low food access to carceral systems necessitating abolition. David Naguib Pellow has created multiple works at this intersection, building a critical environmental

justice framework<sup>99</sup> and offering an environmental justice perspective on carceral abolition.<sup>100</sup>

Pellow's writings contend that environmental justice imagines and processes emancipatory futures—most clearly in that the struggle against toxics or lack of amenities involves the planning and renovation of spaces without toxics and with life-sustaining infrastructures.

Pellow provides a mode of understanding environmental justice organizing in Oakland and the East Bay as organizing for abolition and for presence.

In the following chapter, I consider Indigenous and Black organizing focused on food and land from the 1960s to the present. The historical context provided here frames the case studies within contexts of food inaccess generated by abandonment and devaluation. I turn to environmental justice to conceptualize resistance to systematic environmental harm beyond food inaccess. The historic and present-day organizing by Black and Indigenous peoples in the East Bay detailed below considers food to be an aspect of wider anti-oppression, economic justice, and land caretaking work.

McClintock considers the formal EJ movement in the East Bay mobilizing against air pollution, with multiple grassroots organizations amassing community and legal support to confront local governments and industrial corporations for systematically and disproportionately exposing poor communities of color to toxics. Many organizations, such as the Asian Pacific Environmental Network (APEN) across the East Bay, West County Toxics Coalition in North Richmond and Richmond, and the West Oakland Environmental

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<sup>99</sup> Pellow, *What Is Critical Environmental Justice?*

<sup>100</sup> Pellow, "Struggles for Environmental Justice in US Prisons and Jails." 58-9.

Indicators Project, continue coalitional and community-driven EJ work. Health for Oakland's People and Environment (HOPE Collaborative) engages in community-based EJ research, proving to be a vital body for assessing and vocalizing the strengths and needs of residents of the Oakland flatlands. Particularly relevant to my research, HOPE Collaborative produced reports that review food systems widely<sup>101</sup> as well as narrowly focusing on corner stores.<sup>102</sup>

Environmental justice offers critical methods and perspectives to rethink crisis. I've argued that "food deserts" in the East Bay are created through historically and structurally racialized and class-stratified organizations of space. I've borrowed framings of spaces concentrating and confining racialized poverty as systematically "abandoned" or "devalued" to theorize how abolition makes food present in a "food desert". Environmental justice encapsulates much of the work by poor communities of color in the East Bay to resist devaluation and to make their communities life-sustaining. As an analytical framework, environmental justice helps us understand a genealogy of land, air, water, and food-driven resistance in the East Bay. I now turn to argue why thinking genealogically about crisis and resistance is important.

### **Food Deserts as Anthropocene**

Food deserts, as spatial and environmental demarcations of group-differentiated vulnerability, are not 21st century crises just because we have a term to describe them. As I have

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<sup>101</sup> Hope Collaborative, "Hope Collaborative Food System Meta Analysis."

<sup>102</sup> Bion, "A Snapshot of Oakland Corner Stores: Availability of Healthy Foods in Oakland's Low-Income Neighborhoods."

argued, "food deserts" have long genealogies. This disrupts the notion that they are novel crises.<sup>103</sup> The work of Kyle Whyte, Christina Sharpe, and Kathryn Yusof reframes the Anthropocene as part of a centuries of crisis due to settler colonialism and the TransAtlantic slave trade when untold lives and ecologies were transformed.<sup>104</sup> Thus, I contend food inaccess due to living in a "food desert" is not a crisis to be addressed singularly but a series of relationships that extend farther than the term "food desert" could invoke. The history of "food deserts" through settler colonialism and environmental racism detailed above indicates that Black, Indigenous, and people of color have lived within and despite imposed geographies of food inaccess for much longer than we've had the term "food desert". The crises implied in the term "food desert", similar to the term "Anthropocene" contain embedded histories and structures of racial violence that are often left out of mainstream discourses.

In his 2017 article "Indigenous Climate Change Studies: Indigenizing Futures, Decolonizing the Anthropocene" Kyle Whyte writes,

As Indigenous peoples, we do not tell our futures beginning from the position of concern with the Anthropocene as a hitherto unanticipated vision of human intervention, which involves mass extinctions and the disappearance of certain ecosystems. For the colonial period already rendered comparable outcomes that cost Indigenous peoples their reciprocal relationships with thousands of plants, animals, and ecosystems—most of which are not coming back.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Or, crises made novel or unique because academic and research institutions have developed the language to describe the "food desert" process narrowly.

<sup>104</sup> Anthropocene is a term to describe the current geological age, where *human* activity is considered to most dominantly influence climate and the environment. I am attentive to the politics of arguing that processes of environmental degradation and fossil fuel usage can be applied universally to all humans.

<sup>105</sup> Whyte, "Indigenous Climate Change Studies." 159.



Whyte argues that anthropogenic climate change belongs to histories and structures of settler colonial violence inflicted on Indigenous peoples. That for Indigenous peoples, settler colonialism was and continues to be an environmental catastrophe. Moreover, the theft of land, water, and relations by colonial powers enables and facilitates industrial capitalist activities viewed as driving the Anthropocene.

In her book *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, Kathryn Yusoff offers the perspective that the Anthropocene describes and reinscribes geological formations of antiBlackness. Anthropocene is an opportunity for “insurgent geologies” to coalesce around colonialism, slavery, and diaspora’s material impacts.<sup>106</sup> Yusoff writes that the Anthropocene “is the material history that constitutes the present in all its geotraumas and thus should be embraced, reworked, and reconstituted in terms of agency for the present, for the end of this world and the possibility of others...”<sup>107</sup> In line with Whyte’s perspective on settler colonialism, anti-Blackness enables and is embedded in climatic and geologic catastrophe. This is evident in the geographic and environmental organizations of the East Bay that I analyze. Racialized class violence is embedded in physical, material infrastructures supplying Oakland and the East Bay’s economy: the highways, the heavy industrial activity, and the abandonment.

In terms of food systems, settler colonialism specifically disrupts Indigenous relationships with land, water, and other organisms that are necessary to sustain life.<sup>108</sup> Spanish, Mexican, then U.S. theft of Huchiun was catastrophic to Lisjan Ohlone people’s relationships

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<sup>106</sup> Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*. accessed online.

<sup>107</sup> Yusoff.

<sup>108</sup> Whyte, “Indigenous Climate Change Studies.” 159.

needed to sustain their communities. Slavery and slavery's anti-Black reverberations are material processes described by Christina Sharpe's concept of Black being "in the wake", which means "to occupy and be occupied by the continuous and changing present of slavery's as yet unresolved unfolding."<sup>109</sup> The confinement and deprivation of nourishing Black food cultures is a part of Sharpe's ontology of "the wake" of enslavement. Black and Indigenous being weathers expansive and interconnected temporal and material crises. Attention to the historical and structural aspects of places labeled "food deserts" unravels the struggles of Black and Indigenous people outside and oppositional to white environmental consciousness.

If the Anthropocene can be traced as a formation of settler colonial intellectual structures, anti-Blackness, and racial liberalism, abolitionist thinking and activism generate pathways to, as Yusoff puts it, other worlds. Speaking to housing crises as futures lived out as past formations of space, Brandi Summers writes,

Solutions are fetishized, yet posited as separable from still-active legacies... These pasts persist in the present as traces, ghosts, spores; half denied or invisibilized, and half accepted as normal conditions of the 21st-century East Bay housing economy.<sup>110</sup>

The Black and Indigenous food distribution organizing in Oakland and the East Bay that I explore in the next chapter do not generate supermarket solutions to "food deserts", but rather lasting alternatives that are by and for communities. They continue traditions and strategies to intervene on crises of food inaccessibility by serving as accessible, nourishing, and multifunctional alternatives to supermarkets that are absent or inaccessible. As such, they operate outside of

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<sup>109</sup> Sharpe, *In the Wake On Blackness and Being*. 13.

<sup>110</sup> Summers, "Untimely Futures". accessed online.

narrow “food crises” that necessitate narrow futures. Rather they make food present in “food deserts” by returning Indigenous land in the settler colonial city and practicing Black cooperative economics. Sogorea Te’ Land Trust cultivates and distributes food and medicines to Indigenous elders and families as a practice of healing the land as Indigenous resurgence<sup>111</sup>. Mandela Grocery Cooperative engages in Black cooperative economics to practice small and local sourcing and good relationships with West Oakland residents<sup>112</sup>. This work exists outside of “solutions” brought on by a “food desert crisis”. Beyond settler colonial and anti-Black apocalyptic continuities are continuities of presence and possibility.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter framed Oakland and the East Bay’s histories of environmental racism to understand “food deserts” as landscapes of organized abandonment and demarcated devaluation. It then took a critical perspective to understanding “food deserts” as contemporary crises. I argued that “food deserts” are continual crises informed by the history of settler colonialism and racialized urban development as well as the resistance and resurgence of Black, Indigenous and people of color. Historical and contemporary structural analysis informs the abolitionist perspectives and organizing beyond “food deserts” that I discuss in the next chapter. Understanding food inaccess as a persistent tool of racialized and anti-poor violence is not cause for despair, but rather an indication that abolitionist food distribution technologies

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<sup>111</sup> Brown-Almaweri, conversation with author.

<sup>112</sup> Mandela Partners, “Who We Are.”

and infrastructures are constantly being built and maintained in "food deserts".<sup>113</sup> The people organizing food sources outside of supermarkets to make food present in places called "food deserts" are the subject of the next chapter.

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<sup>113</sup> I mention food justice and abolitionist infrastructures multiple times in this research. The notion comes from a paper called "Beyond Wiindigo Infrastructure" (2020) by Winona LaDuke and Deborah Cowen that considers settler infrastructures through the Anishinaabe mythical figure of the Wiindigo, or an all-consuming beast. The authors argue that justice and decolonization require infrastructures used in transformative and insurgent capacities. Laduke and Cowen. "Beyond Wiindigo Infrastructure". 243-268.

### **Chapter 3: Abolitionist Gardens & Grocery Stores: Three Cases**

This chapter starts with the question: How does food activism in the East Bay generate lasting alternatives to supermarkets? The cases show methods, movement histories, and contemporary organizations that exemplify lasting alternatives to supermarkets in food environments with low access to nourishing and affordable food.

In “Abolition Geography and the Problem of Innocence”, after describing her idea of abolition geography and its connections to the writing of W.E.B. Dubois and Angela Davis, Gilmore turns to observations of people organizing and collectivizing, and in doing so, makes a rhetorical turn from a theoretical and historical analysis to an examination of contemporary cases. In this research project, the Introduction and Background chapters articulate an idea—that abolitionism allows us to radically reshape our ideas and formations of “food deserts”—and a place—Oakland and the East Bay as a site of struggle.

This chapter and its cases describe the process of answering/confronting a “food desert” with abolition, with the presence of places where food is distributed through care, self determination, and resistance. These cases are abolition geographies through food and are bound to care for land and water, economic justice, Black and Indigenous beingness, and so much more. The people and work described in these cases inspire this writing because they make places where they are (Oakland and the East Bay) into places where they wish to be.

The first case is a critical analysis of the “food desert” discourse that mobilizes the Black

feminist geographic work of Katherine McKittrick in her book *Dear Science and Other Stories*. I attend to anti-Black positions embedded in describing a Black place as a "food desert". I also consider the ways that the traditional "food desert" discourse ascribes a false and paralytic set of problems and solutions that do not imagine abolition and liberation as sources of existing and unrecognized food sources. I then turn to the words of Karen Washington, Ashanté Reese, and Nick Estes to explore how Black and Indigenous methods and perspectives can make food present in a place called a "food desert". This first case frames the process of generating abolitionist food sources, which is then shown in action by the following two cases.

The second case, "Sogorea Te' Land Trust and Urban Indigenous Feminist Activism" explores the history of urban Indigenous power movements in the East Bay, considering intertribal, Ohlone-led and Ohlone specific activism. As the history catches up to the present, I shift to write how the Sogorea Te' Land Trust, and Oakland-based, Indigenous feminist and Lisjan Ohlone-centered movement to rematriate land in the East Bay region. I profile the organization's efforts to distribute food to Indigenous families and elders as well as their larger vision of land rematriation, which is the process of returning Indigenous land to the care of Indigenous peoples to serve as spaces of healing, food gathering, cultural and linguistic resurgence, and education. I argue that through land rematriation, Sogorea Te' Land Trust makes food present in places and for Lisjan Ohlone people, Indigenous peoples of all nations, and community members at large with low access to food in the East Bay.

My third case, "Mandela Grocery Cooperative and the Black Food Movement in

Oakland” explores Black food movement in Oakland and the East Bay. The case starts with a brief discussion of Fannie Lou Hamer, who despite not basing her work in the Bay Area, informs and inspires the radical and cooperative Black food activism discussed after through her abolitionist, anticapitalist, Southern, Black feminist organizing leadership and intellectualism. The case study continues with a historical and Black feminist analysis of the food activism of the Black Panther Party chapter in Oakland. It concludes by discussing the contemporary Black food movement in Oakland and the East Bay, focusing specifically on the Mandela Grocery Cooperative. I argue widely that the Black food movement, particularly the activism of Black feminists, in Oakland and the East Bay has and continues to employ abolitionist politics and strategies to make food present in Black neighborhoods systematically deprived of nourishing food. Although I separate Indigenous and Black case studies for analysis, I want to note that the geographies and movements of Black and Indigenous communities are convergent, coalitional, and often one and the same.<sup>114</sup>

## **Methods**

For this case study research I employ several key methods, including a discursive and theoretical analysis in Case One, an interview in Case Two, historical analyses and organizational profiles in cases Two and Three. In this space dedicated to methods, I’m

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<sup>114</sup> I am very curious about shared/coalition activist histories between Black and Indigenous peoples in the Bay Area, and given more time, would be interested in further research on the subject.

interested in exploring the methodological discourses that inform my approach to the cases, as well as the paper as a whole.

In Chapter 1: Introduction, I make a note on discipline and the interdisciplinary nature of this research. For me as a researcher, interdisciplinarity is rooted in abolitionist thinking and method. I've learned from many teachers in my life that interdisciplinarity, particularly in research that's informed by Black and Indigenous studies and communities, engages in the abolitionist refusal of disciplinary surveillance.

Refusal has an extensive role as a method in this project. Much of my refusals are directed towards deficit-oriented pathologizing perspectives of "food deserts" as lifeless, empty places. As I've described, "food desert" as a research and discursive frame, carries with it a set of damaging and marginalizing methods. The data (i.e. supermarkets in census tracts) utilized through these methods often give no consideration to peoples' lived experiences, failing to consider communities' agency to make food present, particularly in food sources alternative to supermarkets.

In my case study research, I draw from historical, structural, and insurgent activist data to consider "food deserts" as sites continually and actively contested. In contrast to mapped data points about supermarket access, this analysis articulates communities' political power, perspectives and desires for their food systems. Desi Rodriguez- Lonebear's discussion of Indigenous data sovereignty in Indian Country<sup>115</sup> considers the anti-colonial power of

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<sup>115</sup> Rodriguez-Lonebear, "Building a Data Revolution in Indian Country.", 253-272.



Indigenous-driven data and data collection methodologies for tribal communities. The data presented about the East Bay and Oakland as a study area are critical of settler colonial representations of land and environment, and attend to Indigenous geospatial data, such as creek systems, arbors, and shellmounds. I also seek to represent the insurgency of urban Indigenous feminist data on the return of Lisjan Ohlone land as methods of food, medicine, language, and cultural resurgence.

### **Case 1: Abolitionist Discourse Analysis – Metaphor, Description and Presence**

In the United States, the term “food desert” consistently maps onto places of racialized poverty<sup>116</sup>. I’m critical of the ways “food desert” then describes racialized poverty through an evocative and pithy metaphor. The “food desert” metaphor’s power to describe, to assume and problematize and pathologize, is dangerous and damaging. The danger in the metaphor is that “food desert”, by implying that supermarket access in that place is low, problematizes these places and the people living in them. “Food desert” also describes a singular, linear, and often white supermacist set of “problem and solutions” that fail to recognize people with low spatial access to supermarkets continue to access the food they need, in many cases through insurgent methods.

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<sup>116</sup> De Master and Daniels, “Desert Wonderings,” 242.

In the first chapter of her book *Dear Science and Other Stories*, Katherine McKittrick attends to metaphor and its complex relationship to Black geographies.<sup>117</sup> In her third chapter, she writes on methods and methodologies.<sup>118</sup> Both of these chapters have illuminated how “food desert” perpetuates racist-capitalist structures by being descriptive and metaphorical.

Writing on metaphor, McKittrick takes a critical and cautionary perspective on spatial and geographic metaphors, or language used to describe figurative spatial relationships, such as space, mapping, position, etc.<sup>119</sup> She argues that often these metaphors are disconnected from their literal meaning in describing physical space—mapping ideas vs mapping space.<sup>120</sup>

Delinking spatial metaphors from physical space brings people to think of space outside of the context of geographies made uneven by social inequities. More specifically, McKittrick explains how metaphor is often used to describe Blackness, Black people, Black places as wrong, or bad, or even dead—metaphorically unliving.

The “food desert” metaphor describes a wrongness of Black and Indigenous places, as well as otherwise racialized and impoverished space. The notion of a “food desert” is founded in anti-Black, settler colonial perceptions and constructions of place, both the notion of lifelessness (metaphor) and the [carceral] quality of abandonment and disinvestment (material conditions). Breaking it down, the spatial metaphor “desert” leverages perceptions of deserts as empty, lifeless, and unproductive for human development. Indigenous perspectives remind

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<sup>117</sup> McKittrick, *Dear Science and Other Stories*. 1-13.

<sup>118</sup> McKittrick, *Dear Science and Other Stories*. 35-57.

<sup>119</sup> McKittrick, *Dear Science and Other Stories*. 9-11.

<sup>120</sup> although in this case, one could map the role of physical space in altering different peoples’ ideas.

that not only does food absolutely grow in the desert, but also that Indigenous land is not lifeless, even when it has been stolen<sup>121</sup>. "Food deserts" are commonly believed to be empty and unyielding of food to its inhabitants. But the metaphor pins suffering—which includes wrongness and pathologies—on those living in "food deserts", such as they are metaphorically unliving as they are *supposedly* without food.<sup>122</sup>

McKittrick writes on description as a method for describing Indigenous and Black people in a harmful way. She argues that describing Black life, people, and places as wrong or as problems when these problems are created through anti-Black and white supremacist logics can only objectify Black people.<sup>123</sup> The process of "describing Black problems" presupposes Black people as problematic by nature, biology, and circumstance. Even when description is intended to be used as an anti-oppression strategy, McKittrick argues that this strategy wrongfully assumes a vision (she speaks of this as a teleology) of moving from oppression to freedom. But liberation, she argues, is far more creative than this, it's about knowing freedom that's not oppositional to but outside of its relationship to oppression<sup>124</sup>. I'm critical of the way "food desert" *describes* racialized poverty. I am encouraged to think of food and land work outside of relationships to "food deserts".

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<sup>121</sup> Brown-Almaweri (Sogorea Te' Land Trust), conversation with author

<sup>122</sup> The phrase "metaphorically unliving" comes from the quotation in *Dear Science* (pp 10-11): "What happens when we, black people, are read or analyzed as pure metaphor? And what kind of metaphors are we? I suspect, in some cases, we are metaphorically unliving. In terms of geography, our sense of place is often pre-conceptualized as dead and dying and this lifelessness extends outward, from that death and deadliness, toward extinction".

<sup>123</sup> McKittrick, *Dear Science and Other Stories*. 49.

<sup>124</sup> McKittrick. *Dear Science and Other Stories*. 49.

Even with the intentions of improving food access, many approaches to "food deserts", as I explore in multiple subsequent sections, are stuck in frames of oppression and reduction. If this poor Black neighborhood or Native reservation has no supermarket it must be a "food desert", so let's build a supermarket. Abolition and liberation (in McKittrick's writing) thinks beyond a supermarket that may only perpetuate cost burdens for groceries, racial prejudices on shoplifting, and industrially-processed foods and toward a food source outside the supermarket, say an Indigenous urban farm or a Black grocery cooperative, which are the subjects of the following two cases.

Food deserts articulate an outsider subject-position, meaning people don't call places where they live "food deserts". In an interview with *Guernica*<sup>125</sup>, food activist Karen Washington asked,

Who in my actual neighborhood has deemed that we live in a food desert? Number one, people will tell you that they do have food. Number two, people in the hood have never used that term. It's an outsider term. "Desert" also makes us think of an empty, absolutely desolate place. But when we're talking about these places, there is so much life and vibrancy and potential. Using that word runs the risk of preventing us from seeing all of those things.

"Food desert" is a metaphor employed by someone on the outside to describe what's wrong with a place and what's wrong with people in that place. It's the subject position of not seeing life or vibrancy or potential. McKittrick writes, "paying close attention to the materiality of the

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<sup>125</sup> Washington, in Brones "Food apartheid."

black story matters”<sup>126</sup>. To borrow Washington’s idea, the materiality of Black stories, lives, and places is the life, vibrancy, and potential of places labeled “food deserts”.

I see McKittrick’s notion of Black method to describe Black stories and Black geographies at work in *Black Food Geographies*, a text that has taught me how to articulate the presence of food in a “food desert” using Black method. Ashanté Reese subverts the common label or demarcation that the Deanwood neighborhood of D.C. is a “food desert” with the memories, observations, and yes, literal descriptions of people’s own food behaviors to articulate a politic surrounding food interconnects race, class, health, and community changing over time. This isn’t to say that food systems and food access are not racialized or connected to racial capitalism; Reese and many of her participants offer clarity on the disparity of food access between Deanwood and many of its surrounding communities. Reese’s research is about presence, the presence of Deanwood’s residents including their everyday, their memories, their history, and the presence of actual food in a “food desert”. One of such articulations of presence is through her ethnography of a corner store in Deanwood and its owner-operator<sup>127</sup>. She asserts that the community values and is nourished by a store that would not be considered nourishing by a traditional study of Deanwood as a “food desert”. Articulating presence in place is Black method as McKittrick describes, as well as a

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<sup>126</sup> McKittrick, *Dear Science and Other Stories*. *Dear Science and Other Stories*. 49.

<sup>127</sup> Reese, *Black Food Geographies*. 91-110.

methodological of place, of ancestors, and what I understand Ruth Wilson Gilmore calls an “infrastructure of feeling”<sup>128</sup>.

Presence, the presence of food in Oakland and the East Bay’s “food deserts” is squarely the subject of the other two cases, but presence and potential can also be observed in Oakland and East Bay corner stores. Short, Guthman, and Raskin<sup>129</sup> focus specifically on small culturally-specific markets in three predominantly Black and Latino neighborhoods in the San Francisco Bay Area. These types of markets are often excluded from traditional food environment studies because they aren’t full-service grocery stores and they’re generally not considered to provide fresh, nourishing food even when many do. The article is critical of viewing these food sources as panaceas that form “food oases” and directly reduce food insecurity, but affirm small and corner grocery stores’ vital role as small businesses contributing affordable and culturally-relevant food to communities with low access to supermarkets.

A 2016 analysis of corner stores in East and West Oakland found that roughly half of the corner stores reviewed sold fresh produce and that produce was consistently of high quality<sup>130</sup>. The study informed the creation of Hope Collaborative’s Healthy Corner Store Project, a program that supports small grocers in expanding and increasing the availability of nourishing and affordable foods. Another Oakland-based organization, Mandela Partners, has

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<sup>128</sup> Gilmore, “Abolition Geography”. 234-237. Infrastructure of feeling refers to the conditions and possibilities created by abolition geographies and freedom as a material, if not, provisional space.

<sup>129</sup> Short, Guthman, and Raskin, “Food Deserts, Oases, or Mirages?” 352-364.

<sup>130</sup> Bion, “A Snapshot of Oakland Corner Stores: Availability of Healthy Foods in Oakland’s Low-Income Neighborhoods.”

a similar healthy grocery program to mitigate systemic barriers to the operation of small grocery stores and invest in safe and nourishing food options<sup>131</sup>.

This is the work to make food present in a "food desert", and it considers existing community infrastructures, as well as community members' existing relationships to corner stores as often the only nearby source of groceries. This idea of gathering data and basing support on community research, on Black method, is insurgent to the aid-based supermarket interventions necessitated by traditional "food desert" narratives and research.

A related application of insurgent methods comes from Indigenous urban studies and urban Indigenous perspectives. Oakland and the East Bay are built on land called Huchiun, the unceded territory of the Confederated Villages of Lisjan, who remain on their land and are in struggle to maintain these sacred relationships, despite the East Bay being heavily urbanized. I mentioned above that the metaphor embeds settler colonial notions of land, particularly urban land abandoned by the state and capital as deprived of food, unproductive, and unable to be nourishing. Erin Koonsmo and Karyn Recollet push back against common perceptions medicines should not be picked in urban, industrialized, or polluted places because they are impure, affirming relations with and care for all Indigenous land, water, and plants. They write:

In order to love and build good relations through ongoing colonialisms and environmental destruction, we need to rid ourselves of the technologies and practices

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<sup>131</sup> Ali, "Shifting the Food Desert Narrative in East Oakland"; Mandela Partners, "Healthy Grocery Initiative: Mandela Partners."

associated with purity, which also ultimately harm our city kin, and gender- and sexuality-complex folks and people with disabilities.<sup>132</sup>

In the next case, I will discuss much further the ongoing urban Indigenous feminist work in the East Bay to return the land to Ohlone care. This case has attended to the presence of food in places called "food deserts", particularly how that food often belongs to food sources and Black and Indigenous food cultures alternative to supermarkets. *Knowing* that food is sourced, eaten, and that people are nourished and well in "food deserts" across Oakland and the East Bay engages insurgent methodologies, such Black method described by McKittrick<sup>133</sup> and applied to food systems by Reese<sup>134</sup>. Reflecting on the words of Komsmo and Recollet<sup>135</sup>, abolitionist<sup>136</sup> and Indigenous relational practices to make food present in a "food desert" are vitally about care and good relations with the land, water, and plants of Oakland and the East Bay as they are.

## **Case 2: Sogorea Te' Land Trust and Urban Indigenous Feminist Activism**

Case 2 is widely about urban Indigenous activism in the East Bay, focusing on the history as well as a present-day organization facilitating the return of Ohlone land called Sogorea Te' Land Trust. This case details how organizing for the return of Lisjan Ohlone land

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<sup>132</sup> Komsmo and Recollet, "Afterword." 243

<sup>133</sup> McKittrick, *Dear Science*, 5.

<sup>134</sup> Reese, *Black Food Geographies*

<sup>135</sup> Komsmo and Recollet, "Afterword." 249-250.

<sup>136</sup> I discussed in the introduction Nick Estes writing on abolitionist and radical practices of Indigenous placemaking. In Case 2, I will discuss connections between the return of Indigenous land (rematriation/Land Back) and abolition. I see abolition as necessitating the return of Native land as a lasting alternative to settler colonial violence.



and sacred sites and more generally, Indigenous beingness in the East Bay, generates nourishing sources of food and medicines for Indigenous peoples in the region.

Following the formal relocation of many Indigenous peoples to Oakland and continued resistance and resurgence efforts of Ohlone people of many nations, this section attends to the contemporary Indigenous activist history of the Bay Area. For nineteen months between 1969 to 1971, an intertribal group called Indians of All Tribes occupied Alcatraz Island in the San Francisco Bay sought to transform the island into an intertribal space and protest the government's use of the island as a carceral and settler-colonial site. Historically, Alcatraz Prison incarcerated many Native peoples resisting invasions and settler colonial violence. The holding of Alcatraz is described as catalyzing occupations of federal lands and buildings all over the country.<sup>137</sup> Ohlone people of many nations organized, often in intertribal organizations, to protect sacred Ohlone sites, many of which were destroyed or inaccessible to Ohlone people due to private property ownership and parks development.<sup>138</sup>

In particular, Ohlone people have organized to protect their shellmounds and the lands around them as development efforts would often unearth ancestral remains.<sup>139</sup> In 1997 the City of Emeryville began redeveloping a site on top of the Emeryville Shellmound, located where the Temescal Creek joins the San Francisco Bay and stood sixty feet tall and over 350 feet wide. The site had been previously desecrated by industrial development decades earlier,

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<sup>137</sup> Estes, "Freedom Is a Place | Versopolis Review"; Bauer, "Reclaiming Alcatraz." 97-107.

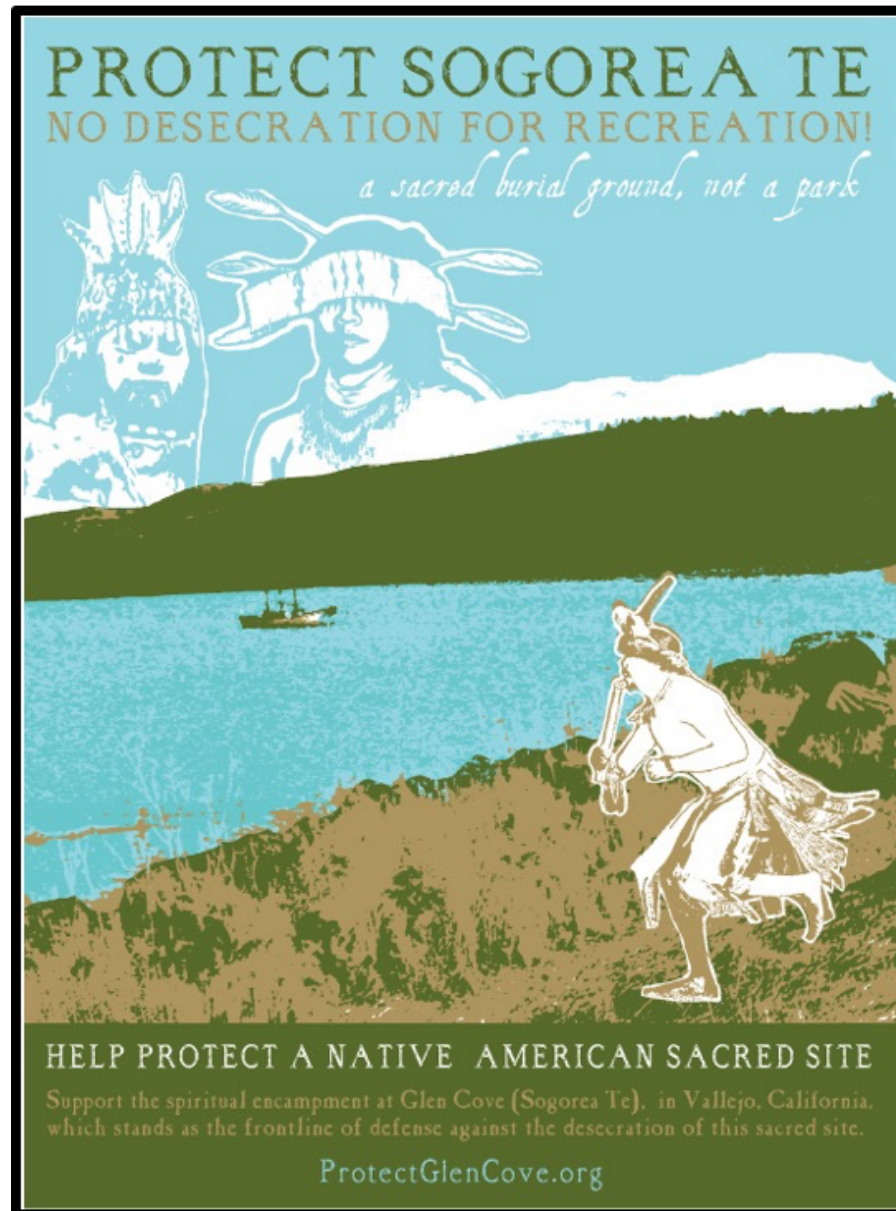
<sup>138</sup> Kanyon Consulting LLC, "Contemporary Ohlone History."

<sup>139</sup> Kanyon Consulting LLC "Contemporary Ohlone History." Sogorea Te' Land Trust, "Lisjan (Ohlone) History & Territory".

flattening the shellmound and removing ancestral remains. However, the 1997 redevelopment uncovered even more remains underground that were contaminated by industrial waste, some of whom were deposited into a mass grave on site while others were incinerated. This was an incredibly traumatic time for Lisjan and all Ohlone peoples that galvanized an annual protest on Black Friday against the mall constructed on the site.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> Kanyon Consulting LLC, “Contemporary Ohlone History”; Sogorea Te’ Land Trust, “Lisjan (Ohlone) History & Territory.”



**Figure 6:** Protect Sogorea Te' Poster (Source: Protect Sogorea Te', 2011 <https://protectsogoreate.org/2011/new-poster-design/>)

In 1999, activists Johnella LaRose and Corrina Gould established Indian People Organizing for Change (IPOC) to defend and restore sacred Indigenous sites throughout the Bay Area. They would organize the Shellmound Peace Walks, which were marches organized to

trace the shellmound sites throughout the Bay Area, as well as other organizing and direct action for shellmound protection.<sup>141</sup> At the same time, IPOC in coalition with many other Bay Area Indigenous organizers, came together to protect the Karkin Ohlone village and burial site called Sogorea Te' from the City of Vallejo's efforts to redevelop the site into a public park. For 109 days starting in April of 1999, organizers gathered thousands of people, many of whom were California Native peoples and urban Indigenous peoples from the Bay Area, to hold a vigil at Sogorea Te' and live at the village site in community (see Figure 6). Founded in 2015 by Gould and LaRose, the Sogorea Te' Land Trust bears the village's namesake.<sup>142</sup>

Today, Ohlone people are fighting to save an ancient shellmound in West Berkeley in a protracted court battle against the City of Berkeley and direct action.<sup>143</sup> The struggle to protect Ohlone sacred sites and shellmounds bears a strong connection to Sogorea Te' Land Trust's fight to restore Bay Area land to the care of Ohlone people.

Sogorea Te' Land Trust (hereafter STLT or the Land Trust) is a land trust facilitating the return of East Bay land to Indigenous people based in Huchiun/Oakland. The Land Trust is led by a Lisjan Ohlone-centered and intertribal group of urban Indigenous women. As a land trust, STLT pursues legal and title access to land in the Bay Area to be used for Ohlone language and cultural revitalization, land stewardship and food sovereignty, as well as sacred

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<sup>141</sup> Sogorea Te' Land Trust, "Lisjan (Ohlone) History & Territory.;" Sheynen, "IPOC's Shellmound Peace Walks - FoundSF."

<sup>142</sup> Sogorea Te' Land Trust, "Lisjan (Ohlone) History & Territory."

<sup>143</sup> Save the West Berkeley Shellmound and Village Site, "Learn More."

and ceremonial site protection.<sup>144</sup>

For the purposes of this research I examine their work for land rematriation as the creation of abolition geographies. I argue that as an urban Indigenous feminist organization, the Land Trust embodies abolitionist land and food practices through the return of Indigenous land outside of US governmental recognition processes, and by making food and land present for urban Indigenous resurgence. This organizational profile would not be possible without the support of STLT staff member Nazshonnii Brown-Almaweri, who offered her time to speak with me about the organization and specifically their food distribution and land rematriation work.

Land rematriation encompasses all of the work of Sogorea Te' Land Trust. Land rematriation is the return of land to Indigenous peoples, which involves many relational and cultural practices guided by and centering Ohlone women on Lisjan Ohlone land. For STLT, physically and spatially rematriating land to Indigenous peoples is a process of restoring sacred relationships between people and their ancestral homelands, and in doing so, creating new community where “everyone has a place in healing the trauma that’s happened on this land and healing each other...”.<sup>145</sup> The Land Trust’s practice of healing in community is politicized by confrontations of the settler city for Indigenous land, these are struggles for Native life and wellbeing.

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<sup>144</sup> Sogorea Te' Land Trust, “Our History”; Brown-Almaweri, conversation with author.

<sup>145</sup> Brown-Almaweri, conversation with author.

When I asked her about the Land Trust's stance on "food deserts" and their work, Nazshonnii responded with the provocation, "Why do we say deserts when food can grow in the desert?"<sup>146</sup> She spoke first to the importance of language and how we speak of the land. She recognized a tension that I've felt throughout this project of not being interested in censoring anyone out of saying a place is a "food desert", but rather recognizing and amplifying the work to transform relations to land and place. She affirmed that each site the Land Trusts works to rematriate, each piece of land that is returned helps to fight "food deserts" and generate food sovereignty. She returned to speaking on their work with neighbors and the public, noting that making the food cultivated on their sites accessible is sometimes a challenge but they try to have food available as often as they can. The work exists in the space that it's in – on Native land and with the people that are there. Nazshonnii spoke specifically on the ways that STLT's rematriated land sites engage neighbors and the community around them, who are not always Indigenous or Lisjan Ohlone. STLT shares food and medicine from the gardens on their sites with community and engages community on their needs and hopes for the site.

Nazshonnii also spoke to the role of food distribution under the broader theme of land rematriation as vital visibility and recognition work for Ohlone women on Ohlone land. She asserted that the work of STLT is urban Indigenous resistance that includes farming, food distribution, and tincture making. Taken with the Land Trust's work for Ohlone language and cultural resurgence, youth leadership and education, creating space for gathering and

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<sup>146</sup> Brown-Almaweri, conversation with author.

ceremony-holding, and disaster preparedness, this is Ohlone visibility through rematriation.

She stated:

...our focus on rematriation is like this holistic healing for our communities, for the land, for the earth where we're taking care of the mother earth that's personified... but also like receiving this knowledge from the matriarchs in our communities and from ancestral knowledge of is often passed down through the women.<sup>147</sup>

Land rematriation is a radical struggle that is highly compatible with abolitionist geographies—freedom is place and land and making present good relationships with the land. Pursuing these relationships informs Sogorea Te' Land Trust's work in many ways, including its food distribution.

STLT's food distribution program generates a network of care and resilience in response to vulnerability manufactured to be worse for Indigenous peoples, people of color, poor people, and people with disabilities and/or are immunocompromised. The program started when the Land Trust received the USDA Farms to Families Grant that diverted food from food service industries that were diminished by the pandemic and would otherwise be wasted into boxes for families. When the program ended after a few months, the STLT staff generated their own network of food distributors to continue to meet the needs of their community, at this point over one hundred families. Nazshonnii emphasized that distinction of their food distribution from other larger food aid institutions and organizations is a focus

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<sup>147</sup> Brown-Almaweri. conversation with author. This part of our discussion embedded STLT's feminist analysis and praxis in the notion of rematriation.

on specific and culturally relevant foods and medicines that Indigenous people and elders specifically might need.

By working collaboratively with a number of food justice organizations including farms and grocery stores, the Land Trust offers a wide variety of fresh and high quality foods. Nazshonnii told me that they prioritized community members who were immunocompromised and vulnerable if they had to grocery shop for themselves, families with incarcerated relatives, and families with single parents or grandparents and other relatives as guardians. She also noted that the organization has grown because of recent projects like the food distribution, bringing in new people to help tend land at STLT sites as well as harvesting for food distribution, packing, and delivering food to community members. Through its food distribution Land Trust extends its work beyond the scale of its sites to support a community of Native peoples dispersed throughout the East Bay.

When I asked about the relationship between land back and land rematriation, as well as if she considers the work to be abolitionist, Nazshonnii explained that she sees land back and land rematriation as being synonymous and contextual. Land rematriation is a prominent term and form of action in the Bay Area, it's the core work of Sogorea' Te Land Trust and the work of returning Ohlone land to Ohlone people. Nazshonnii said she sees this work as aligned with Land Back organizing, citing their solidarity with the pipeline resistance organizing that gave rise to the term. Thus, Land Back and land rematriation are a part of abolitionist work against white supremacist violence focusing especially on returning Indigenous land to Indigenous



peoples as a practice of care for the land and one another in healing relationship.

Sogorea Te' Land Trust's Indigenous feminist organizing resists the settler colonial structures that do not recognize the Confederated Villages of Lisjan by facilitating rematriation for the wider urban intertribal community living on Lisjan Ohlone land. Thinking with Nick Estes' writing on freedom and abolition for Indigenous land and places, the Land Trust exemplifies his notion of anticolonial Indigenous placemaking.<sup>148</sup> STLT practices resistance to the settlement and colonization of Huchiun by taking land back and facilitating the resurgence of Lisjan Ohlone people and land.

### **Case 3: Mandela Grocery Cooperative and the Black Food Movement in Oakland**

This final case examines the Black Food Movement in Oakland and the East Bay, both historically with a focus on the Black Panther Party's Free Breakfast for School Children program and through a contemporary review of food justice organizations, focusing on Mandela Grocery Cooperative. I argue that the Black Food Movement has and continues to practice abolition by actively reshaping landscapes of anti-Black devaluation and abandonment to make food present in liberatory ways. Black feminist geographers and Black feminist abolitionists have informed this case by embedding gender analysis in the politics of land, care, and wellbeing explored below. Much like the urban Indigenous feminist organizing of Sogorea

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<sup>148</sup> Estes, "Freedom Is a Place | Versopolis Review."

Te' Land Trust, good land relations are intimately tied to gender and queer liberation. Thus, I make a second, insurgent, argument that abolition through the transformation of food systems and food cultures includes a genealogy of Black feminist struggle.

### **On Fannie Lou Hamer**

Although she was not based in California, Fannie Lou Hamer continues to have a profound impact on Black food organizing in Oakland and the East Bay. She has been made legendary for her leadership in voting rights activism with the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and her speech to the 1964 Democratic National Convention.<sup>149</sup> Her voting rights organizing in the face of organized white terror and brutality speaks for itself, and is widely explored. However, her name is perhaps less commonly associated with her work as a food and land activist in Sunflower County, Mississippi, most centrally in her founding and leadership with the Freedom Farm Cooperative. Sunflower County was Fannie Lou Hamer's home, and this commitment to her community informs her work at the national scale as well as her hyper-local organizing for Black economic and agricultural cooperation. Throughout her lifetime, Black sharecroppers and farmworkers in Sunflower County were subjected to federal and Mississippi state agricultural policies and economic schemes of labor exploitation, impoverishment, undereducation and malnutrition. Apartheid, racial terror, and agricultural mechanization

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<sup>149</sup> White, *Freedom Farmers: Agricultural Resistance and the Black Freedom Movement*, 67; SNCC Digital Gateway, "Fannie Lou Hamer."

propelled the Second Great Migration with significant proportions of African American populations leaving the rural South for mainly Northern urban areas.<sup>150</sup>

Monica M. White mobilizes the ideas of Antonio Gramsci to describe Fannie Lou Hamer as an organic intellectual.<sup>151</sup> She understood how white supremacist power structures wielded starvation against rural and poor Black people struggling against their exploitation and for voting rights. So, she envisioned and executed a plan for Black economic and alimentary self-sufficiency in the Freedom Farm Cooperative. The Freedom Farm included high-quality affordable housing, small business incubation, and an agricultural cooperative to distribute food to the residents and the wider vulnerable population of Sunflower County.<sup>152</sup> The cooperative owned several hundred acres of land, fluctuating in size throughout its life and produced a diverse array of subsistence and cash crops, raised livestock and fish, housed an education center, employment center, and provided disaster and poverty relief.<sup>153</sup> Fannie Lou Hamer advanced Black self sufficiency for survival and through economic cooperation.

I describe her work and the Freedom Farm Cooperative in depth because she exemplifies the struggle and creativity of abolition geographies and abolition ecologies. Against oppressive anti-Black and carceral violence including the wielding of starvation against her and her community, she built a place where food was present, a cooperative economy for Black

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<sup>150</sup> White, *Freedom Farmers: Agricultural Resistance and the Black Freedom Movement*, 68-69

<sup>151</sup> White, *Freedom Farmers: Agricultural Resistance and the Black Freedom Movement*, 71

<sup>152</sup> White, *Freedom Farmers*, 72

<sup>153</sup> White, *Freedom Farmers*, 67-82

survival, a radical alternative to systemic violence. Fannie Lou Hamer's intellectual connection of food, land, and democratic participation, her embedding of anticapitalist cooperation, and her strategic commitment to care and wellbeing as Black liberation have inspired much of the Black food activism explored below, as well as my own analysis and framing of abolition.

### **Black Power in Oakland, BPP and the Free Breakfast For School Children Program**

Black power manifested in Oakland most prominently through the formation of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense (BPP or Panthers hereafter) in 1966. The constant anti-Black violence of the police and prisons tasked with maintaining violent social and political hierarchy runs parallel to the racist organizations of space in Oakland documented in the above history. The Panthers formulated revolutionary praxis to disrupt and transform anti-Black systems with the same root: police violence, displacement from urban renewal, food insecurity, economic apartheid, etc. A part of their revolutionary praxis was a group of strategies called "Survival Programs", initiatives led by Panthers to meet community needs that were unmet due to racist-capitalist abandonment by the state and capital.<sup>154</sup> Narrowing on food, the BPP created multiple efforts to distribute food in Oakland's flatlands as well as its many other chapters across the United States, most notably the Free Breakfast for School Children program. The Free Breakfast Program in Oakland started in the basement of St Augustine's church in West Oakland, organized by Panther leader Bobby Seale, Ms. Ruth Beckford, and Reverend Earl Neil. The Panthers alongside Ms. Beckford and Rev. Neil

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<sup>154</sup> Survival Programs included a number of social services including grocery distributions, Sickle Cell Anemia research, Free Ambulance. For a complete list see PBS, "A Huey P. Newton Story - Actions - Survival Programs."

planned breakfasts that would be nourishing for children and prevent hunger at school that was pervasive among students in West Oakland.

The Panthers, in a long-standing coalition with the United Farm Workers (UFW), carried out boycotts of Oakland Safeway supermarkets in solidarity with the UFW's boycott of non-union grapes. The Panther's also brought to the boycott protests against the Safeway's unwillingness to make food donations to the Free Breakfast program, resulting in the closing of a Safeway store in West Oakland.<sup>155</sup> The coalitional organizing between the two groups exemplifies the role of food in larger activist struggles for Black urban survival, farm workers' labor rights, and the making of food systems beyond systemic violence.

The Panthers' food work was abolitionist resistance to organized abandonment that left many Black people in Oakland without food access necessary to adequately nourish themselves or their children. The practice of abolition was to make food present, and to make food present without formal, traditional food sources and food systems that had systematically abandoned Black communities in Oakland.

Gender politics in the Black Panther Party is a critical aspect of the Free Breakfast program and other food distribution efforts. More broadly, a Black feminist analysis of food systems, food labor/care work deepens understandings of abolition. Black women and the Black feminism of female Panthers cultivated and sustained the Free Breakfast Program for School Children. Quoted in an interview with Nik Heynen in his paper "Bending the Bars of

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<sup>155</sup> Araiza, "In Common Struggle against a Common Oppression." 200-202

Empire from Every Ghetto for Survival”, party leader Elaine Brown argued that the Breakfast Program was a catalyst for gendered tensions in the party as many male party members, including early leader Eldridge Cleaver, did not like or want to participate in the Breakfast Program because of patriarchal positions that food and care work was not men’s role in the revolution or revolutionary at all.<sup>156</sup> Nevertheless, volunteering for the Breakfast Program became a part of the Party’s rank-and-file, and approximately forty-five Party chapters carried out the Breakfast Program across the United States by the end of 1969.<sup>157</sup> Female Panthers’ work in the Breakfast Program engaged anti-Black and misogynistic rhetoric of Black women as bad mothers and caregivers.<sup>158</sup> Ruth Beckford is widely considered a leader in the founding and proliferation of the Breakfast Program first at St. Augustine’s church in West Oakland, then in Fruitvale and San Francisco. She mobilized many volunteers from outside the Party to cook and led the effort to source food donations from local businesses. Meredith Wade (2017) argues that the cooking labor and leadership of female Panthers and volunteers in the Breakfast Program, as well as other care-oriented survival programs, was Black feminist organizing for the survival and nourishment of their community, which often included defending these programs from patriarchal agendas for the party and the US government’s efforts to undermine and destroy the Party altogether.<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> Heynen, “Bending the Bars of Empire from Every Ghetto for Survival.” 413.

<sup>157</sup> Heynen, “Bending the Bars of Empire from Every Ghetto for Survival.” 413.

<sup>158</sup> Wade, “Breakfast of Unsung Heroes: Black Women’s Forgotten Crusade for Survival in the Free Breakfast for Children.” 14-15

<sup>159</sup> Wade cites the sickle-cell anemia clinics as a particular parallel to the Free Breakfast Program as many nurses and caregivers volunteered at the clinics.

Thinking through Black feminist geographies, the Breakfast Program established a geography of care and nourishment in spaces abandoned by state and capital.<sup>160</sup> Ruth Wilson Gilmore in *Golden Gulag* and Sarah Haley in her contribution to the UCLA Luskin Institute panel “Abolition on Stolen Land” follow the work of mothers of the incarcerated as vital abolitionist practice. These mothers engaged in everyday anti-carceral work to free their children, as well as the work of protecting their families and recovering from carceral violence.<sup>161</sup> The leadership and work and care of Black women in BPP food programs is also everyday anti-carceral work and work for the radical presence of nourishment against geographies created as “food deserts”.

Thinking of the Free Breakfast program, the Panthers worked with the understanding that food distribution was not just important because the problem of food insecurity is connected to the problem of police brutality, but that the solutions and alternatives are connected as well. Both Black power advanced by the Panthers and the Black Radical Tradition that generated contemporary abolitionist politics frame the work structurally, the active practice of creating a world not built on anti-Black and anti-poor violence and exploitation. In the case of the Panthers, building that world meant providing a place for children to eat breakfast for free before school, in addition to the mass distribution of free groceries. That was their work and it was abolition in practice.

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<sup>160</sup> Heynen, “Bending the Bars of Empire from Every Ghetto for Survival.” 420

<sup>161</sup> Haley in Roy et al., *Abolition on Stolen Land*. 1:20:30-1:35:20

## **Contemporary Black Food Movement in the Oakland and the East Bay**

Today, Oakland remains a center for resistance and organizing for food justice and food sovereignty. Many organizations are multicultural or center low-income and residents of color by locating themselves in neighborhoods facing organized abandonment and low food access in Oakland and the East Bay. My interest in this case study is to focus in particular on the work of Black-led/centered organizations in neighborhoods with large Black communities. This is to consider this contemporary work as part of a wider genealogy of Black food politics that connects Fannie Lou Hamer and Black food cooperatives and the Panthers' food programs to ongoing work today in Oakland and the East Bay. I'm curious as to how this organizing, cultivating, and distributing impacts landscapes of demarcated devaluation/organized abandonment resulting in low food access. In particular, these organizations are testaments to the presence of food in these places labeled as "food deserts". Thinking through the principles of abolitionism, much of this organizing work embodies the creation of lasting alternatives to violence, namely confinement to spaces with low-quality and highly processed foods and low access to affordable and nourishing foods. In contrast to corporate chain supermarkets, I argue that these organizations reconfigure anti-Black food systems and food geographies of abandonment to cultivate and distribute food to affirm Black life and wellbeing.

Urban farming and urban gardening is widely recognized as a mode of converting abandoned or vacant plots of land into sources of food security, education, and community



gathering.<sup>162</sup> The relationship between abandoned urban land and urban agriculture is often argued as a relationship of revitalization or resurgence, such as the urban agriculture movement of Black Detroiters in recent decades.<sup>163</sup>

In the East Bay, organizations such as City Slicker Farms in West Oakland, Acta Non Verba Youth Urban Farm Project in East Oakland, and Urban Tilth in Richmond and North Richmond do urban agriculture projects centering residents and youth of color in their respective neighborhoods. Each of these organizations produce scalable models of urban farming and gardening that allow them to have multiple sites or collaborations throughout the neighborhoods in which they are based. The organizations also have various distribution programs to make food available to community members as well as programs for community gathering, and the sharing of resources and knowledge. This work considers food systems and food geographies, altering the landscapes of abandonment to nourish social and ecological relations. In the same vein as the Panther's Free Breakfast Program, organizations' focuses on nourishing Black youth produce futurity for the work and for wellbeing founded in Black cooperation, resistance, and good relationships with the land. Although these urban agriculture projects show their commitment to nourishing the communities that they're in, revitalization brings concerns about gentrification, particularly in West Oakland.<sup>164</sup> Much like the connections between a new supermarket and gentrification that I analyze in the previous

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<sup>162</sup> Lawson and Miller, "Community Gardens and Urban." 18; Safransky, "Promised Land", 4-5; White, "Sisters of the Soil." 15

<sup>163</sup> Safransky, "Promised Land"; White, "Sisters of the Soil."

<sup>164</sup> Irwin, "The Rise of Food Justice in West Oakland - FoundSF."

chapter, it's not enough for new food sources to simply exist in a "food desert". Rather, organizations form coalitions that fight for Black being and places wholly.

Other food justice organizations in Oakland and the East Bay pursue the transformation of food systems and food geographies across multiple strategies. Planting Justice is a prominent organization operating multiple food justice projects throughout the East Bay including a food forest in El Sobrante, a community garden hub, landscaping services, and a nursery.<sup>165</sup> Through a collaboration with Sogorea Te' Land Trust, Planting Justice has formed a legal easement to return the land at one of their sites for Indigenous use and stewardship.<sup>166</sup> The organization also has a holistic re-entry program to employ people formerly incarcerated at San Quentin Prison.<sup>167</sup> Farmers market organizations such as Freedom Farmers Market and Phat Beets Market are Black-driven farmers markets in North Oakland that seek to make Black-grown produce affordable and accessible. Focuses on holistic reentry from incarceration, the return of Indigenous land, creating interdependencies with Black farmers and Black consumers demonstrate how food justice work advances abolitionism.

### **Mandela Grocery Cooperative**

As explored above, there are many organizations across Oakland and the East Bay doing food justice work and in particular, centering Black food cultures. As a central case for this section, I focus on Mandela Grocery Cooperative in West Oakland to explore the

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<sup>165</sup> Planting Justice, "About."

<sup>166</sup> Planting Justice, "Organic Tree Crop Nursery & Working for Justice."

<sup>167</sup> Planting Justice, "Holistic Re-Entry."

relationship between Black food organizing and abolitionism. The Mandela Co-op executes a vision of Black women organizers in West Oakland, practices cooperative economics, and brings nourishing and BIPOC-produced food to West Oakland through strategies of self-determination and collectivity. As the focus of this research is principally on food distribution systems and the food that exists “where there is no grocery store”, I argue that the Mandela Grocery Cooperative is an abolitionist answer to the West Oakland “food desert”. It is the presence of food applied through radical and lasting Black food cultures.

For background, a grocery cooperative is a grocery store built and operated on practices of collective ownership. Mandela Grocery Cooperative is a worker-owned cooperative, meaning the workers at the store share ownership, meaning profits and decision-making are earned and made collectively. Cooperative economics, or principles of collective ownership of wealth, land, businesses, etc, originated in African American communities during enslavement as strategies of abolition and emancipation.<sup>168</sup> Fannie Lou Hamer’s cooperatives mentioned above exemplify this long-standing approach to food justice and food sovereignty, which continues today in organizations like Mandela Grocery Cooperative.

Mandela Grocery Cooperative is a roughly 2000-square foot full-service grocery store run cooperatively by ten worker-owners. The store is located in the Lower Bottoms neighborhood on 7th street, the historic business strip of West Oakland, directly across from the West Oakland BART station whose construction, in addition to the tracks, destroyed all of

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<sup>168</sup> Gordon Nembhard, *Collective Courage*. 20.

the structures on that side of the street.<sup>169</sup> The cooperative started in the 1990s when three Black women activists began organizing and engaging community members to have a farmers market stand in the West Oakland BART parking lot that grew into a nonprofit called Mandela Partners (formerly Mandela Marketplace).<sup>170</sup> Mandela Partners incubated the concept of a co-op grocery store and also has programs to distribute produce to corner stores, community supported agriculture from BIPOC farms, and business development in West Oakland.<sup>171</sup>

Mandela Grocery Co-op opened in 2009 and is a space designed and curated in African American culture with the intention and to the success of making the space and vibes comfortable.<sup>172</sup> The Co-op has popular programs offered to shoppers with SNAP/EBT benefits include a 50% discount for on all produce items without added salt, sugar, or grease, as well as a 50% discount on all produce grown in California.<sup>173</sup> The store is frequently a space for community gathering as it hosts food arts and culture-centered events. Since its opening, the Co-op has dedicated itself to establishing trust and comfort with the residents of West Oakland, despite attracting a following from around the East Bay, so that it can be a central food source in a neighborhood with low access to nourishing groceries. This active focus on

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<sup>169</sup> Soliman, “The Rise and Fall of Seventh Street in Oakland - FoundSF.”

<sup>170</sup> Henry, “An Oakland Community Grocery Store Feeds Its People”; Talley in Baszille, Talley, and Robinson, *Black Farming*. 9:40-10:50.

<sup>171</sup> Mandela Partners, “Who We Are.”

<sup>172</sup> Henry, “An Oakland Community Grocery Store Feeds Its People”; Halliday and Foster, “A Tale of Two Co-Ops in Two Cities.” 248.

<sup>173</sup> Mandela Grocery Cooperative, “CA Grown”; Halliday and Foster, “A Tale of Two Co-Ops in Two Cities.”249.

community trust and engagement through specifically Black food culture and collaboration solidifies Mandela Grocery Co-op's commitment to making food present in West Oakland.

Mandela Grocery Co-op also gains trust from the community because of its worker-owned status. A grocery cooperative, particularly a Black grocery cooperative serving a working class Black and Brown community, reaches the community and wider food systems well beyond a "big box" supermarket ever could, even if they would come to West Oakland. Worker-owners share in decision-making about the distribution of profits and the direction of the store. Much like the food justice organizations described at the beginning of this section, abolitionism provides a framework for observing Mandela Co-op's work as beyond the foods they sell and toward better relations, cultures, and politics. As a worker-owned cooperative, the Co-op reiterates the genealogy of Black cooperative economics, or Ujamaa.<sup>174</sup> The worker-owners exemplify the abolitionist struggle to make food present in West Oakland through anti-hierarchical and collective leadership. By working to source as much of their products from local BIPOC producers and vendors as possible, the Co-op widens the reach of cooperation. Not your average supermarket, but rather a piece of insurgent and nourishing infrastructure.

The length and breadth of Black food activism shows persistence against thorough institutional abandonment. Where Black life and wellbeing would and will not be upheld by the state and capital, Black people in Oakland and the East Bay have and continue to make

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<sup>174</sup> Mandela Grocery Cooperative, "CA Grown"; Halliday and Foster, "A Tale of Two Co-Ops in Two Cities."250.

food present. By shifting systems and relations to make food present, the Black struggle for nourishing food cultures embodies abolition's presence and sustainability. The work and the infrastructures are laid outside of exploitation of the land and people through fresh and affordable produce, through youth empowerment, and through collective practice.

## Conclusion



**Image 1:** Sogorea Te' Land Trust's Site Rammay (Source: Ixierda and Brown-Almaweri, 2021. Online. <https://sogoreate-landtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/The-Return-of-Rammay-1-1.pdf>)

“The Return of Rammay” is an article by Sogorea Te' Land Trust staff Inés Ixierda and Nazshonii Brown-Almaweri about the interconnected Lisjan Ohlone and Black histories of land called Rammay, or “west” in Chochenyo also known as West Oakland<sup>175</sup>. The piece tells the wider history of Rammay before and during its theft and settlement, as well as the racist confinement and abandonment history in West Oakland. At the same time, the authors focus

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<sup>175</sup> Ixierda and Brown-Almaweri, “The Return of Rammay.”

on the life and home of Inez Jones, a prominent jazz singer, who kept a beautiful garden until her passing in 1995 and foreclosure of her home. Today, Sogorea Te' Land Trust holds stewardship rights and is actively gardening the site, which is now named Rammay (West Garden). The abolitionist presence of food in a "food desert" is the persistence of Inez Jones' garden to now be under the care of Lisjan Ohlone and other Indigenous women with the Land Trust. This convergence is vital to understand the coalition and co-conspiratorial nature of Black and Indigenous abolitionist food work, historically, in present activism, and to nourishing futures.

Taken altogether, the case studies are the work that's being done to make food present through lasting alternatives to supermarkets. They make Black and Indigenous beingness imperative through material, ecological, and relational work. The first case serves as a methodological intervention on "food desert" research and how we research lasting alternatives and abolitionist possibilities. Black and Indigenous method instruct shifts in the way we refer to places and reconceptualize liberation outside of racist-capitalist formulations of space, much like the discussion in Chapter 2 the Anthropocene. Rather than having to prove that food exists in places labeled as "food deserts", conceptualizing resistance in the past, present and future indicates insurgent teleologies that stem from anti-colonial ways of knowing and being.

Through the second and third cases consider Indigenous and Black food movement histories and current organizations I attempt to distill a little of these insurgent teleologies using Indigenous and Black method. Thinking with the widening field of Black food

geographies, these cases dispute traditional and white supremacist perspectives on spatial food inaccess. They indicate to institutions the work that is ongoing to make food present, to divert communities' dependencies on supermarkets that are inaccessible and exploitative of labor and the environment. In many ways, the organizations and movements (Black Panther Party, Indian People Organizing for Change, Sogorea Te' Land Trust, and Mandela Grocery Co-op) operate within modes of self-determination and collective resilience beyond and often despite white supremacist capitalist institutions. Their insurgency also necessitates greater considerations for reparations, Land Back and repatriation as imperatives of food justice and food sovereignty.



## Chapter 4: Conclusion

The purpose of this research project has been to assert that food is present in places labeled “food deserts”. Using abolitionist methodologies, I’ve argued that food activism historically and actively contests “food deserts” by making food present in sources alternative to supermarkets. This research thinks beyond supermarkets, beyond “food deserts”, and toward insurgent and liberatory food cultures and food relationships.

My intervention has been discursive by decentering “food desert” in favor of historical and present abolitionist activism. This research has also focused heavily on challenging and shifting methodological approaches, arguing for Black and Indigenous methods in food environment research and applying these methods in historical, structural, and case study research. Chapter 2: Background heavily recontextualizes “food desert” discourse around the idea of continuities of crisis. Continuities between the historical, contemporary, and futures instruct insurgent perspectives and research approaches to food environments. The case studies concretize the meaning of “lasting alternatives”, they are presence in place utilizing Indigenous and Black methods. By employing genealogical approaches to movement histories continuing into contemporary organizing, I’ve sought to emulate Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s approach in “Abolition Geography and the Problem of Innocence”.

Places where access to affordable and nourishing food is low exist globally through structures of racial capitalism and economic and environmental injustice. This research has offered insurgent methodologies to consider continuities of struggle to access and generate

food infrastructures outside of oppressive and destructive global food economies. By thinking through the East Bay, I've intervened on the traditional research with the perspective that "food deserts" are wrong places where people make wrong decisions about their food cultures. To reiterate from the end of Chapter 3, beyond the "food desert", beyond the supermarket lies abundant potential and places where life is precious.<sup>176</sup> I organize the balance of this concluding section by writing on four themes that have coalesced from this research process: abandonment, presence, method, and solidarity. The themes distill my approach and reflections to consider futures and extensions for this writing.

### **Abandonment:**

Food desert is a phrase meant to be familiar, it started as a person describing their experience of food inaccess where they lived. Abandonment is an idea familiar to perceptions of "food deserts", and it's a core theme of this paper. The idea of abandonment in this paper is used to represent much more than, for example, the closing of grocery stores in the Oakland flatlands from the 1950s to the present. I borrow the ideas of organized abandonment from Ruth Wilson Gilmore and related demarcated devaluation from Nathan McClintock to think critically about how "food desert" is a metaphor for an abandoned, empty place.<sup>177 178</sup>

Historical and structural thinking about formations of spatialized food inaccess in the East Bay

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<sup>176</sup> The phrase "where life is precious, life is precious", comes from Gilmore in Kumanyika, 2020, a Ruth Wilson Gilmore interview for the Intercepted Podcast. She argues that abolition follows this notion of places where life is precious, or where people are not vulnerable to interpersonal or structural violence

<sup>177</sup> Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*, 64-70, 107; Gilmore, "Abolition Geography and the Problem of Innocence." Gilmore in Kumanyika, "Ruth Wilson Gilmore on Abolition"

<sup>178</sup> McClintock, "From Industrial Garden to Food Desert".

led me to situate "food deserts" in relationship to abandonment in carceral geographies. Abolition geography and ecology's considerations for presence through lasting alternatives to violence helped me build a textured critique of traditional/mainstream approaches and methods to researching "food deserts". Primarily is the assertion that in a place depicted as absent of food, food is present. Second is a wider consideration for resistance through people's care and work to make life precious by creating nourishing places. My attention to abandonment considers structural violence—the state and retail capital abandoning poor racialized parts of the city—while also focusing on what people do when they are abandoned. In this sense, abandonment becomes less familiar when "food deserts" are no longer viewed as totalizing and unchangeable.

**Presence:**

Presence, the presence of food, the presence of people, is a contestation of abandonment. Presence undergirds my analysis of the case studies and all of my thinking about food activism in a "food desert". There's clarity in the presence of food because food is cultivated and distributed and consumed/enjoyed. Abolition geography and abolition ecology consider systemic, sustainable, and reciprocal practices of presence. By transforming the modes, methods, and relations through which nourishing food is distributed, the food activism I discuss exemplifies Ruth Wilson Gilmore's notion of abolition being "life in rehearsal".<sup>179</sup> In some ways, the idea of making food present in a "food desert" is a vague, if not

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<sup>179</sup> Gilmore in Roy et al., "Abolition on Stolen Land".

incomplete description of the food activism I describe going on in the East Bay. I engage with an idea of presence to think against and then beyond the notion of food deserts. Thinking back to Katherine McKittrick's discussion of a false teleologies of oppression → liberation, I've learned that Sogorea Te' Land Trust and Mandela Grocery Cooperative are thinking well beyond food absence → food presence.

**Method:**

I return to thinking about method to consider the futures that this research might unravel. Black and Indigenous feminist method made this work possible and give this work futures. Methods of interdisciplinarity, refusal, anti-carcerality, and co-conspiracy form the core of my learning through this research process. Using these methods, this paper considers data that are not traditional or disciplined to analyses of "food deserts". I think about the idea of abolition beyond "food deserts" as creating possibilities for many further inquiries and convergences, including a more thorough carceral geographic analysis of food environments in the East Bay, as well as writing that converges urban and rural geographies of food inaccess and exploitation. Abolitionism, especially but not exclusively for its roots in Black method, is a method that is and can be vitally insurgent to Food Studies, Environmental Justice Studies, and Environmental Studies. As we continue to consider how the logics of policing, imprisonment, surveillance, and racial capitalism are inscribed into the analytical frames we call environments, the methods and rehearsals can only become more potent.

**Solidarity:**

Lastly, I want to consider futures of this work through gratitude and reciprocity for the organizations named in my case studies, particularly Sogorea Te' Land Trust, Indian People Organizing for Change, and Mandela Grocery Cooperative. If you as a reader learned from the work of these organizations, please consider reciprocating the gift and labor of sharing that knowledge by contributing to their work, which includes land rematriation, sacred site protection, Black cooperative food economies and so much more.

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