

These Bars Can't Hold Us Back: Plowing Incarcerated Geographies with Restorative Food Justice

Joshua Sbicca

*Department of Sociology, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, CO, USA;
j.sbicca@colostate.edu*

Abstract: Mass incarceration entrenches racial and class inequality and segregation. Before, during, and after low-income people of color enter prison, they experience a range of barriers and biases that make it difficult to break out of the prison pipeline. This article investigates food justice and restorative justice activists in Oakland, California who are intervening at the point of reentry. I argue for the significance of teasing out the connections between food and carceral politics as a way to expand the practice and understanding of food justice. Specifically, I show how the incarcerated geographies of former prisoners, that is, perspectives and experiences that result due to the prison pipeline, motivate the formation of a restorative food justice. The associated healing and mutual aid practices increase social equity by creating spaces to overcome the historical trauma of mass incarceration, produce living wage jobs, rearticulate relationships to food and land, and achieve policy reforms.

Keywords: food justice, food movement, mass incarceration, racial justice, prisoner reentry, restorative justice

Introduction

Food justice and restorative justice activists across the United States are collectively fighting for policies, developing programs, and creating living wage work that supports formerly incarcerated people as they reenter their communities. While food justice takes as its starting point tackling social inequities that relate to food, restorative justice offers tools to heal from the trauma of incarceration. Combined they offer a unique set of strategies to stanch the flow of people into prison. For example, the New York cooperative Milk Not Jails fosters urban–rural ties between upstate dairy farmers living in communities facing prison closures and city-dwelling low-income communities and communities of color with high rates of incarceration. Another organization called the Freedom Food Alliance runs a bus cooperative that offers roundtrip rides to families in urban communities who want to visit friends and family in rural prisons when they purchase a package of food from local farmers. In California, a broad-based coalition of 140 organizations, including prison reform, anti-hunger and food justice organizations, successfully repealed the lifetime ban on food stamps, basic needs support, and job training for people with drug-related felony convictions.¹ These cross-movement collaborations expand the field of food justice struggle by responding to interlocking structural inequalities with integrative solutions that support those coming out of prison. As these examples show, food justice practice is far more than increasing access to affordable and healthy food for low-income

communities and communities of color. In fact, they reveal the political necessity of linking together food justice and restorative justice practices that help integrate, rehabilitate, and heal formerly incarcerated people. Given the reach of mass incarceration into the same urban communities where food justice activism predominates, the imprisonment of low-income people of color is a pressing problem. Therefore, I focus this article on the expansion of food justice practice. Many food scholars have sufficiently critiqued self-proclaimed food justice activism and scholarship for failing to explicitly address social inequities (Bradley and Herrera 2016; Cadieux and Slocum 2015; Guthman 2008). Moreover, what passes for food justice practice may in fact not advance social justice. Even if activists accept the need to confront structural inequalities and power asymmetries, and work toward social justice, most notions of food justice only see how this pertains to people's relationship to food. Severing food justice from other social movements, both in scholarship and in practice, runs the risk of misrepresenting the particularities of how place-based networks strive to solve social problems.

In this article, I argue that to understand the expansion of food justice activism scholars need to attend to forms of oppression and social experiences that foreground strategies for racial and economic justice (McCutcheon 2013; Ramírez 2015; White 2011). In particular, *incarcerated geographies*, namely the experiences and perspectives that result due to living in heavily surveilled and policed spaces before, during, and after prison, inform the development of what I refer to as *restorative food justice*. Mass incarceration devastates low-income communities and communities of color by locking up and then exploiting the acquired economic, cultural, and social capital. This exacerbates poverty and segregation, unsettles families, squashes innovation, and pathologizes historically marginalized social groups. Restorative food justice practices emerge in the process of working with formerly incarcerated people and reflect their desires to heal from the trauma of incarceration and improve their economic position. These practices are grounded in a strategy that increases opportunities to break free from the prison pipeline.² Therefore, the food justice movement should heed these and other strategies that prioritize addressing structural inequalities.

To help tease out the process by which activists in Oakland, California are broadening how to think about and do food justice, as well as the benefits of their approach, I answer two related questions. First, what inspires food justice activists to address problems related to mass incarceration? Second, how is food justice activism reimaged to increase social equity at the point of reentry? I develop my answers by investigating the relationships between formerly incarcerated people, the food justice organization, Planting Justice, and their allies. After providing the structural context of mass incarceration and a discussion of how fusing restorative justice practices helps reimagine food justice, I present the experiences and perspectives of formerly incarcerated people at each stage of the prison pipeline. I then analyze how the restorative food justice practices of Planting Justice and some of their community partners support the reentry process.

I find that the incarcerated geographies of those moving through the prison pipeline generate restorative food justice practices, which dovetail with a number of food justice strategies needed to “intervene against structural inequalities”

(Cadieux and Slocum 2015). Planting Justice acknowledges and challenges historical trauma and inequity, creates non- and despite-capitalist relationships with land, and commits to fair labor standards. In short, my case reveals how sensitivity to the needs of those reentering their communities disrupts the prison pipeline and advances social equity. The restorative food justice practices at the crux of this disruption reflect new social movement networks built on healing and mutual aid that offer new ways to do food justice.

Mass Incarceration, Reentry, and Historical Trauma

Much like it is important to understand how the “plantation complex” informs contemporary forms of violence that produce black geographies and influence how activists do food justice (Ramírez 2015), dissecting mass incarceration can reveal how it produces incarcerated geographies. Specifically, there are many communities subject to a “prisonized” and often racialized production of space that shapes social experiences, worldviews, and identities (Shabazz 2015). The pervasive system of mass incarceration in the United States criminalizes and regulates the same low-income and black and Latino/a communities (Carson 2014; Wacquant 2009) disproportionately experiencing a range of institutionally racist practices, food inequities, and traumas (Cadieux and Slocum 2015; McClintock 2011). Perhaps more importantly, it is a racialized means to politicize crime and exacerbate a range of barriers to adequate education, employment, food, housing, and political participation (Alexander 2012; Pager 2007). The experiences, then, of those subject to social and spatial modes of control while living in particular neighborhoods, going to prison, and then often coming back into these neighborhoods (Herbert 1997; Hipp et al. 2010; van Hoven and Sibley 2008) can inform how food justice activists intervene and generate new practices.

A brief history of this system of mass incarceration reveals a confluence of factors that produce psychosocial trauma and economic disadvantage. The punitive predilection for criminalizing poor people and people of color and locking them up in record numbers accelerated in the 1980s with the War on Drugs, deindustrialization, and neoliberal counterrevolution (Pager 2007; Wacquant 2009). Behind the rollback of social services and rhetoric of “getting tough on crime” were a series of capitalist crises that drove prison expansion, the greatest of which took place in California (Gilmore 2007). Elites reorganized four surpluses into a prison fix: finance capital that was no longer going to military investment; rural farmland that became available because of drought and development pressures; labor as a result of deindustrialization and recession, particularly for blacks and Latino/as; and state capacity due to a waning military Keynesianism that required putting taxes from delegitimized social programs to work. In short, instead of investing in social services and other public programs money went to prisons, and one way to deal with unemployment became imprisonment.

This prison boom exacerbated racial hierarchies in cities such as Oakland. Blacks and Latino/as are disproportionately stopped, searched, and arrested (BondGraham and Winston 2015). They are also disproportionately represented in Alameda County’s prison population (Duxbury 2012). Although incidents of

violent crime have fallen and property crimes continue to outpace all others (California Department of Justice 2014) criminalizing poverty remains a prominent solution.³ This masks the role of the state and capitalists in producing economic crises and “cleans up” the streets of low-income communities and communities of color through imprisonment (Wacquant 2009). Budget priorities are therefore instructive. In 2010, the state paid \$47,000 a year per prisoner, and in total \$7.9 billion (Vera Institute of Justice 2012). For comparison, the state spent about \$12,000 per university student, and in total about \$12 billion from the general fund (Johnson 2012).

While economic self-interest and institutionalized discrimination drive arrests and imprisonment, prisons also generate inequality by removing people from their communities. This disrupts local labor markets and possibilities for economic mobility, aggravates already existing health problems due to stress and shaky access to healthcare, ruptures family structures, furthers household disadvantage, and marginalizes former felons from civic life (Wakefield and Uggen 2010). Moreover, when people reenter their communities they are subject to state surveillance, further social exclusion and stigma in terms of benefits, employment, and housing, and higher than average rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (Goff et al. 2007; Pager 2007; Petersilia 2003; Travis 2005).

Most people do not live in heavily policed and poverty ridden neighborhoods made worse by high levels of incarceration (Clear 2007). Therefore, people who can translate their experience of incarceration and the challenge of reentering their communities are imperative to developing solutions. Activists committed to food justice and restorative justice are working alongside formerly incarcerated people in Oakland, which deepens their attention to incarcerated geographies at the point of reentry. It is at this point where merging restorative practices with urban agriculture can intervene in structural inequalities and reimagine food justice.

Reimagining Food Justice through Restorative Justice

A passion for social justice connects food justice and restorative justice activists. In Oakland, both prioritize the immediate needs of low-income communities and communities of color and work to reform policies and practices related to reentry. The resulting forms of mutual aid respond to Gilmore’s (2007:28) definition of racism as “the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death”. As Kropotkin (2009) and generations of anarchists have shown, the strategies and organizations that emerge out of mutual aid practices set the foundation for advancing social justice. In this case, both sets of activists recognize the structural drivers of racial hierarchies that disproportionately harm certain bodies, hold institutions and political elites responsible, and develop community-based empowerment strategies and alternatives. Together they offer a creative means to reimagine how to reduce vulnerability to the racialized historical trauma of imprisonment.

On the one hand, food justice strives to eliminate and challenge social inequities within and beyond the food system. In this way, it carries on the legacy of racial justice movements such as the Civil Rights and environmental justice movements,

while developing new strategies that incorporate food-related concerns. Food justice advocates for the right to healthy food that is produced justly and sustainably, recognizes diverse cultural foodways and histories, promotes democratic participation and control over local food systems, and equitable distribution of resources in the food system (Alkon and Agyeman 2011; Cadieux and Slocum 2015; Gottlieb and Joshi 2010; Hislop 2015). Understood broadly, the food justice movement creates equitable alternatives and engages in policy battles to improve the conventional food system, *and* uses food as a tool to advance social justice. This includes democratically run food co-ops with fair supply networks that offer affordable and healthy food for all, campaigns that support food and farmworkers, and direct action to prevent land grabs (Harrison 2011; Knupfer 2013; Myers and Sbicca 2015; Roman-Alcalá 2015). And as this article shows with reentry work, it includes developing cross-movement ties based on local assets and needs.

On the other hand, restorative justice promotes healing. Although practices vary, it focuses on the needs of victims, reintegrates offenders, and works with the local community to rehabilitate victims and offenders (Marshall 1999; Wright 1996; Zehr 1990). As such, it rejects the carceral logic of exclusion and segregation inherent to mass incarceration. The roots of these practices lie in some forms of indigenous community-based restorative justice (Johnstone 2013). In sentencing circles the community engages deliberatively, often with the victim, to address a crime and restore peace. In healing circles prisoners or the formerly incarcerated create a space to undertake individually and collectively their victimization and crimes. In restorative conferences communities of care intervene with youth before any court proceedings to try and solve the problem (Walgrave 2013). These restorative justice practices are powerful not because they can supplant a retributive criminal justice system, but because of the strong social bonds that emerge through voluntary association. These bonds are the basis for transforming selves, communities, and the criminal justice system (LeBel et al. 2015; Opsal 2012).

Recent practices in many places around the world indicate that the new articulations of food justice in Oakland are part of a wider movement to develop methods for increasing social equity at the point of reentry. Restorative justice is merging with “greening justice” initiatives (White and Graham 2015:3). Successful practices with formerly incarcerated adults in Australia, England, Norway, and Native American youth in the United States foster a connection to nature through food and gardening, develop green job skills and certifications, and facilitate ties to local social movements. These initiatives help create a foundation for psychosocial healing, empowerment, and community reintegration, outcomes that parallel restorative justice goals (Graham and White 2015; Hynes 1996; Pudup 2008). For example, working in gardens and growing food has psychologically and socially restorative properties (Kaplan 1995; Saldivar-Tanaka and Krasny 2004; Söderback et al. 2004), and the visceral capacity to mobilize bodies into a social movement (Hayes-Conroy and Martin 2010).

On their own, restorative practices may simply reflect a do-good politics that fail to address the drivers of various inequities (Koopman 2008), but when combined with a food justice politics grounded in mutual aid that recognizes and works against oppression, activists are better positioned to reduce power asymmetries

(Cadieux and Slocum 2015). Strategic interventions will vary by place, but the marginalized experience of imprisonment often means that resistance emerges in the interstitial spaces of capitalism and institutionalized racism (see also Bradley and Galt 2014 on the work of Dig Deep Farms & Produce). These interstitial spaces offer the freedom for resistance to grow and corrode the foundations responsible for problems like mass incarceration (Gibson-Graham 1996; Omi and Winant 2015; Wright 2010). As I contend in this article, food justice activists are blending in beneficial restorative justice practices. First, supporting people with jobs can lead to the formation of “pro-social replacement selves” and therefore a reduced likelihood of reoffending (Opsal 2012). Second, in reentry work it is particularly helpful when formerly incarcerated people become “wounded healers” (LeBel et al. 2015). That is, people who work with those who have been to prison. Whether these wounded healers are co-workers or leading healing circles, they can translate their experiences and needs, and tell stories that weave people and movements together (Davis 2002). These cross-movement ties show how a restorative food justice can expand mobilization space through an express commitment to revaluing and working alongside a largely discarded population in order to resist mass incarceration.

In what follows, I further elaborate on how incarcerated geographies inspire the expansion of food justice activism, and highlight the role food plays as a tool in the reentry process. After a discussion of my methods, I explain how formerly incarcerated black men identify and critique oppression before, during, and after prison. Their experiences with institutionalized racism, segregation, and confinement inspire the response of Planting Justice and its community partners. Therefore, I next identify the formation of a restorative food justice predicated on healing and mutual aid practices. These two sections demonstrate the tight coupling between an analysis of racialized trauma that stems from incarcerated geographies and the co-development of alternative relationships to land and food labor standards that create new opportunities for formerly incarcerated people.

Embeddedness with Planting Justice

My relationship with Planting Justice goes back to 2008, before its founding, to conversations with friends who became staff members about what to name the organization. At the outset, the founders decided that the organization would use food to blend commitments to environmental, economic, and racial justice. In a sense, they saw food as a proxy for basic human needs and therefore a means to contest social inequities. Because activists in Oakland ascribe the origins of the food justice movement to other social justice movements (Alkon 2012; Sbicca 2012), it felt natural to link a range of social struggles. Consequently, Planting Justice aims to be more than a food justice organization. It is a multi-racial, multi-ethnic, and cross-class organization with wide-ranging political commitments to social justice, which it channeled early on through the problem of mass incarceration. In March 2009, a month before the founding of the organization, they started working inside San Quentin State Prison with the Insight Garden Program, a decision that has since shaped their food justice imagination.⁴

As a member of the board of directors for the first four years, I saw how the organization evolved to address the trauma of imprisonment for those formerly confined in San Quentin. Key to this evolution was a commitment to creating living wage work and alternative relationships to land. These are some of the hallmarks of radical food justice practice (Bradley and Herrera 2016; Cadieux and Slocum 2015). The organization developed a fee-for-service permaculture-landscaping program called Transform Your Yard.⁵ As part of a reentry program where people first participate in horticultural therapy in prison through the Insight Garden Program, when they return home they receive living wages to work on teams installing and designing edible landscapes and gardens. Clients, mainly homeowners, pay in full for about three-quarters of these installations, while the organization subsidizes or installs for free the other quarter for low-income people or community-based organizations. As of April 2015, Planting Justice had installed 315 edible landscapes or gardens, 80 of which were free (Burke 2015). This program shuffles capital from middle and upper class homeowners to create full-time jobs starting at \$17.50/hour.⁶ Such well-paid work is also supported by a team of canvassers, some formerly incarcerated, who fundraise throughout the San Francisco Bay Area. These two self-generated cash flows account for two-thirds of the budget, while one-third of the budget comes from grants. These strategies are essential to the development of a restorative food justice that can monkey wrench the prison pipeline.

Between 2012 and 2015, I worked on a case study of Planting Justice. This included 35 interviews with Planting Justice board members and staff, 11 formerly incarcerated, and their community partners involved in restorative justice work.⁷ My first set of interviews was exclusively with affiliates of Planting Justice over a two and a half month period in the summer of 2012. During this time, I worked 20–40 hours a week in a range of organizational capacities and spaces. For example, I canvassed on the streets of the East Bay, built edible landscapes throughout the Bay Area, and designed evaluation methods in an office in Oakland. Although my fieldwork ended in 2012, I continued to gather and analyze press reports, organizational documents, blogs, and social media until 2015. I completed a second phase of interviews during the summer of 2015. This set of interviews included some formerly incarcerated staff members and community partners involved with restorative justice, such as people at the Insight Garden Program and Pathways to Resilience.

Before moving on, I want to acknowledge the praxis informing Planting Justice. A few of their organizers developed the metaphor of “compost the empire” through an engagement with the many social inequities present in Oakland and the work of Gloria Anzaldúa and Grace Lee Boggs (Garzo Montalvo and Zandi 2011). Rejecting simple do-gooder politics, this reflects a belief that oppression never lasts because people resist and undertake building new models in the shell of the old. The goal, then, is to reclaim spaces such as gardens, farms, and kitchens to advance economic and racial justice. They write, “What we have found as organizers in the movement for food justice is the need to intervene and find more ways to transform waste into life through spiritual activism” (Garzo Montalvo and Zandi 2011). They respond to a system of mass incarceration that discards millions of low-income people and people of color at the point of reentry with tools such as permaculture design

and community organizing. The following two sections identify how incarcerated geographies inform what constitutes composting the empire, and how food becomes reimagined as an instrument for social justice.

Incarcerated Geographies and Oppression in the Prison Pipeline

Most formerly incarcerated staff members at Planting Justice or those who have completed restorative justice programs with allied organizations are black, so their experiences are particularly relevant. Their incarcerated geographies map onto a prison pipeline that disproportionately removes members of their community and exacerbates racial hierarchies. On the one hand, many blacks live in and reenter spaces where they are criminalized and racialized by the current carceral regime, spaces riddled with problems such as poverty and food inequities (Cacho 2012; Rios 2011; Shabazz 2015). On the other hand, while in prison and upon reentry they face coming to terms with decisions to commit crime, whether because of addiction, peer pressure, or out of economic desperation (Petersilia 2003; Travis 2005). Below I discuss and contextualize their chief concerns, critiques, and analyses, which form the basis for developing restorative food justice practices.

Before Prison

Formerly incarcerated people challenge those who draw a line between personal responsibility and crime by pointing out racial and economic inequities embedded in their neighborhoods. Like many others, Barry, a middle-aged black man who suffered from drug addiction, had few opportunities where he grew up. He first told me about how his drug addiction resulted in incarceration:

once you use drugs then you do a lot of procrastinating I'd say. Because you are on the substance you'll say "I wanna do this, I wanna change my ways." You notice that it never pans out. You always find another reason to go back into the hole.

He went on to note, however, that drug programs overlook how economic insecurity perpetuates drug use: "if you don't have a place to stay, and you don't have a stable income, you are not going to be clean and sober on the streets." This leaves people with few options to escape, a reality that stems from the carceral power of politicians and law enforcement committed to confinement strategies in low-income black neighborhoods (Shabazz 2015). Barry suggests, "some people don't mind being incarcerated ... because they have no money, no transportation, they don't have no food and they don't have no house." He concludes his thought with an affirmative Black Lives Matter Movement frame that rejects the carceral power producing these incarcerated geographies: "it is not just black lives that matter, it's brown lives, everybody that's being oppressed, actually."

Linda, who is Latina, and a former probation officer and correctional case manager, recognizes many of the same challenges identified by Barry: "the system is rigged against them. It is designed for them to fail ... It is really stressful out

there.” She arrives at these conclusions by recalling what formerly incarcerated people tell her:

“Don’t feel sorry for me; give me a job so I can feed my kids.” They don’t need your sympathy. They don’t need food stamps. Another thing I hear too is that people want a job they are proud of ... People want to make more money than they can hustling on the street.

This anecdote suggests that pathologizing people for living in poverty ignores disinvestment in neighborhoods with large numbers of low-income people and people of color. It is also the kind of story that leads to the development of restorative food justice practices that link healing to gainful employment. Linda contends, “It’s really not so much about morality and bad people ... No, people need to survive.”

In addition to economic disparity and criminalization, many of the men I interviewed spoke of the historical legacy of slavery that is reanimated through the mass incarceration of black people. Reflecting on the nature of this structural racism, a middle-aged black man named Saul asserts:

I still don’t believe that we have a fair shake ... I’m being punished for something I had nothing to do with, bruh. I wasn’t around, whatever was happening in history four hundred years ago. That ain’t have anything to do with me ... So for me to be penalized ... not just me but all of us in general, as a whole, for us to be held back, held down, treated the way we have been treated, all these years, bruh? ... We did nothing wrong to deserve the stigma, the treatment, and everything that we’ve been getting all these years.

Committing crimes, then, does not take place in a vacuum. The policing of black people is a continuation of the historical trauma of the plantation economy, made worse by the fact that neighborhoods with high arrest rates often lack public investment that would help people avoid entering prison to begin with. The experiences and stories relayed by people like Saul, Linda, and Barry challenge ascribing immorality into decisions to break the law by highlighting the criminalization of low-income people of color. Incarcerated geographies begin in places that prevent people from being law abiding because the state deems these places and the impoverished people who occupy them more worthy of punishment than protection (Cacho 2012).

During Prison

The confinement of prison is only the formalized outcome of a larger system of mass incarceration that targets low-income people of color (Alexander 2012). Most of the men I spoke with ended up in San Quentin’s H-Unit. Lindahl (2011:8) describes H-Unit as:

five large prefabricated warehouse-style “dorms” [that] circle a concrete exercise yard and house 200 prisoners each in bunks. The men ... are generally serving sentences for between one and ten years ... [T]hey tend to be younger than their counterparts in North Block [where people convicted of violent crimes serve life sentences] and serve sentences for drug-related offenses, possession of an illegal firearm, theft, burglary, and/or assault, to name a few crimes.

The prison is also overcrowded. *The New York Times* (2013) reported:

In 2011, the United States Supreme Court found that the overcrowding [in California prisons] had gotten so bad—close to double the prisons' designed capacity—that inmates' health and safety were unconstitutionally compromised. The court ordered the state to reduce its prison population by tens of thousands of inmates ...

San Quentin was built for 3000 prisoners, but at the time housed over 5000 prisoners (Light in Prison 2016).

Once incarcerated, people experience further marginalization and sociospatial control. Strict prison rules and physical layout tightly regulate behavior, such as mealtimes, mandatory work shifts, breaks, who one associates with, and whether one receives adequate or even any healthcare treatment (Irwin 2005). On top of these conditions, California prisons offer few rehabilitation or mental health programs and over 65% of prisoners return within three years (Petersilia 2008; Pew Center on the States 2011). Jamal, a young black man who was in San Quentin for robbery surmises that these conditions perpetuate problems:

Well when you go to prison, it's a sensory deprivation camp ... for however long that you're in there. So when you get out, you're back in the concrete jungle ... you still got that mentality of ... "I have to survive and I have to get this money, get this job, get this whatever."

The formerly incarcerated carry these and other feelings of restriction and dispossession due to the experience of imprisonment.

A chief grievance about the conditions of confinement was that prisons exploit prisoner labor. Saul was particularly incisive about this state of affairs:

Take prison ... we call that modern day slavery. And I say we because I just left there, and ... they paid us crow. Some of the jobs that we do, they should get paid contractors, big money to do that shit. They paid us peanuts. We had to do electrical jobs that you should be paying somebody at least 13, 17, 27 dollars an hour to do ... you paying me 75 cents. Come on bruh! And then I'm working eight hours. Come on bruh! And that's just one job ... We make all the clothes, all the furniture, all the food ... They give us crumbs ... it's insulting ... Now when I say I don't wanna do it you gonna write me up, and give me some more time in prison because I don't wanna work, basically, for nothing ... That's injustice inside the prison system!

One of the attributes, then, of incarcerated geographies is that economic exploitation intersects with criminalization.

Attention to the convergence of these structural problems inside prison compels the development of a restorative food justice that recognizes the power of horticultural therapy. Such work inside prison complements what Planting Justice does during reentry. The Insight Garden Program and Planting Justice convinced prison officials at San Quentin to allow four raised vegetable and flower beds for permaculture and restorative justice classes in the H-Unit. This success follows the expansion of programs and the inclusion of other voices in the decision-making process at San Quentin over the past 10 years. As of 2010 there were 63 programs, including drug and alcohol treatments, spiritual practice, health and literacy education, yoga, and

art classes. Carole, a white woman with the Insight Garden Program recalled how prison officials were concerned with water usage given California's drought, "But instead of 'Okay, we're gonna shut your gardens today, you can't water your garden,' they invited us to the prison to brainstorm solutions." These few oases inside prison open up the space for prisoners to start the healing process and develop skills to successfully reenter their communities. Nevertheless, as I show below, life after prison is inherently difficult.

After Prison

Even men who go through rehabilitative programs in prison, participate in restorative justice practices, or engage in food justice activism still experience discriminatory laws and policies that allow other forms of control to replace the physical bars of imprisonment. Most people currently under correctional control in the United States are not in prison. In 2013 there were 6,899,000 people under correctional control, 67% of whom were on probation and parole (Glaze and Kaeble 2014). They often reenter the same criminalized communities, what Shabazz (2015) refers to as a "prison-like environment", and face the same policing, surveillance, and poverty that put them in prison to begin with, only this time with the added pressure of a criminal record (Petersilia 2003). The challenges these people face include finding employment and housing, emotional and social travails that come with reconnecting with family, and navigating institutions that perpetuate stigma.

The men I spoke with repeatedly emphasized the ever present threat or experience of poverty and alienation. Jamal told me, "The hardest thing is coming home ... we being shut out of jobs ... or voting or housing or ... food stamps or any of the myriad things that we shut out of by having a criminal offense." The daily grind of these economic struggles coupled with problems like post-traumatic stress disorder make it hard to escape a cyclical prison pipeline. Jamal explains some of this psychological trauma:

Folks are coming back mentally disabled ... it takes some time to trust people, it takes some time to get relationships with people ... like on some real healing, you know, it takes time and a lot of the times folks don't got time because they trying to get their housing, they've got all of the other stuff that society tells us that we need and that's a necessity.

In the process of conducting some interviews, I witnessed how economic support from the state can be undermined by criminalizing people on parole, which perpetuates the marginalization of people deemed "immoral" for committing a crime (Cacho 2012). During a phone interview with Gene, a middle-aged black man, he was taking the bus to Contra Costa County Housing Authority to find a landlord who would not discriminate against someone with a criminal record. He had to hang up and call me back while he dealt with this. Once back on the bus he told me, "I've been searching almost six months now for an apartment with a Section 8 voucher that will pay a landlord \$1,200 a month for a one bedroom. That's the sort of thing to me that is broken." Gene went on to share, "I have a nine year old daughter, but I have a court order to see her a couple days in the week. I don't have

a place to bring her, I don't have a lot of money ... I'm working just to pay child support, man." In true Kafkaesque fashion, the formerly incarcerated navigate a state that offers support that can be undermined with discriminatory practices or other state mandates.

Constant surveillance of parolees can also thwart the desire to participate in publically visible activism to reform the reentry process. To reject the carceral logic superimposed on black communities, a logic that relies on a steady supply of black bodies to send to prison, can be risky. Referring to the conflict between being on parole and engaging in advocacy with Planting Justice, Saul states:

it's really actually hard for me to get out there and protest and get involved with a lot of things that they're doing out in the community ... because say I'm public speaking, I run into a policeman or woman whose gonna grab me up ... they can send me to jail ... I don't have time for that, man.

Moreover, employers might closely monitor the performance of someone convicted of a felony. Gene used to advocate for more community-based services money for reentry work, but feels that having a job now prevents this advocacy: "I'm in my probation period [at work], so I can't be running back and forth between this and that like I was." Therefore, the healing and mutual aid network described below becomes vital during reentry.

Restorative Food Justice Grounded in Healing and Mutual Aid Practices

Incarcerated geographies reflect the carceral forms of violence, discrimination, and marginalization experienced before, during, and after prison. Planting Justice and the community partners who make up Pathways to Resilience have paid attention to this reality as they devise ways to meet immediate needs and advocate for structural reforms. As noted above, the greatest challenge for most of these men is returning from prison. It is at this point where activists see an opportunity to disrupt the spatial logic of incarceration. In response to racialized experiences of poverty and exclusion they have devised a restorative food justice grounded in healing and mutual aid, which uses food as the vehicle to reverse the trend of accumulated disadvantage. The associated practices help address historical trauma with living wage food work and through non- and despite-capitalist relations to land. I build on this analysis of an expanded form of food justice in the remainder of this section.

The Process of Expanding Food Justice

Although none of the 17 formerly incarcerated people who have worked for Planting Justice have returned to jail, the typical focus on recidivism rates to measure the rehabilitative efficacy of the criminal justice system and non-profit programs overlooks the more important metrics of economic, social, and psychological well-being. While lower recidivism appears to correlate with models that meld restorative

justice and food justice, the benefits of creating healing spaces with formerly incarcerated people, reconnecting to family, nature, and food, and well-paying and meaningful work provide a foundation to resist mass incarceration (LeBel et al. 2015; Opsal 2012).⁸ The expansion of food justice practice in Oakland that makes such resistance possible acknowledges incarcerated geographies by creating spaces to undo the sociospatial and psychological forms of confinement.

In 2013, Planting Justice and a number of other partners (The Green Life, Earthseed Consulting, Wildheart Gardens, Impact Hub Oakland, United Roots, Sustainability Economies Law Center) developed a two-year pilot program called Pathways to Resilience. They asked, "Could an integrated program of culturally relevant, experiential permaculture design education; meaningful, values-aligned, and entrepreneurial work; and wrap around services reduce recidivism by healing and restoring participants' connections to the community and the environment?" This project was funded because of the passage of California Assembly Bill 109, which was part of the 2011 Public Safety Realignment. To help reduce state spending and prison overcrowding, counties were given more discretion in how they spent accompanying funds for "rehabilitation". Many counties expanded their jails, but some came under public pressure to provide funds for reentry programs. In addition to an 18-month program in San Quentin that served 250 participants, they offered a reentry program for two cohorts that focused on psychosocial healing and graduated 21 permaculture designers, many of whom went on to get living wage work or start businesses. Given the collective commitment to cultural relevancy, the program also contributed to the expansion of the network of black permaculturalists, thereby deepening the integration between food justice and restorative justice.⁹

Healing circles anchored the Pathways to Resilience program. In a circle everyone can see everyone else, which fosters psychological and social connectivity. These circles also reject the spatial logic of segregation and incarceration. They offer a space to address the trauma of prison and create new social networks. Both inside and outside of prison, many of the people I spoke with discussed the importance of having safe spaces to address their own victimization, the crimes they committed, and their vision of the future. Carl, who helps facilitate healing circles explains, "We're just allowing them to be in a space, see the space created, create the space, and then come when they're ready to come." Speaking to the power of this space, Gene reflects, "I felt safe and secure ... [I]t's like a platform that I could use to either dump some stuff in people's lap I was dealing with from the week or what I had been through ... It was a time to be able to get things out so I could grow and move on." Joan, a white woman who worked with Pathways to Resilience and is an expert on the restorative justice process says, "there's a sort of collective wisdom that comes out of that circle process [that is] ... giving people a sense of community." These circles foster solidarity and trust with those going through the reentry transition and build connections with those wanting to improve their lives.

The ritual of sitting in a circle is buoyed by other rituals. What is taking place in Oakland confirms Maruna's (2011) suggestion that these rituals counteract the degradation of incarceration because they are symbolic and emotive, are

repeated as necessary, involve community, focus on achievement, and involve “wiping the slate clean”. The culmination for each cohort of Pathways to Resilience participants is a rites of passage ceremony. As one participant noted:

We opened the day in circle, with the sound of drums, as one community member lead us in a ritual of calling in the four directions as well as the earth and sky to set the space as sacred. Another member encouraged us to speak aloud the names of our family, ancestors, and important figures that have shaped our lives and whose shoulders we stand on. Each of us also had a chance to put our own voices in the circle ... each expressing the gifts and offerings we bring to the circle (Planting Justice 2014).

The graduates of the program then wrote down something that they wanted to release from their past. They individually approached a golden bowl full of fire and incense, dropped in the paper and then announced what they wanted to let go of. Afterward they walked through an archway of the entangled arms and bodies of family and friends and received a crystal from one of the Pathways to Resilience educators.

The rites of passage ceremony crystalizes one stage of healing and sets the foundation for entering into food justice work. The deep internal and interpersonal engagement required by Pathways to Resilience empowers formerly incarcerated people to then participate in prefigurative urban agriculture projects that help re-imagine our relationship to food and expand the practice of food justice to challenge incarcerated geographies. Restorative justice deepens the work of food justice by calling attention to the institutionally racist realities of mass incarceration and offering ways to meet the immediate needs of people inside prison and upon reentry. In brief, although food justice activists are committed to social justice their typical methods and skills are insufficient to work with formerly incarcerated people, which therefore necessitates fusing restorative practices. At the same time, food justice activists at Planting Justice have a deep understanding of agriculture and creating viable economic paths, which offers opportunities for deeper healing and the necessary resources for economic mobility.

Work in general and quality work in particular is important for desistance and providing people coming home from prison an opportunity to develop a positive self-identity (Maruna 2001; Uggen 1999). Planting Justice helps make such outcomes possible. In reference to his job as a food justice educator and permaculturalist Anthony Forest, a Pathways to Resilience participant and Planting Justice staff member beams, “It makes me feel good to know that I am needed today” (Endangered Ideas 2014). As Jerry, another black middle-aged staff member explains:

most people getting ready to get out of prison, that’s what they’re looking for. They’re looking for a job, and for most people that get a job, it’ll change their life ... I’m making \$20 an hour. What do I wanna do crime for? ... So that’s what we do for guys that get out, to take care of themselves, take care of their families.

Mutual aid in the form of living wage work supports the food justice movement’s interventions against social inequities. These alternative agricultural models reflect the movement’s commitment to economic, social, and political goals over those simply having to do with food (Cadieux and Slocum 2015). By putting social justice first, Planting Justice also links meeting pressing needs to other ancillary benefits.

Food becomes an innovative tool in the restorative process when it links working with plants to healing individuals and building community. Reflecting on these transformative experiences, Jamal says:

It's just something magical, man; something spiritual happens when you are able to ... grow your own food and sustain yourself ... especially coming out of prison, we've been deprived of certain human rights ... there's nothing better getting out of prison than to build a relationship with the earth to really go down and become grounded in that.

Food justice activism that promotes the restorative properties of urban agriculture is a bulwark against the carceral logic that might otherwise wrap these men back into the prison pipeline. Central to this activism is also the way it strengthens community bonds. Knowing the empowerment they feel individually, the edible landscapers and permaculture designers at Planting Justice enjoy providing free gardens to community based organizations and low-income families, often in the same criminalized communities of color staff members come from. They see how these private edible landscapes serve non-market social functions (e.g. rehabilitative space) and how the free gardens built in public spaces or for non-profits increase cross-cultural collaboration and civic participation (Baker 2004).

To foster mutual aid and achieve some of the aforementioned outcomes, restorative food justice entails open communication grounded in anti-oppression principles.¹⁰ Speaking to this openness, Joan contemplates, "I'm really getting that wisdom from ... the men who have been formerly incarcerated, who've been paying close attention to what their needs have been since they've been out." As a result, Planting Justice and some of its partners work to remain reflexive in the midst of creating greater economic stability. Another white woman named Simone notes:

I'm a person with white skin and I'm impacted deeply by privileges that come to me because of that and impacted and influenced by a culture of fear around people of color, especially African-American people. And we live in a country where what we have is built on ... stolen land and stolen people and we have not acknowledged that ... we can't even begin to heal from it if we don't acknowledge it ... I'm very humbled to be able to be part of this work. It's not something that I could've earned or deserved ... I'm receiving deeply and it's changing me.

The process of mutual aid requires an acknowledgement of how one's social position is embedded in histories of oppression. That is, supporting the healing process means changing oneself. The mutual benefit of working with plants, deepening community bonds, and reflexivity is a reduction in power asymmetries.

The last important characteristic of restorative food justice is community organizing. As others have shown, engaging in food justice work can help people "learn democracy" (Levkoe 2006), which is important given laws that politically disenfranchise ex-felons. Gavin Raders, a white co-founder of Planting Justice, identifies the historical precedent for their strategy, "Black Panthers, United Farm Workers, Gandhi, and all these kinds of movements around the world ... have used food and land to fight for people's rights" (Burke 2015). The organization uses a food justice curriculum at high schools to sensitize students to the power of social movements.

They also canvass in public places to raise money for the organization and awareness about racial and economic inequities. In all these efforts, staff members who have been imprisoned are entering these spaces to tell their stories, which illuminate the human toll of the prison pipeline and the kinds of reentry strategies that work. Public engagement, such as the 52,000 people they have canvassed since 2012, helps increase the number of people who can be asked to support reentry related political campaigns. For example, Planting Justice worked on the “Jobs Not Jails” campaign as part of the Alameda County Coalition for Criminal Justice Reform. This campaign eventually secured 50% of the AB 109 Public Safety Realignment budget for community-based reentry programs and services. Before 2015, most of this money (62–77%) went to the Alameda County Sheriff’s Office for running Santa Rita Jail (Levin 2015). Such victories reinforce the need for restorative food justice practices to tie together education, storytelling, and community organizing.

Conclusion

Restorative food justice practices in Oakland, California are not just fostering individual resilience for formerly incarcerated people, but reflect strategies aimed at disrupting the prison pipeline at the point of reentry. This includes both the development of socially just practices in the shell of current sociospatial arrangements and an engagement with the state to demand programs that create good job opportunities, housing, and food. Given that food justice is ultimately about social justice (i.e. equity), scholars need to do more to elevate how activists navigate and alter structural conditions. There are always a set of intersecting inequalities or barriers to address in tandem with food in order to achieve food justice. In this case, because Planting Justice and parts of its activist network respond to the incarcerated geographies of those they work with, food justice becomes linked to reentry work, prison reform, living wage campaigns, and fair housing statutes.

When taken together the relationship between the perspectives of formerly incarcerated people and the healing and mutual aid practices identified in this article amount to a refutation of food first orientations to food justice. If you were to only read critiques of the food justice movement this might be considered an outlier (Guthman 2008). But as others have shown there are many ways activists do food justice (Hislop 2015), not all of these ways foreground social justice or work toward transformative change (Cadieux and Slocum 2015), and that the social change process is riddled with challenges (McClintock 2014; Sbicca 2014). What is still unclear in all of these discussions is the role that food plays in projects that claim they are doing food justice. For decades, scholars and activists have sought to elevate the importance of addressing social inequities if there is to be any change in the food system (Allen et al. 1991). The problem is that the food lens has often clouded the strategies and tactics necessary to advance social justice. For example, food insecurity becomes about food access instead of poverty and capitalism, or deforestation to grow soy becomes about environmental conservation instead of neoliberal trade regimes and colonialism. Consequently, many self-

proclaimed food justice activists have cocooned themselves within the food movement without a sense that strategic alliances with other movements are necessary in order to address the structural causes of social inequities.

All of this is not to say that problems in the food system and in the food movement are unimportant. Rather, depending on the circumstances food has been used both as a tool for oppression and for liberation. Without an explicit articulation of contemporary inequities activists may miss opportunities to bridge sociospatial boundaries, fight for policies, and devise local solutions necessary to transform the conditions behind food system problems. At the same time, food is a multifaceted tool. While gardens and potlucks can certainly build community, scholars should also attend to how contemporary movements such as the Black Power Movement and Food Not Bombs have used food to challenge social and economic inequities (Heynen 2009, 2010). As the former Chairwoman of the Black Panther Party, Elaine Brown, clarifies the reason for employing formerly incarcerated people at her farm in West Oakland, "I'm not in the farm business ... I'm in the business of creating opportunities for Black men and women who are poor and lack the education, skills, and resources to return to a community that is rapidly gentrifying without economic avenues for them in mind" (Henry 2015). This commitment mirrors the work of Planting Justice and Pathways to Resilience. Because all of these activists are foregrounding the experiences of the imprisoned, a more expansive and imaginative notion of food justice is emerging. The resulting initiatives are what revitalize life and compost the empire.

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Endnotes

¹ Between 1990 and 2014, there were over 100,000 drug arrests a year.

² Although some scholars and activists have drawn connections between gardens, prisons, poverty, and race (Hynes 1996; Pudup 2008), this has not been framed in relation to the food justice movement.

³ The ratio of violent versus property crimes in 2014 was roughly 3:17. Official statistics kept by the California Department of Justice do not include drug crimes, only drug arrests.

⁴ For more information on the Insight Garden Program, see <http://insightgardenprogram.org/>

⁵ The founder of permaculture, Bill Mollison (1988:ix), defines this as "the conscious design and maintenance of agriculturally productive ecosystems which have the diversity, stability, and resilience of natural ecosystems. It is the harmonious integration of landscape and people providing their food, energy, shelter and other material and non-material needs in a sustainable way ... Permaculture design is a system of assembling conceptual, material, and strategic components in a pattern which functions to benefit all forms of life".

⁶ Although it took a number of years, all staff members have full-time salaried positions with health insurance.

⁷ Interview demographics: 14 white, 13 black, 5 Latino/a, 3 Asian, 23 male, 12 female. I

have changed the names of participants given the sensitivity of some of the topics covered. I only use real names if there is a publicly available record.

⁸ Only one person who went through Pathways to Resilience was reincarcerated.

⁹ One of the leaders of the Pathways to Resilience program helped start the Black Permaculture Network. Their solidarity statement links racial, economic, food, and environmental justice struggles: <http://blackpermaculturenetwork.org/solidarity-statement/>

¹⁰ Anti-oppression work builds bridges across social boundaries (Sbicca 2012).

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