



Michael Brown, an unarmed Black teenager, was shot and killed on Aug. 9, 2014 by Darren Wilson, a white police officer, in Ferguson, Mo., a suburb of St. Louis. What does what happened in Ferguson and the subsequent response that followed have to do with the food justice movement?

[Risk Ratios](#) reveals that Black people were killed at 10 to 40 times the rate of whites or other minorities at the hands of the police. [Research also forecasts that Black and Brown children are now expected to live shorter lives than their parents, due to diet-related disease.](#) This special series of WhyHunger's Food Justice Voices is a bold attempt to explore the way in which police violence and institutionalized anti-black racism is deeply interconnected to food, land and Black bodies. What is the connection between the death of Black people at the hands of the state (police shootings) and the death of Black people at the hands of the corporate food system (diet-related disease/land displacement/redlining)?

To lift up critical voices of grassroots leaders, WhyHunger's Beatriz Beckford facilitated a national call with dynamic organizers and activists across the country to discuss the connection between the oppression that Black communities face at the hands of the state via police violence and at the hands of an unjust

food system. Based on this initial dialogue, *What Ferguson Means for the Food Justice Movement* series was born. Through this series, we'll release a powerful collection of articles featuring the grassroots voices of Black leaders working within movement building and food justice to create real social change. These are their voices and their solutions, rooted in their lived experiences.

The *What Ferguson Means for the Food Justice Movement* series is a collective interrogation of these issues from the perspective of Black activists around the country organizing around food justice. The series is rooted in the innovation happening in Black communities to resist state violence in all its forms while building our way into the society we have always dreamed of.

We hope you join us for this important conversation and contribute your thoughts. Read the [series introduction](#) by Beatriz Beckford to get started and follow the conversation with [#FoodJusticeVoices](#).

What Ferguson Means for the Food Justice Movement Issue 2

An Interview with Food Justice Activist Dara Cooper

Conducted by **Beatriz Beckford**, Director, Grassroots Action Network, WhyHunger

BB: Can you speak to the importance of creating autonomous spaces that center Black leadership, Black struggle, and solutions to food sovereignty and land rights work?

DC: An essential part of Black struggle is self-determination, including how our communities are able to feed and house ourselves. As it stands now, our communities are almost wholesale reliant on corporate and outside producers to feed us, house us and protect us—ultimately affecting our ability to be truly self-determining and liberated. As we defend

ourselves against the incessant violence via the state and racist vigilantes, we also understand the violent attacks on our communities via the violence of hunger, land dispossession, blatant discrimination against Black farmers/growers, wage theft and exploitation and excessive saturation of junk food marketing in Black communities—all of which the state is also [complicit in](#).

Black communities, however, have a long history of resilience, self-determination and deep historical roots in Black food security, production and culture. From farming, to ▶▶

Dara Cooper is an activist and organizer working with other food justice activists nationally to organize the National Black Food and Justice Alliance. Dara is the former director of the NYC Food and Fitness Partnership in Brooklyn, NY where she worked on creating and strengthening Black farmers markets, developing a community based local food hub and creating a farm to Head Start program partnering with Corbin Hill Food Project, a local food hub. Prior to this work, Dara led the launch and expansion of Fresh Moves in Chicago, an award winning mobile produce market with community health programming, which quickly became a nationally recognized model for healthy food distribution and community based self-determination and empowerment. She believes in the power of people organizing and investing in self-determining, sustainable communities worldwide.

developing systems of distribution, to shaping the culinary traditions of foodways nationwide, to production and a wide array of collective/cooperative food businesses, **Black communities have historically organized ourselves to address our needs where the system fails (and assaults) us.** For these reasons and many more, we are organizing a network of Black-led organizations working towards advancing Black leadership, building Black self-determination, and organizing towards food sovereignty and justice. We are organizing the National Black Food and Justice Alliance (NBFJA).

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Beatriz and Dara visiting Rid-All Urban Farm during Movement for Black Lives Convening in Cleveland OH

Introducing the National Black Food and Justice Alliance

By **Beatriz Beckford**, Director, Grassroots Action Network, WhyHunger

As our comrade, friend, and collaborator of the National Black Food and Justice Alliance Malik Yakini puts it: "It is necessary to have Black spaces to affirm, advance and protect the interests and aspirations of people of African descent. It is also necessary to facilitate the healing that we need to move forward in a sane and balanced way." Organizing, Institution Building, Direct Action, Storytelling, and Togetherness....all the strategies the National Black Food and Justice Alliance is working to employ to do the very risky visioning, building and power shifting Dara Cooper talks about in her interview.

The National Black Food and Justice Alliance, or NBFJA, is a coalition of Black-led organizations working towards advancing Black leadership, building Black self-determination, institution building and organizing for food sovereignty, land and justice. The Alliance works to achieve this by engaging in broad based coalition organizing and direct action for Black food and land, increasing visibility of Black led narratives and work, advancing Black led visions for just and sustainable communities, and building capacity for self-determination within our local, national, and international food systems work. The NBFJA also seeks to shift the white normative and, oftentimes, scarcity framing of Black food and land issues and as such has identified these three focus areas:

■ **Black Food Sovereignty:** Sovereignty as the ultimate goal cannot be achieved without confronting the question of governance. As such we must ensure that Black people have not only the right, but the ability to have community control of our food including but not limited to the means of production and distribution. The governance of food systems should be rooted in the right to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and the right to define our own food and agriculture systems. Shifting from an

exclusively rights based framework to one of governance puts the needs of those who work and consume at all points of the food chain at the center rather than the demands of corporations and markets.

■ **Self-determining food economies:**

Centering the principles of self-determination in building our collective power, we work to reclaim our economies within the food system. We understand the need to radically shift from a white dominant power paradigm that is dependent on the extraction of Black wealth and labor for the purpose of resourcing a corporatized food system towards one of Black ownership over all parts of our labor, businesses and systems of monetization including the utilization of alternative economies including but not limited to cooperatives and shared economies.

■ **Land:** Historically affirmed by leaders including Malcolm X, land has been the root of dominion and as such is the root of revolution and self-determination. Displacement pre and post colonialism continues to deracinate our ability to take root, reclaim, liberate exploited land and call it home. Our connection to, relationship with and access to land is an essential source of our healing, power and ultimately our liberation. As land based indigenous people, Black communities have a deep connection to the earth with land as a source of spiritual, economic, cultural and communal grounding. We understand building a healthy, ecologically sound connection to the land in all its manifestations provides a deep sense of place and security, serves as an economic stabilizer, and enforces a strong social and political network.

* When we say land, we don't just mean agricultural uses of land. We mean land in the broadest sense, to include housing, zoning, farming and the plethora of ways in which Black people have been displaced from land both domestically and internationally.

The work of Black people in food and land justice is deep and plentiful. Yet too often our work, voices and visions go ignored, unheard, underrepresented and or co-opted by others. We have to work to actively resist this paradigm while building the plurality and power we need to create change.

We know that one of the most effective strategies for building power in our communities is creating and maintaining institutions dedicated to the work of building Black organizations and investing in Black leadership, strategies and innovations around food and land. Doing so builds Black food security infrastructures that have the capacity to identify issues and develop and implement strategies that systematize solutions to Black food and land struggles.

As Director of the Grassroots Action Network, we employ a community of practice approach to being a grassroots support program at WhyHunger, we work to build the groups capacity to organize and build grassroots power for addressing food justice issues nationally. It has been a beautiful process to support the development of the National Black Food and Justice Alliance in partnership with organizations like the Detroit Black Community Food Security Coalition, SAAFON, Cooperation Jackson, **MXGM** and countless other who have been thought partners, visionaries and strategist in this tremendous undertaking

I also want to invite those who are interested in supporting black-led organizations and that are interested in connecting to the NBFJA to reach out via email at info@blackfoodjustice.org and check out the website at blackfoodjustice.org

BB: What explicit connections do you make between food justice and police violence?

DC: The violence that Black people face in this country is a web of violence rooted in a system of anti-Black domination, destruction and repression. It is the same system that instigates our food quality, our lack of access to our own means of production, the theft of our land, our health outcomes, the exploitation of our labor, our air quality, disproportionately high asthma rates, the privatization of our water and is the same system that drives predatory policing, the criminalization of Blackness and the continuation of our enslavement via the prison industrial complex. It's important we understand the system of state violence and all of the ways in which it targets Black life and progress.

If we look at mapping in Chicago for example, the same maps of neighborhoods without access to food retailers can directly overlay with maps indicating high rates of heart disease, which directly overlay with maps of school closings, which directly overlay with rates of high homicide. All of which directly correlate to race—specifically Black communities in Chicago. We can see similar patterns all over the country as we look at health, food, education, economic exploitation and incarceration conditions of Black communities in the U.S. And this is not all by accident but in fact an entire system of racist policies, practices and legislation rooted in white supremacy and violence.

In Ferguson specifically, we see a city that relies heavily on preying on and profiling mostly Black people for their city revenue with a largely white police department (understanding Black people and people of color can also be [agents of white supremacy](#), however), and a largely (disempowered/underemployed) Black population that responded defiantly against the police murder of young Michael Brown with what we now know as an incredible spark with national implications. Intergenerational resistance—largely young people on the front lines (with the presence of critical organizing institutions like Organization of Black Struggle) resisting anti-Blackness, mass incarceration, state violence, economic violence and refusing to allow one more murder of one more Black body to be sanctioned by police and with impunity. We hear the chants and cries “the whole damn system is guilty as hell” and know that our people are

clear that this system is larger than sanctioning the killing of one Black body. It is the systematic attempted destruction of all of our bodies.

According to scholar and author [Dr. Monica White](#), “police shootings are modern day lynchings and lynching was the tool used by white supremacists to drive black folks off their valuable land and out of Mississippi.” We know that this happened and continues to happen in various ways and in various places in addition to Mississippi. Dr. White goes on to say, “We still see a systemic failure to value Black lives, in terms of policing, access to food, education transportation, etc. The issue is privilege and oppression. It's the same communities dealing with policing issues and bad food.”

I would add that not only do we see a failure to value Black lives, but we see actual state sanctioned *assaults* on Black lives via food, land and policing. In fact, history teaches us that the police serve as representatives of the state and are a part of a system whose function is to protect property, not us. So what is critical to acknowledge here, when we talk about the function of policing and power, we need to be clear on who's protecting whom (and what). It has never been the function of police to protect Black bodies and so we have to be very clear about the function that policing and police violence has played in our communities. We also know that the utility of public lynchings (as we see via police shootings) has been to control and contain our resistance, to discourage our activism and keep us in line. **We need to understand that history, and be undeterred, and reclaim and support Black radical resistance.**

BB: On the national call with Black food activists around the country, which precipitated this series, I asked participants to finish the sentence “We demand...” How would you finish it?

DC: We demand restoration of Black land and culture. We demand access to land. We demand support and prioritization of Black farmers. We demand access to means of distribution within our food system. **We demand the prioritization of Black led or driven initiatives that self-determination move towards.** We demand that workers be compensated fairly, including agricultural workers that have been intentionally left out of labor laws. Finally, we demand an end to the assault on our communities via food apartheid and state police violence.

BB: How can we connect the organizing that has been happening, as well as the innovation and future thinking in Black communities, with the energy that has been generated through the response to and support of mass actions around policing and police killings in Black communities?

So to organize nationally for Black food sovereignty is critical. **We have examples within Black liberation work and Black food work that I think are genius, brilliant, and critical.** One, for example is [Black Oaks Center for Sustainable Renewable Living](#), Black people owning and running a 40 acre eco-campus completely off grid, teaching us how to live 100% self-sufficiently, growing own food, alternative energy, not relying on this extractive system. So when we talk about this system—this very violent system that is assaulting us that we need to extract ourselves from—**there are real live models in this country that we can look to and support in order to understand how to create alternative systems.** How do we extract ourselves from this very destructive system and create other means? And so I want to see and make sure that it's documented that we have specific examples and that we should look to them, lift them up, and support them. And also, Black Oaks is one, but there are many others too: [Cooperation Jackson](#), [Detroit Black Community Food Security Network](#), [Southeast African American Organic Farmers Network](#), among others. We need to build a national network in order to fight against the attacks on our communities but also to invest in real models of self-determination—models that we need in order to really work towards Black liberation.

BB: It has truly been an honor to work with you and to be thought partners in this work. Any final offerings to share?

DC: Likewise! A tremendous honor to work with you. I would add that when we think about the scope in which we understand what we're responding to with police violence, that these are not about isolated incidents. We're responding to an entire legacy of violence against our community. And we have to understand the scope of violence we're fighting *against* as well and what we're fighting *for*. So in this sort of Afrofuturistic sense I think it's really critical to frame and stand in what we know we want. **It takes a lot of privilege to be able to dream beyond fighting against the immediate. But we have to fight to do that because we need to know what we're standing for and what we're fighting for.**

WhyHunger is a leader in building the movement to end hunger and poverty by connecting people to nutritious, affordable food and by supporting grassroots solutions that inspire self-reliance and community empowerment. WhyHunger's programs support community-based organizations and social movements as they grow and develop, and bring new ideas and practices to creating a just food system that provides universal access to nutritious and affordable food.

Learn more at whyhunger.org