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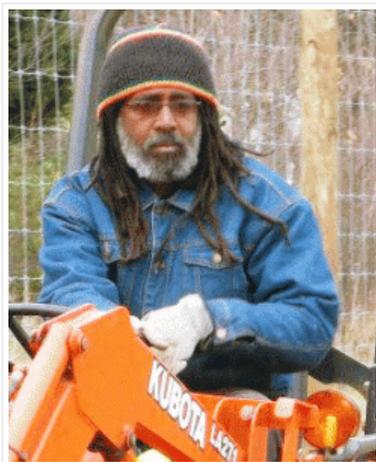
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Land, food security and social justice

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By [Malik Yakini](#)

[Special to the Michigan Citizen](#)

In 1888, my great-grandfather Sandy Odom was forced to leave his farm in Marion, Ark., by an armed white mob. You may ask what this has to do with the current "good food" revolution. My answer? Plenty!

One of the root causes of food insecurity throughout the world is dispossessing people of their lands and thus their ability to feed and otherwise provide for themselves. The story of my great-grandfather is significant not because it is extraordinary but because it is one of numerous documented instances in the 19th and 20th centuries of Black people being forced off their lands in southern and Midwestern states.

In November 1888, the American Missionary Society published an account of the incident:

The Crittenden County outrage

By [The Rev. B.A. Imes](#)

From the bluff at Memphis we look across the river, where along the western shore stretch the forests of Crittenden County, Arkansas and Marion, about 14 miles from Memphis, is the county seat. The story of the recent banishment of 15 prominent colored office-holders, professional men and farmers has gone to the world.

The whites, well armed, took their game by surprise, bagged and shipped it without bloodshed. Now the "empire is peace" they say, although for a time terror reigned among the startled colored people.

With a Negro population six or seven times as large as the white, it is not strange that the County Court Judge, the County Clerk and his deputy should be Negroes, nor that they should aspire to other places in public life. Unfortunately, as all witnesses agree, Judge Lewis and Clerk Ferguson were given to drinking habits, which brought them under accusation before the courts for drunkenness. It was probable that they would have been convicted; but without awaiting the tardiness of the law, a shorter process was found.

In palliation of their hasty banishment it is claimed that anonymous letters were sent to some of the leading white citizens, warning them to leave the county. These letters it is asserted — not proved — must have proceeded from Clerk Ferguson's office, although not written by himself. The object was to intimidate those who would be most efficient in convicting and deposing the unworthy officials.

At all events, the time was very short, after the delivery of the letters, until Winchester rifles and shot-guns were in the hands of some scores of white citizens, and 15 Negro men ... were speedily sent

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across the river to Memphis. Sandy S. Odom, living on his farm about six miles from Marion, I am informed, refused to leave his home, when waited upon and ordered to go. Said he, "All I have is here — wife, child and farm — I can't go away." For a time his pluck seemed to be respected. His fault was that of being a friend of the Marion officials. He had once served at Little Rock as a legislator from his district, but, like Cincinnatus, had since resumed the plow. According to the latest by the Memphis Appeal, Odom has decided that discretion is the better part of valor, and will be off for a safer place as soon as his business affairs can be arranged.

In addition to violence, all manner of trickery and deceit were used to separate Blacks from their land. I often reflect on how different my life might have been had my great-grandfather been able to hold on to his land and pass it down through the generations. How would the collective welfare of African Americans be different if we still owned the 15 million acres that we owned in 1910? That land ownership would have significantly impacted our ability to feed ourselves and create healthy empowered communities. Similar arguments could be made regarding the various Native American nations disposed of their lands, including those in North, Central and South America, the Caribbean and Hawaii.

Community gardens and urban farms are important but are not sufficient. Any serious efforts at solving food insecurity and injustice and promoting food sovereignty must address the issue of land; who "owns" it, who controls it and who benefits from it. This is perhaps the most difficult social justice because making things right would involve massive land and wealth redistribution. It would turn the western world on its head.

Malik Yakini is the executive director of the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network and a member of the Detroit Food Policy Council.

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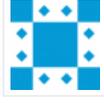
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