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Collaborative survival in the city: Envisioning alternative urban futures through Black agrarian praxis

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Urban inhabitants exist within hybrid spaces of continual transformation and metabolism where human labor is woven into the work of the trees, the grass, the water cycle. The built environment – concrete, houses, skyscrapers – butts up against urban riparian zones and wetlands. The postindustrial landscape exposes both the possibilities and the limits of building resilience in the context of constant metabolism and change. This article asks about the potential for collaborative survival in these spaces of deindustrialization, where the abundance of so-called vacant parcels represent a pathway toward more self-determined food systems and the potential for reimagined urban futures. I play with the concept of collaborative survival to consider a plurality of epistemologies, knowledge systems, and traditions, as well as histories and geographies of exclusion that contribute to this reimagining. I examine the work of Black gardeners and farmers in Cleveland, OH as an example of collaborative survival: their work within a changing environment to grow food for themselves and their community, producing the city around them as a socio-ecological hybrid. Urban food production, in this case, serves as a praxis and a knowledge frame for liberation and emancipation. This paper explores urban agrarianism among Black residents in light of two historical moments that have deeply impacted Cleveland, and that I argue have shaped and informed Black agrarian praxis and growers' urban imaginaries. Collaborative survival recognizes that processes of urban development are ongoing and immanent and contests developmentalist narratives that marginalize epistemologies embracing alternative urban futures. Examining Black growers' experiences with attention to a framing around survival and resilience highlights the continuity of structural and systemic racism and violence against Black and brown bodies, as well as the innovations that individuals and groups deploy to contest that violence.

KEYWORDS

community resilience, urban agriculture, black agrarianism, urban political ecology, afro-surrealism, agrarian praxis, police violence, housing crisis

“All that you touch, you change. All that you change, changes you.” Octavia Butler, 1993.

1. Introduction: Collaborative survival in the city

What is the potential for collaborative survival in spaces of deindustrialization, overlaid with historical geographies of racial violence? In landscapes that appear neither urban nor rural, where there are perhaps nearly as many so-called vacant¹ parcels as there are those that are “occupied.” I borrow the concept of collaborative survival from Tsing (2015), who artfully explores its possibilities in the face of precarity in the aftershocks of capitalism. I am interested in what this might mean in places, like Cleveland, where built structures are often so old and worn, they have begun to transform back to previous forms, almost like dead and decomposing trees in the forest. Is this also the life cycle of milled timber? Places where the concrete succumbs to the insistence of weeds, shrubs, and tree roots to form a crooked trail like in a field or on a hillside.

Urban inhabitants exist within hybrid spaces of continual transformation and metabolism: the labor that humans contribute is complemented and matched by the work of the trees, the grass, the water cycle. The built environment – houses, skyscrapers, gray water systems – butts up against urban riparian zones, forests, and wetlands. However, any ‘boundaries’ are fuzzy at best, or maybe nonexistent. Bioswales, just as much a part of the built environment as any traffic sign or highway onramp, are built landscapes created to manage stormwater runoff, and find their counterpart in the persistent growth of tree roots and branches that contest the presence of sewer pipes and electrical wires. In these corners of neighborhoods in Cleveland, Ohio, once densely populated and driven by production – mostly steel – collaborative survival is another way to think about resilience. Survival and resilience are built here the same way as anywhere else. The togetherness of habitation across life forms, landscapes, and livelihoods, a togetherness cocreating an existence that somehow feels old and worn and more like a remembering of something that emerged generations ago.

In urban spaces with ample vacant and abandoned parcels and buildings, where demographic movement and historical geographical processes concentrate both racial segregation and poverty (Tornaghi, 2017), that remembering emerges in varied and innovative ways. Cleveland, the geographical focus of this paper, was an important destination during the Great Migration for Black Americans escaping racial terror and violence in the American South with the hopes of finding stability, employment, and safety in the North. The second and third generation of Black migrants have deep – and yet contested – relationships to an agrarian culture and heritage. Many “third generation” Clevelanders recall grandparents who were gardeners, that “came up from the South, did all of the agricultural things” and whose parents (second generation migrants) “wanted nothing to do with it.” That generation wanted

“to get married so (they) could shop at the grocery store” (personal communication, 2017). The younger generation that lives with more, or different, precarity than their parents did, or perhaps that can see beyond perceptions of urban food production as “backwards, southern, rural,” (see also Zeiderman, 2006) more readily seeks to unearth agrarian knowledge and traditions. These are the acts of remembering: pulling upon or rediscovering the practices, knowledge, and lived experiences of ancestors and elders to enact them anew.

The story of collaborative survival in these settings is about the processes that comprise and produce the city and the practices that continuously transform and reimagine it. It is about growing food and people, about the assemblages within the city that produce space, agricultural and otherwise; about the changes, transformations, and constant metabolisms that occur between people, their environment, and the non-human natural world (Swyngedouw, 1996; Hinchliffe and Whatmore, 2006; Certoma, 2011; Classens, 2015). It is the coming together of historically and geographically embedded memories that we are sometimes not even aware we possess. It is the moss that appeared one day on the rotting front steps that you assume must have always been there. It is the young child who learns from her grandmother about where she came from, about why her hands and fingers are twisted and knotted like the trees in the front yard of her childhood home. It is the remembering and integration of ancestral knowledge and traditions with current practices, lived experiences, and local knowledge. Ultimately, this is about continual change, the power relations that undergird it, and the resulting influences on Black geographies in the city and a persistent Black urban agrarianism.

Drawing upon literature on racial capitalism, urban political ecology, and afro-surrealism, as well as several years of qualitative research in Cleveland, this article explores Black and brown residents’ relationship to an ancestral and diasporic heritage in shaping both growing practices and a vision for and relationship to the city spaces they inhabit. Given decades of deindustrialization, white flight, and disinvestment, the political ecologies of Cleveland allow for a collective reimagining of the city. The politics of this are complex, and many visions for urban space do not allow for self-determination in food (Lindemann, 2022). Collaborative survival recognizes that we are “no longer in a position to stop change from occurring” whether that is the impacts of climate change or processes of urban development (Van Zandt et al., 2020, p. 27). Examining Black experiences with the urban food system with attention to a framing around survival and resilience highlights the continuity of structural and systemic racism and violence against Black and brown bodies. This framing also centers the innovations that individuals and groups have deployed to contest that racism and violence and the persistent systems and structures that produce them.

I am concerned with the political ecologies and socio-spatial implications of the production of food and land as they relate to processes of racialization and how both of these impact the potential for collaborative survival – in the many forms it takes – in Cleveland. I explore how Black subjects contest the socio-political and spatial representation of Black spaces and thus Black bodies, as both marginal to and at the margins of the state (Asad, 2004): illegible or erased. I examine processes of and motivations for the production of urban space and a “Black sense of place”

1 Noting here that the concept of “vacant land” is very much predicated on a developmentalist mindset; a parcel without a built structure is only absent a structure, not a blank slate that requires development or that is vacant of life.

(McKittrick, 2006, p.948) through engagement with the land, the soil, memory and ancestry, as well as reimaginings of how people live in and relate to the city. The among groups who are often both simultaneously under the hypersurveillance of governing apparatuses and excluded from discursively white spaces (Asad, 2004; Wilson, 2006; Finney, 2014; Anderson, 2022).

This article draws upon semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and other ethnographic methods (Weiss, 1995; Small, 2009) from almost 4 years of research and engagement in Cleveland, Ohio between 2014 and 2018. I also draw upon research examining recent historical events in Cleveland – a housing crisis for which Cleveland was the epicenter and police violence that claimed the life of a twelve-year-old boy – that inform not only how Black and brown bodies move through and experience space, but the iterative development of and manifestation through agrarian praxis of identity frames and epistemologies rooted in these experiences. I focus on how the production of space – as an active and agentic practice – manifests concerning access to land, personal and community safety, and urban and community development. My analysis of historical geographies of Cleveland allows me to draw connections between the socio-spatial and political actions of Black growers across the city, and a seemingly collective ancestral and diasporic heritage that informs not only growing practices, but a latent surrealist philosophy of (agrarian) praxis that I argue informs a vision for alternative urban futures (Forbes, 2022).

2. Literature and background

2.1. Resilience in the post-industrial city: Reclaiming a neoliberal project

The postindustrial landscape lays bare the “unruly edges” of the built environment (Tsing, 2015, p. 19), exposing the limits and the possibilities of human agency vis-à-vis urban forms and geographies over time. People are matriculated into assemblages of labor, metabolism, and change that defies even the most well-planned or constructed metropolis. Narratives about urban change generally leave aside the plurality of human epistemologies, knowledge systems, and traditions, and the histories and geographies of exclusion that relegate significant proportions of the world’s population to the margins. In other words, development is and has always been uneven, as are processes of “dedevelopment” or deindustrialization. Both are intensely embedded in power relations, bolstered by or resulting in long-lasting racial projects: exclusion, removal, rendering less visible (Omi and Winant, 1994; Wilson and Sternberg, 2012). Marginality refers to physical or spatial separateness, but also to metaphorical, political, economic, and epistemic exclusion. Those who exist on or within the margins face injustice and neglect; they also often occupy a place of epistemic difference (Wylie, 2003), outside of normative Enlightenment or western epistemic frames.

Critiques of the concept of and expectation for resilience tend to highlight the tendency of resilience discourse to reproduce the neoliberal subject and to excuse the state of responsibility for the wellbeing of citizens (Joseph, 2013; Cretney, 2014; Chandler and Reid, 2016). Ranganathan and Bratman (2021, p. 115) write that resilience, as a proposed solution to vulnerability,

“validat(es) embedded processes of racial capitalism that have historically dehumanized and endangered residents and their environments in the first place”. As Joseph points out, resilience itself cannot be reduced to a neoliberal policy or system, but it can align with larger aspirations of neoliberal ideology (Joseph, 2013, p. 38). Scholarly discussion of resilience in this vein largely focuses on resilience discourse as targeting the individual, reinforcing the theory of resilience as part of the neoliberal project.

Examining resilience through this lens of critique highlights the ways in which discourses encouraging resilience tend to push individuals to adapt to and “bounce back” from the shocks of systemic disturbances and global historical patterns of capital flight, deindustrialization, urban renewal and gentrification, and the racial projects in which they are embedded (Meerow and Newell, 2019). The scalar mismatch between individual resilience and systemic disturbances demands either a different approach to resilience [if not a rejection of the concept entirely (MacKinnon and Derickson, 2013)] or a different understanding of the individual’s role as a resilient subject.

Emphasizing the inevitability of climate change, Sharon Van Zandt writes, “Bluntly (resilience) means that we know impacts will occur, and, to survive, we must learn to bounce back from them” (2020, p. 39). We must not only bounce back, she continues, but also adapt. “It suggests a need to change ourselves; change the way we live, the way we use the land, or what we put on it” (Van Zandt et al., 2020, p. 39). This understanding of and approach to resilience, when applied at the scale of the individual, replicates and reifies the neoliberal discourse of personal and individual responsibility of dealing with and adapting to issues not of one’s own making. However, if we jump scales to consider the neighborhood, community, or even city, Van Zandt’s framing of resilience is more easily refracted through a political ecology lens, where it can become an expansive project of resilience that is collaborative and liberatory. Van Zandt’s writing suggests we might “change ourselves” and our relationships to and with the land. Reimagining human agency and action (Davis and Zanotti, 2014; Tsing, 2015) allows for a collective reframing of the function and physicality of the spaces that all beings live in, experience, and move through.

Just as rural and urban space have elements of each found in the other, the meaning and physical form of these spaces is continually evolving. Ananya Roy examines rural spaces and “ruralness” as one aspect of the “constitutive outside of the urban” (Roy, 2016, p. 813). Rurality is often also constitutive of the urban. Within the city are rural histories, urban-rural migrations, incomplete and fractured processes of urbanization and deruralization, and processes of deindustrialization that are often coupled with the hollowing out of neighborhoods across the city. Roy calls attention to the importance of how the agrarian question and the urban question are intertwined, which becomes even more evident in the enmeshed historical geographies of rural people who come to live in and build urban spaces, of agrarianism (de)industrialization, and a post-industrial return to, or reinvigoration of agrarianism in the city. The rural here is not defined by its distance from the urban, but rather by close relationship to it. In Cleveland, rural histories, agrarian imaginaries, and processes of rewilding – both intentional and secondary to these historical geographies – create hybrid spaces

that allow for the possibility of more expansive understandings of a Black agrarian praxis.

2.2. Black agrarianism and praxis

An article about Black food sovereignty activist Dara Cooper opens with the following description of Black people's relationship to the land:

For Black people, Black southerners in particular, land is sacred and our relationship to it is complicated. The land swaddles the bones of our elders. Our histories are rooted deep beneath surfaces (made) rich with Black blood. And that Black blood marks the spot where Afro-futuristic possibilities are waiting to be unburied and rediscovered (Savali, 2019).

Combined with the agrarian and urban questions noted above is a complicated land question that is central to US Black agrarianism. A lack of Black land ownership throughout history – despite the ways in which enslaved Black hands drew forth life and endless profits from that land – is one big chapter of the land question. Black land ownership that reached a peak at between 16 and 19 million acres of land in about 1910, followed by persistent decline in Black land ownership is another chapter. Black cooperative farming, and the role of Black growers during the Civil Rights and Black Power era in feeding, housing, and supporting those fighting for racial justice is an important part of the story (see White, 2018), and the ways in which urban histories related to housing (addressed more in depth below) are implicated as well in questions of ownership over and access to land for Black growers are also essential elements of the Black land story. I touch upon these here to note the complexity and breadth of Black agrarianism in the U.S. over time.

Rural Black agrarian history and the struggle for access to land is deeply embedded in Black agrarian praxis today, often representing what several Black geographers describe as building or producing “spaces of Black liberation” (Bledsoe and Wright, 2019, p. 420) or a “Black sense of place” (McKittrick, 2011, p. 948). Historian Russell Rickford describes the pastoralist influence on Black imaginations around citizenship and identity in the 1970s, even as a vast majority of Black Americans were living in cities (Rickford, 2017). Black urban agrarianism today is comprised of a plurality of spatial strivings around space production, land as liberation, and reaching into history to draw upon the strength, wisdom, and survival of ancestors' agrarian praxis. Rickford (2017, p. 960) writes, “African Americans have craved land as a source of refuge, freedom, and power since the days of slavery. [...] The quest for land also reflected larger desires to create sovereign black communities beyond the reach of white society”.

Black urban agrarian praxis to build a more self-determined Black and brown-led food urban systems often exists outside of white-dominant and normative systems and structures (Hoover, 2013), including epistemologies of land value and white colonialist (often aesthetic) determinations of what constitutes the city (Tuck et al., 2014; Angelo, 2017). This is particularly salient to epistemological questions of land value (Lindemann, 2022) and to how Black agrarian work is viewed: where Black bodies do and

do not belong (McKittrick, 2011) and whose cultural (food and growing) practices are acceptable in the process of negotiating alternative urban futures, alternative urban land use (Rickford, 2017), and postindustrial urbanism more broadly (Zeiderman, 2006; Reese, 2019).

Anti-Black racism and racial violence in northern cities fuel what Lipsitz (2011) calls the Black spatial imaginary, consisting in part of negotiations of “power, space, and confinement to create places of care and celebration” (Reese, 2019, p. 71). Narratives of care (Miewald and McCann, 2014; Tornaghi, 2017) permeate much of the literature Black agrarianism (see also White, 2012). Acts of caring for spaces and in the production of space as well as care for self and community contest prevailing narratives of Black neighborhoods as unsafe or neglected, and work toward a “vision of thriving, self-reliant African American communities and the desire to rebuild soil, neighborhoods, and economies” (Fiskio et al., 2016, p. 19). Miewald and McCann (2014, p. 540) write that food (and food production) “can be positioned centrally in the study of geographies of poverty and survival” to elucidate residents' “everyday agency”. As I expand upon below, caring constitutes part of the collective and agentic resilience of collaborative survival; it is central to the consistent and intentional work of Cleveland's Black farmers and gardeners to draw forth from the land alternative imagined urban futures in the face of ongoing and persistent precarity.

2.3. The influence of historical geographies

Cleveland, Ohio is a very intentional setting for examining the possibility of collaborative survival in part because of the historical geographies that have shaped the lives and lived experiences of Black Clevelanders over decades and generations. While I won't dive fully into all that entails - others have done so in more complete ways – (Phillips, 1999; see Kerr, 2011; Black and Williams, 2012), there are two “moments” in Cleveland's history that continue to shape Black geographies and socio-spatial experiences within and across the city (Abrams, 1982; McKittrick, 2006), and in turn shape how Black Clevelanders imagine urban futures and the possibility of more alternative relationships to and with the land and agrarian praxis. The housing crisis in Cleveland and the police killing of Tamir Rice are two moments that are unique to Cleveland in certain ways; however, they also represent the continuous (re)defining of racial projects across landscapes, urban and rural. Both moments illustrate racialized narratives around where Black bodies do and do not belong and form part of a collective consciousness as motivating factors in the ways that Black residents move through, appropriate, and produce space within and across the city.

The two moments referenced above are deeply embedded in the urban Black agrarian praxis in Cleveland and can be used as analytical devices to gain a deeper understanding of the racial, political, economic, and spatial dynamics over time in the city, and, more specifically, of the lives and experiences of Black Clevelanders as they struggle to build, rebuild, and make sense of their everyday environments (Loftus, 2008). I use these events to narrate how the production of space and Black agrarianism in Cleveland are deeply informed by Black geographies and

epistemologies (McKittrick, 2006; McKittrick and Woods, 2007; Brahinsky et al., 2014; White, 2018; Reese, 2019). Black histories inform and are informed by Black geographies: “placements and displacements, segregations and integrations, margins and centers, and migrations and settlements” (McKittrick, 2006, p. xiv). Both race (as “bodily difference”) and space (as asocial, homogenous, and ahistorical) tend to be essentialized within conventional social theory (McKittrick and Woods, 2007), but I attempt here to “de-essentialize” the histories and geographies of Black Clevelanders through a closer look at the particularities of Black spatial experiences and their role in shaping the political economic and socio-spatial experiences of Black urban growers in Cleveland (Abrams, 1982; McKittrick and Woods, 2007, p. 7).

Although not directly related to each other, both moments speak to how Black bodies move through, respond to, and are perceived across the urban terrain. These moments have been particularly influential in producing perceptions and representations of Black bodies and geographies. According to geographer Carolyn Finney, these types of representations of Blackness and Black bodies are deeply impactful within the Black community as well, presenting “a danger of internalizing negative images to the extent that they cannot imagine different possibilities for themselves” (Finney, 2014, p. 68). The two moments in question illustrate not only the continued importance of race in Cleveland’s historical-geographical landscape but demonstrate how crucial the historical scaffolding of racial formations and other racial projects have been in constructing racial politics in the city today (see Omi and Winant, 1994). Both of these moments have had significant impact on the Black population of Cleveland; they are etched into a shared Black consciousness and have more deeply entrenched many of the racial formations and racialized patterns of inequity in the city.

2.4. Moments in Cleveland: A housing crisis and a young king

The first historical geographic “moment” in fact occurred over a period of several years in the 2000s, with direct repercussions for thousands of individuals and families across the city and the surrounding Cuyahoga County. From 1995 to 2007, the number of housing foreclosures in Cuyahoga County quadrupled (Coulton et al., 2010). While this was a nationwide and even global crisis, four of the top twenty-one U.S. zip codes impacted by the housing foreclosure crisis in 2007 were in low-income, majority Black neighborhoods in Cleveland (Christie, 2007). A foreclosure domino effect – whereby the existence of foreclosed-upon and vacant homes increases the likelihood of other foreclosures in proximity – intensified the impact in these neighborhoods (personal communication 2015; Rokakis, 2013). Slavic Village, a predominantly Black neighborhood, included the hardest hit zip code in the United States in 2007. By 2013, about 3,000 of the 12,000 residences remained vacant (Smith, 2013).

In just 1 year, housing values across Cleveland plummeted, with the median sale price dropping from \$62,000 in 2007 to \$15,500 in 2008. Black neighborhoods bore the brunt of the loss. Homes in neighborhoods such as Kinsman, St. Clair-Superior, and Hough

lost between 80 and 87% of their value between 2004 and 2015 (Western Reserve Land Conservancy, 2015, p. 33). This protracted moment was acutely painful in itself, but it also falls in line as one more example of the many instances of “creative destruction” in majority Black neighborhoods across Cleveland: decades of slum development (and subsequent clearance), urban renewal (Michney, 2011), arson (Kerr, 2011, 2012), housing demolition, and so on. Central to most racial projects inscribed in space, creative destruction is an intrinsic, albeit unpredictable, part of the capitalist spatial fix: a reworking of capital across space that “thoroughly transform(s)” landscapes for the purpose of reinvigorating capital accumulation (Brenner and Theodore, 2002, p. 355).

The other moment took place over fewer than 45 seconds in a small public park. On November 22, 2014, a 12-year-old boy named Tamir Rice was shot and killed by police trainee Timothy Loemann outside of the Cudell Recreation Center on the west side of the city. Tamir was playing outside with other young children, waving a toy gun in the air. The 911 call described Tamir as “probably a juvenile” and the gun as “probably a fake,” but those two key pieces were not relayed to the responding officers (Heisig, 2017). Upon arriving at the recreation center, the two officers broke protocol by driving over a curb just a few feet from where the children were playing. Within 2 s of exiting the car, Loemann shot 12-year-old Tamir from close range. Neither Frank Garmback (the other officer on the scene) nor Loemann offered Tamir medical attention, as protocol would have demanded. The boy died the next day from his wounds. Neither officer was convicted of any crime associated with the killing, although Loemann was later fired from the Cleveland Department of Police for having lied on his employment application (Fortin and Bromwich, 2017).

Both police violence and the Great Recession of the 2000s were “racialized moments” (Schein, 2012, p. 942) in Cleveland. These transformations in urban space over time are essential to “processes of racial formation [and] racialized landscapes” (Ibid.) and are intimately connected to the racialized historical geography of the city as a whole. These moments connect with Black political organizing in Cleveland over time, the history of Black farming in the American South, and an international Black agrarianism that has found local roots in Cleveland. Both moments have had deep impacts on the lives of Cleveland’s Black population, including experiences with urban gardening, farming, and land-stewardship, as well as understandings of these practices.

To demonstrate the historical geographical importance of these two moments, to understand their role as “markers of transition” (Abrams, 1982, p. 195), I situate them within the broader historical geography of Cleveland and its Black residents. I do not claim that either the foreclosure crisis, as a spatial crisis of capital, or the homicide of Tamir, as an instantiation of racial violence, is directly responsible for producing any particular historical event or conjuncture. Rather, particular social, political, or economic configurations, crises, and contradictions lay the groundwork for the “dissemination of certain modes of thought, and certain ways of posing and resolving questions” (Gramsci, 2014, p. 184). This approach to history helped define Gramsci’s “concept of immanence” (Gramsci, 2014, p. 400), which is central to his philosophy of praxis, or the ways in which theory and action inform each other. Immanence, or the mutual constitution

of history, geography, economy, and politics – and of political ecologies – is expressed in each fragment of praxis and is present in each moment of the (re)production of new social natures (Loftus, 2008; Ekers et al., 2013). Gramsci's concept of immanence, or "being with history" is present in resident and community praxis that asserts a different way of living and being within (and against) the hegemony of racial capitalism. Collaborative survival, a striving toward multispecies resilience, represents the possibility of collective praxis, one that is shaped by the political ecologies and historical geography not only of Cleveland, but of the Black diaspora and Black agrarianism across time and space.

2.4.1. Housing foreclosure as creative destruction

The more protracted "moment" of housing foreclosures and mortgage loan crises in Cleveland has had deep socio-spatial impacts on the Black community in Cleveland, with implications for Black agrarianism and the urban agriculture movement more broadly. Despite the lingering effects of the Great Recession and widespread foreclosures in Cleveland, a discourse of revitalization and renaissance is common in political and community development circles, albeit in uneven and racialized ways (Lebovits, 2017). The uneven development in Cleveland is increasingly evident, with significant investment in the downtown business district as well as a few predominantly white west side neighborhoods such as Ohio City, Tremont, and Detroit Shoreway. In majority Black neighborhoods such as Kinsman (95% Black), median house values peaked in 2005 at about \$72,000, and fell to just over \$15,000 by 2015. As of 2021, median house values in Kinsman remained far below pre-recession levels at around \$25,000.

The foreclosure crisis does not explain every struggle facing the Black community, nor does it lay a complete groundwork for an alternative urban future embedded in collaborative and multispecies resilience. The foreclosure crisis does represent, however, an important moment within the prolonged history of creative destruction of communities of color in Cleveland drastically changing the landscapes and the political ecologies of these spaces. The housing and foreclosure crisis of 2007 serves as a microcosm of many instances of creative destruction in Cleveland over the last several decades.

Cleveland was a major destination for migrants from Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and South Carolina during the induced migration of Black Americans from southern states (Davies and M'Bow, 2007, p. 14; McKittrick and Woods, 2007). These migrants were spatially confined through politics and policies of segregation, displacement, and dispossession (Davis, 1972; Rothstein, 2017). The two moments that provide the analytical frame for this article are squarely situated within the Black geographical imaginary of Cleveland, which is in part constituted by this historical movement of Black bodies across space.

Black Clevelanders have long been concentrated in neighborhoods on the east side of the city. By 1940, 80 percent of the Black population of Cleveland was concentrated in the east side Central neighborhood (Davis, 1972, p. 271), in part because the influx of Black southern migrants into Cleveland created a sense of urgency for city officials to both manage and accommodate

the changing population and racial dynamics of Cleveland. Race-based divisions between the east and west sides of the city that emerged with the first waves of Black migrants sequestered in the Central neighborhood (Davis, 1972) persist to this day. Since the creation of Cleveland's redlining "security" map in 1936, the racial, socioeconomic, and spatial divisions within Cleveland that they helped, in part, to create, have been crystallized.

Racial segregation remains "sticky" (Saldanha, 2006) meaning that present-day Black geographies are deeply historical. In 1976, for example, a fire burned down more than 60 homes in a neighborhood in Kinsman known as Garden Valley or the Forgotten Triangle. Inadequate water pressure in the hydrants prevented firefighters from putting out the fires (Kerr, 2012). Due in part to bank redlining practices that labeled this residential neighborhood as high risk, none of the houses had homeowners' insurance. "Supermarket redlining," (Eisenhauer, 2001) which mirrors housing redlining practices, has left this area with no full-service grocery stores; instead, Garden Valley is dominated by businesses that prey upon and benefit from concentrated poverty, including check cashing, lotto stores, and comparatively expensive corner stores with limited selections of fresh produce or nutrient-dense food (Alkon et al., 2013; Reese, 2018). Led by the federal government and national banking system, redlining maps illustrate how geographical and racialized patterns endure across time despite social and political intervention. They also illustrate the difficulty of undoing this sort of de jure segregation (Saldanha, 2006, p. 10).

The most recent housing and mortgage loan crisis in Cleveland is only one example of the evolution of "the geographic landscape of capital accumulation" (Harvey, 2011, p. 185) as both a racial project and a process of re-embedding racial economies within urban space (Omi and Winant, 1994; Wilson, 2006, 2009; Soss et al., 2011). It is another manifestation of the tendency for financial and spatial speculation to prioritize capitalist accumulation over social relations (Polanyi, 1944; Harvey, 2011). Capital's need for mobility and constant reinvestment (Marx, 1976) leads to changing socio-spatial (and racial) configurations of capitalist accumulation with impacts within and across urban regions (Harvey, 1985; Weber, 2002; Brenner, 2004; Martinez-Fernandez et al., 2012; Schein, 2012). The intensification of racialized poverty through geographically concentrated foreclosures in Black neighborhoods has resulted in these communities being seen as hopelessly lost to violence, disorder, and destruction. Black subjects, in turn, are cast as desperately in need of management, control, and "re-molding for the civic... good" (Wilson, 2009, p. 103), while simultaneously being treated – like the spaces in which they reside – as pathologically lost to chaos, abandonment, and destruction.

From the perspective of many of Cleveland's city planners and community development professionals, the foreclosure crisis in Cleveland, much like the fires in the 1970s and 80s, provides the opportunity to welcome outside investment (Sheldon et al., 2009; personal communications 2015, 2016). This illustrates Harvey (1985) understanding of how capital both destroys and regenerates landscapes at particular junctures in space and time: "Capitalist development must negotiate a knife-edge between preserving the values of past commitments made at a particular place and time, or devaluing them to open up fresh room for accumulation" (Harvey, 1985, p. 150).

Urban renewal, large-scale development projects, and the mortgage and housing crisis can all be interpreted as similar “racialized moments” in the history of Cleveland (Schein, 2012). Many east side neighborhoods in Cleveland were left with property vacancy rates of between 20 and 40% and property values at a fraction of their pre-crisis levels (Western Reserve Land Conservancy, 2015), while the majority of previously foreclosed-upon houses in wealthier urban and suburban communities have recovered their value.

The concentrated impacts of vacant and abandoned properties, vacant land, and lower population density within predominantly Black neighborhoods persist to this day. Parcels of vacant land in the city have historically been the starting point and a crucial resource for both formal and informal practices of urban agriculture. And yet, would-be urban gardeners and farmers do not have consistent access to vacant land because of a planning paradigm and governance strategy that – despite favorable legislation and the support of some city officials – are still enmeshed in a particular understanding of growth and development (Lindemann, 2022). The patterns and histories of creative destruction, demographic change, and socio-natural transformation that the housing and foreclosure crisis represent (including cycles of growth and decline, deindustrialization and neoliberalization of urban space, and a growth-based politics of land management, assembly, and development) have shaped a specifically Black agrarianism within Cleveland. I mention them here as part of the larger historical geographical context: namely the racializing patterns across space and the politics of land management, assembly, and reuse over the last several decades of decreasing population density in Cleveland.

The protracted trauma of these patterns and histories are central to understanding the Black geographies of Cleveland’s urban gardening and farming movement.² The spatial “fix” of capital, campaigns of renewal and destruction, and variable land use policies and norms, continuously reappear and reinvent themselves as anonymous neoliberalizing processes of urbanization. This stands in contrast to the ongoing strivings of a Black agrarian praxis, with growers, rooted in place, working to build resilient neighborhoods and communities.

2.4.2. The social, spatial, and bodily aspects of racial violence

It is important to note that Tamir Rice was shot and killed in a public space, participating in what is generally considered to be normal kid behavior. He was playing outside with other children in a city park, waving a toy gun that a friend had lent him when a neighborhood resident called 911. The called told the dispatcher that the boy was probably a juvenile (although he also described Tamir as “older looking”

and later said he thought he was closer to 20 years old because of his size.). He reported that he was playing with a gun, which he qualified as “possibly fake,” but also said that he was “acting gangster” (Cuyahoga County Sheriff’s Department 2015:9).

The above description of Tamir focuses the lens on questions about which kinds of bodies – raced, classed, and gendered, among others – are welcomed in or allowed access to public spaces and those that are found to be suspicious or out of place (Peake and Schein, 2000; Slocum, 2007; Mitchell and Heynen, 2009). This moment also brings into relief the extent to which racialized spaces influence how behaviors are interpreted and handled by residents, police officers, and other agents of the state (Soja, 1980, 2009). The west side of Cleveland is historically dominated by white bodies and the hegemonic white geographies that govern those spaces dictate how bodies are perceived, and what is allowed and not allowed, such as “acting gangster.” White geographies, or what McKittrick (2011, p. 947) refers to as slave and post-slave geographies, supersede and destroy any “black sense of place” even on the grounds of a community center where Black children regularly gather to play (Lipsitz, 2006; Slocum, 2007). Tamir was occupying this space in a way that, for some people, did not align with an established ethic of whiteness, and his killing joins a long list of racial violence that deeply influences a “[B]lack sense of place”: how Black subjects move through, appropriate, react to, and produce space.

Geographer Mitchell (1996, p. 155) highlights the contradictions and tensions embedded within public space “as a legal entity, a political theory, and a material space”. The “contested concept” of public space – what it constitutes and how – is tied up in a “dialectic of inclusion and exclusion, order and disorder, rationality and irrationality, violence and peaceful dissent” (Ibid.) that changes over time. Notwithstanding changes in cultural norms and socio-spatial practices, the racialized, gendered, and classed tendencies of public spaces – especially in urban areas – foment power dynamics that often do not allow individuals to “confront one another ... as subjects on an equal footing” (Ruddick, 1996, p. 134). The Black male body, “constituted through fear,” is continuously represented as deviant in public spaces, and Tamir – constituted as a deviant, “gangster”, Black male, rather than as a (white) child – was no exception.

Tamir’s death is important as a historical geographical analytic because of what it represents about socio-spatial relations and racial politics within Cleveland. The presence of a Black body in a public city space in a mostly white and Hispanic neighborhood on the predominantly white west side of Cleveland is a good example of how difference is encountered within communities constituted by difference (Young, 1990; Ruddick, 1996). The encounter of difference within this space – particularly the lack of empathy through asking questions or engaging in conversation – ended in a violent encounter that has reified a racialized urban spatial politics of isolation. Tamir’s death confirmed for many that Black bodies are not welcome in white spaces. Drawing upon Ruth Wilson Gilmore, McKittrick describes “geographies of domination” as “‘the displacement of difference,’ wherein ‘particular kinds of bodies, one by one, are materially (if not always visibly) configured by racism into a hierarchy of human and inhuman persons

² I use the word “movement” loosely, and do not characterize urban food provisioning or urban agriculture practices in Cleveland as a cohesive or organized movement. Rather, the idea of a movement signifies shared ideology and objectives across much of the community of Black growers.

that in sum form the category of human being” (McKittrick, 2006, p. xi). At the very least, there are specific expectations or standards for how to behave and look that differ from their white counterparts. In a book written as a letter to his Black son, author and journalist Ta-Nehisi Coates’ (2015) words explain this sentiment:

... I feared not just the violence of this world, but the rules designed to protect you from it, the rules that would have you contort your body to address the block, and contort again to be taken seriously by colleagues, and contort again so as not to give the police a reason. All my life I’d heard people tell their black boys and black girls to “be twice as good.”

While a significant proportion of Cleveland’s population identifies as Black, these spaces are governed and policed by largely white social norms, and majority white political, disciplinary, and security apparatuses. As Rachel Slocum points out, white space is not about counting the number of Black or white bodies in a particular space, but rather how different bodies act and are interpreted or governed “in a particular context, and the socio-spatial processes with which those tendencies are linked” (2007, p. 521).

After his death, Tamir – as other Black subjects before him (Montgomery, 2016) – was portrayed by many as responsible for his own death. This is hinted at in the way the resident who called 911 described the young boy as “acting gangster” and as much older than his 12 years. In response to a lawsuit filed by the Rice family against Officer Loehmann and the City of Cleveland, the defense stated that “injuries, losses, and damages complained of, were directly and proximately caused by the failure of [Tamir] to exercise due care to avoid injury” and were further “directly and proximately cause[d] by [Tamir’s] own acts, not this Defendant (Loehmann)” (Rice v. Loehmann, 2015). In other words, 12-year-old Tamir Rice did not take care to avoid being shot.

While this case is especially jarring because of the age of the victim, the narrative supported by city officials and the CDP works discursively to take away his youth – and with it, the presumption of innocence – by blaming his appearance and how he was playing for his own death (see Brahinsky et al., 2014). The former president of the Cleveland police union, Steve Loomis, said that “Tamir Rice [was] in the wrong” (Schultz, 2015), describing Tamir in a way that would reaffirm that narrative: “He’s menacing. He’s 5-feet-7, 191 pounds. He wasn’t that little kid you’re seeing in pictures. He’s a 12-year-old in an adult body.” Portrayals of Tamir as a threateningly large (Black) man, rather than as an innocent child playing with other children in an outdoor space, not only racialize Tamir as a social deviant, but play into deeply ingrained fears about the threat that Black (male) bodies pose in these spaces. The portrayal of Black bodies as deviant, out-of-place, or responsible for the harm done to them is consistent with the widespread use of isolating and exclusionary language builds a normative construction of “public space” as raced and classed: white, wealthy, orderly, and obedient (Ruddick, 1996).

3. Black agrarian praxis and imaginaries in Cleveland: Examination and analysis

3.1. The emergence of collaborative survival

The ways that Black farmers and gardeners describe the drive to produce a different kind of urban space in Cleveland reflects embedded memories and ongoing experiences of (moments of) violence overlaid with an unwavering belief in the possibility of something different. For Cleveland’s Black growers, access to land, innovation around vacant land use, and a deep connection to ancestral and diasporic agrarian practices define and shape their agrarianism and have become central to the production of Black space and a Black sense of place (McKittrick, 2011). To be sure, there is variance amongst growers in Cleveland: their relationship to political processes or willingness to engage in them, how they understand what it means to “be political” or how they frame their agrarianism in relation to politics, social movements, and other growers, and how they situate themselves as a part of the historical geographies and struggles around Black land. Notwithstanding this variability, all growers I spoke with are concerned with the production of Black space and with the potential for positive impacts that agrarian praxis might have on Cleveland’s Black community. Growing food in the city is much more than growing food; it is growing the city and its possible alternative futures.

The concentrated impacts of housing foreclosure including vacant and abandoned properties, vacant land, and lower population density within predominantly Black neighborhoods persist to this day. Parcels of vacant land in the city have historically been the starting point and a necessary resource for both formal and informal practices of urban agriculture. And yet, would-be urban gardeners and farmers do not have consistent access to vacant land because of a planning paradigm and governance strategy that – despite favorable legislation and the support of some city officials – are still enmeshed in capitalist understandings of growth and development (Lindemann, 2020). The patterns and histories of creative destruction, demographic change, and socio-natural transformation represented by the housing and foreclosure crisis (including a developmentalist politics of land management and assembly) have shaped a specifically Black agrarianism within Cleveland. The protracted trauma of these patterns and histories are central to understanding the Black geographies of Cleveland’s urban gardening and farming movement.

Accounts of police violence and excessive use of force, the fear of such, or frustration with what is perceived as the over-policing of Black neighborhoods came up organically in several interviews with farmers and gardeners, as well as in casual conversation and participant observation. None of my interview questions focused on police violence, rather connections were made spontaneously by growers themselves. This is not entirely surprising in a city that has had two Federal Department of Justice investigations focused on inappropriate and unprofessional comportment of police officers. In other words, violent police behavior looms large and infiltrates

many aspects of Black subjects' lives. In 2004 and 2014, DOJ investigations found that a significant proportion of cases of use of force by the Cleveland Division of Police (CDP) “fell short” of a “respect for human life and human dignity, the need to protect public safety, and the duty to protect individuals from unreasonable seizures under the Fourth Amendment” [United States Department of Justice Civil Rights Division. (DOJ), 2014]. Cleveland, as also one of the most segregated cities of its size, continues to experience the lasting legacies of redlining, urban renewal, suburbanization and white flight. The other geographic racial projects combine with current experiences of police violence that disproportionately harms Black bodies, to influence the everyday lived experiences of Black residents across the city.

Building urban agricultural spaces in Cleveland's Black neighborhoods is often understood to be part of community efforts to stay safe in the face of an ever-present threat of police violence. Gladys, an elder in Cleveland's urban food movement, describing the situation in her community in Cleveland lamented, “We're just trying to stay alive.” She frequently referenced the widespread perception of heightened police presence in predominantly Black neighborhoods and police violence against Black bodies within and outside of those neighborhoods while also describing her vision for urban gardens and green amenities as “oases” of safety and health for Black residents. “Staying alive” is related to both the prevention of police violence and the provisioning of foods in spaces of food apartheid. The assumption is that the production of agrarian spaces would decrease police presence while also increasing the availability of life-giving foods, collectively makes these spaces safer for the residents who inhabit them.

In describing the philosophy embodied by growers at a large urban farm on the east side, Keymah, one of the founders described his understanding of how growers (re)imagine their world to in the production of peaceful and safe environments where all things can grow and thrive.

What better place to incubate life than in the garden? Whether it's ideas or plants... there's an innate sense that most humans have about nurturing. Mothers get it from a maternal perspective when they nurse or care for a child. And it's the same feeling you get when you nurture a plant or nurture an animal, because you have to give so much of yourself before it could ever give you back anything. We believe that phenomena not only helps to create a peaceful environment but it is also been shown to reduce violence in communities.

The importance of building these networks and “oases” lends a quite literal meaning to the concept of collaborative survival for residents living in a context of heightened community or police violence. And in a more expansive sense, the give and take this farmer describes of nurturing between landscapes, ideas, and people elucidates an integrated network of care, resilience, and survival.

3.2. History, collective memory, and black agrarianism

Ongoing efforts in Cleveland to establish spaces of safety, health, and wellbeing draw upon continuous practices of mutual

care and nurturing that are also deeply influenced by family history of agricultural work (especially in the American south) and by the organizing of Black historical figures. During a conversation about political organizing, one grower insisted on the importance to the food movement of retaining and spreading knowledge of Black political organizing of the past, especially among Black youth:

Like we did in the sixties, you know... in the basements of churches, we trained folks: “Look: this is how you go out and register voters, this is how you go out and you talk to people.” [...] To give our young people a contextual knowledge base. There's even stuff coming out that I never knew about. About those leaders – Fannie Lou Hamer – all those folks who contributed. Ella Baker, you know.

Organizations such as cooperative farms that emerged during the era of Civil Rights and Black Power – including Fannie Lou Hamer's Freedom Farms – continue to inspire residents in asserting their own ways of “knowing and writing the social world” through a “material spatialization of ‘difference’” (McKittrick, 2006, p. xvi). Processes of spatialization of the “racial-sexual [B]lack subject” (Ibid.) emerge both from racial projects across space and through the contestation of such geographic racial projects. Figures like Fannie Lou Hamer and Ella Baker are powerful as “heroes and sheroes” considered by many of Cleveland's Black growers to be part of the collective diasporic ancestry whose influence crosses geographies and generations.

Like on Hamer's Freedom Farms in Mississippi, migrants to northern cities rejected the oppression they (or their ancestors) experienced in many parts of the American South. Gladys, quoted earlier, connected the lack of land ownership in Cleveland to the oppressive labor conditions Black farmers experienced in the South in prior generations. She recounts speaking at a Ward meeting in the city and responding to her councilman who told her the City would not allow her to purchase parcels of vacant land:

It showed me his disconnection to the whole thing. That he would stand up publicly (and say) “Oh no, we not goin' let you own the land, you can lease it.” *I don't wanna sharecrop for the rest of my life.* You need to be supporting us in owning this land.

Land ownership – and access to land more broadly – is one of many rights claims that growers across the city continuously make, whether explicitly or, as Gladys does, in more subtle, tacit ways. Eleanor, who worked for several years on a vacant land reuse program called Reimagining Cleveland, recounted the same analogy being made to describe exploitative land/labor practices: “It's sharecropping all over again. ‘We don't own the land; we're just investing in it.’”

Constellations of influence on the agrarian praxis of Black growers range from historical figures such as Hamer and Baker and oppressive practices such as sharecropping, to places and energy across the world, that are, as Keymah, an urban farmer put it, “beyond our physical presence around each other” (personal communication 2017).

Our work connects with everybody that's positive about sustainability on the Earth. Because that's the energy that goes forth that pushes back against commercial deforestation, all of these individual efforts. They combine somewhere in the space beyond me being in your physical presence. [...] There's a term called "universal consciousness" that if enough people think the same way at the same time we can create a shift in the universe. [...] There's a common energy there that exists that makes a difference in the universe.

This farmer described his understanding of connection and universal consciousness as a sameness between people all "shar(ing) the same air every day," "shar(ing) the same sunlight." Michael, another farmer at the same urban farm, situated humans even more intimately within their landscape, saying, "We are soil ourselves," and likening "deficiencies in the soil" to those that "reside in mankind" (personal communication 2018). The concept of universal consciousness across geographies also reflects not only connection of Black agrarian histories, as noted above, but the embedded memories that many growers carry with them and that guide their approach to survival and resilience.

Kim, who is concerned with environmental justice in Cleveland, evokes the idea of collective memory or consciousness that is somehow rooted in the genetics of those whose ancestors farmed:

I think we carry genes, and we carry memory. I believe in that. [...] My great-grandmother could green-thumb all day. And I remember that. I think we have some memory of that ... it's like "We just have to remember where we came from." This is just going back and remembering or relearning something that we already know.

Amina is an grower with roots in Arkansas, where her grandfather grew up. Amina and her neighbors "all grew up with a garden." This practice took hold in response to both a lack of accessible food options and to the "down south, up south" ties that emerged from the migration of thousands of people from southern spaces to Cleveland (Adero, 1992). Seeing, understanding, and experiencing the spatially uneven and racially determined character of development in the city – especially the geographies of food access – has informed the work of many Black urban growers in calling upon knowledge and histories of urban food production. Amina recalls her connection to southern agricultural practices throughout her entire life:

We all grew up with my mom canning and all that kind of stuff, so it's not foreign, it's just to be reintroduced back into the family. I know how to do all of that, I learned it by helping my mom. And then when we would go to Arkansas, we had to help. So yeah! It's just there, but when you live in the city, when things change, you get that convenience, and you forget. And that's what – I forgot.

The idea of memory – both remembering and forgetting – is reflected in what another grower, Sofie, says about the oppression many growers faced in southern states and the land they used to work and steward.

You have a generation of farmers in the south that lost their land. You know about that Black farmers thing. So, when their descendants moved to the north, their memory is about detachment from the land.

Black geographies across history thus comprise both positive and negative motivations for the current spatial practices and strivings of Black urban growers. The collective Black consciousness and memory help to create a vision for what Black subjects do want as much as what they do not want. For the vast majority of growers I interacted with, the influence of a childhood in the south or stories from their parents or grandparents had a powerful impact on how they re-envision what is possible in Cleveland.

Louise, an elder who now gardens on almost two acres on Cleveland's east side recounted how things were in rural Mississippi: "Everyone had a garden in the front yard and a garden in the backyard. You shared with your neighbors and grew what you ate" (personal communication 2015). The instantiation of a southern agrarian heritage in the city is more complex than simply bringing rural landscapes into an urban space. Black agrarianism in Cleveland enacts a different production of space entirely, reworking the multiplicity of socio-natural relationships that can be less visible in urbanized landscapes (Lefebvre, 1991; McKittrick, 2006). It draws upon alternative understandings of what the city is or what it could be, including the valuation of land, meanings of community development, and the embedded relationships. Growers are explicit about their vision for imparting value into land as well as how that value can extend and take root in their community. Building upon Michael's understanding of humans as soil, the very act of working and stewarding the land is akin to building or caring for human bodies in another form. Keymah, quoted above, described the relationship and exchange between humans and the soil as a "spiritual connection that exists" that is expressed in a multitude of ways. "It's (sic) no textbook for it, no manual for it, you can't buy it off the shelf. It's not packaged or bagged, it's just so organic, it flows out of what's into you, you put it in the soil and the soil gives it back to you, so it's more like an exchange than it is something that you can replicate place to place."

The relationships – with the soil, with memory and ancestral agrarian heritage, with the city, and with other people – that are built through Black agrarian praxis contest the violence of racial projects and ongoing moments of trauma that target Black and brown bodies. This is how collaborative survival emerges.

4. Conclusion: (Afro)surrealism and collaborative survival

I conclude this paper by suggesting a connection between the concept of collaborative survival as I have deployed it, and an ontology and philosophy of practice that I see woven through the work and strivings of Black gardeners and farmers in Cleveland. Historian and scholar of the Black radical tradition, Kelley (2002, p. 5), characterizes surrealism as a "revolutionary movement concerned with the emancipation of thought". "The surrealists are talking about total transformation of society, not just granting

aggrieved populations greater political and economic power,” he continues. “They are speaking of new social relationships, new ways of living and interacting” (Kelley, 2002, p. 5). Surrealist praxis emerges “in the poetics of struggle and lived experience, in the utterances of ordinary folk, in the cultural products of social movements, [and] in the reflections of activists” (Tyner, 2007, p. 220). The multiple vectors of lived experience point to “the many cognitive maps of the future, of a world not yet born” (Tyner, 2007, p. 220). Indeed, surrealist thought and practice is intimately bound up in struggles for emancipation, liberation, and abolition. Like the agrarianism of Black growers in Cleveland and their diasporic influences, surrealist praxis has always been grounded in multiple ways of knowing, being in, and experiencing the world.

The farmers and gardeners I worked with and interviewed in Cleveland did not use the language of surrealism or Afrosurrealism in our interactions. However, their strivings – in the soil, in their communities, in relationship with plants, the soil and the land, through art, music, poetry, and movement – run parallel to and reflect surrealist ontologies. Like Van Zandt et al. (2020) contention that resilience can be built through a changing relationship to the land, Black agrarian praxis understands land as a vehicle to liberation. Land as part of an abolitionist future is not unique to growers in Cleveland, but is a thread woven through the Black radical tradition, and one that reflects a surrealist praxis. Keymah spoke about the space where he farms as “a blank canvas you can paint anything you want” (personal communication, 2016). This perspective suggests a relationship to and with land and space that is interwoven with imagination, creativity, and the infinite possibility of alternative futures.

Collaborative survival requires much more than just association, proximity, or even similar life circumstances, objectives, and values. True collaboration requires trust and the willingness to be vulnerable in the face of adversity and challenge. The trust that collaboration requires is often absent from the community of Black growers in Cleveland, in part because of the ways in which the politics of resource allocation spawns competition instead of collaboration. One of my frequent collaborators in community development spaces often reminded me of that by insisting that I not disclose anything we discussed with other people or share any of her strategies for community organizing or programming.

The alternative futures suggested by a surrealist philosophy, when refracted through a Black agrarian praxis, are embedded in dynamic and complex relationships that transcend one place or even the present moment, drawing simultaneously upon the past, present, and future. They also demand trust and collaboration among and between people. One farmer told me, “Food gives us life and we give life to the plants and food.” Building resilient and collaborative alternative futures requires breaking down the barriers to trust between and among those striving for liberation. Embracing surrealism, as a philosophy in action characterized by poetry, imagination, and emancipation or abolitionism speaks to this: collaborative survival points to the need to “discredit and destroy the forces of repression” of mind, body, and spirit (Chicago Surrealist Group quoted in Kelley, 2002, p. 158). It is an oneness between the grower and the plants whose nurturing is reciprocated as mutual acts of care.

The spiritual and metaphysical elements of surrealism, Kelley argues, were present in the Black radical tradition and Afrodiasporic culture before surrealism became its own movement. The concept of emancipation and liberation within Afrosurrealist traditions are as much bodily (emancipation from slavery in all forms) as emotional, mental, or spiritual [“a struggle against the slavery of rationalism” (Kelley, 2002, p. 160)]. Liberation in this sense, and embracing the poetry of “a world not yet born” (Tyner, 2007, p. 220) enables a Black agrarian vision wherein the plant world, the soil world, and other elements of urban landscapes are woven together with the work of people to produce alternative urban futures that support Black health, wellbeing, and safety, at the same time that they produce beautiful, more livable, and sustainable urban spaces.

There is a vision of the contested city that emerges out of my observations and interviews as well as the other interactions I have had in Cleveland. This is a vision that paints, with broad strokes, an image of a site of constant struggle, a place where residents strive to build radically democratic and liberated futures (Holston and Appadurai, 1999; Kelley, 2002; Purcell, 2008). The city as contested space is not a uniform vision, nor is it shared by all Black subjects who appropriate and produce space across Cleveland’s urban terrain. This vision should not be taken as one that essentializes or flattens the differences or struggles that exist within and amongst growers, nuances that are informed by their unique experiences, worldviews, or standpoints. Rather, framing the city as contested treats it as a space where ontologies are continuously challenged and reconfigured. It is an ideal site of inquiry for exploring everything from state building and governance to the various ontologies and epistemologies of social-natures, relationships of trust and co-creation, and the constant metabolisms that produce and reproduce the city as a dynamic part of those interactions (Mitchell and Heynen, 2009). It is produced space, the result of and situated among the intimate socio-spatial relations of everyday life.

Sometimes a life of survival leaves little room for liberation; however, a vision and imaginary of what constitutes a liberated life are embedded in the collective resilience that contests the thrust of individualist capitalism. It is through this plurality of alternative ways of knowing and being that the concepts of collaborative survival and liberation become relevant and productive to socio-spatial change.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the Cornell University Institutional Review Board for Human Participant Research. Written informed consent for participation was not required for this

study in accordance with the national legislation and the institutional requirements.

Author contributions

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

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