Black Self-determination Drawn From Our Roots

an interview with Eric Jackson – Black Yield Institute, Baltimore

by Edmund Ruge

| USA |

It may surprise some of our readers to learn that issues of urban food access in the United States long predate the onset of Covid-19. Entire neighborhoods, often termed "food deserts," stand bereft of grocery stores and markets, featuring only fast food options for kilometers on end. In such areas, the lack of access to fresh and healthy foods has had a predictable effect on health indicators, disproportionately impacting Black communities.

Though research around the "food desert" phenomenon has brought useful attention to the issue, the term itself speaks only to surface-level problems. Eric Jackson, founder of Baltimore, Maryland's Black Yield Institute, prefers "food apartheid," an intentional historic process that has torn Black communities from their ties to land, culture, and food preparation.

The deeper issues behind food insecurity thus demand holistic solutions. For Jackson, this means self-determination. Born and raised in Baltimore's Cherry Hill neighborhood (an area he says "personified Black power without saying it"), the 34-year-old has dedicated himself to that mission, developing Black ownership over institutions, preparing communities to lead their own futures, and reclaiming Pan-Afrikan diasporic practices.

Jackson took the time to speak with Peripheries in early April. The resulting interview, edited down for clarity, illustrates a broad understanding of public health and a clear-eyed vision for the future of Black food sovereignty.

Edmund Ruge: I'd love to get into the topic of structural inequality, some of Baltimore's history, maybe the question of land ownership. If you were to explain the current situation Baltimore communities are in, and how that came about, what policies and which actors were behind this? If you could paint a picture for someone who's never even heard of Baltimore, how would you explain that?

Eric Jackson: Sure. Baltimore is a port city in Maryland. I contextualize it that way as a port city because it speaks to the nature of Black people and their role in this. What's interesting is that Baltimore as a city, and Maryland as a state, doesn't come up in conversations about the South. But Maryland is, technically, the South. And there is a particular point on the Mason-Dixon Line which is in Maryland, just north of Baltimore, which is the dividing point between the North and the South and the larger context of the history of the United States of America.

And so, in that divide in the forced free labor of African peoples in this part of the world, we are right in the middle. And Baltimore, technically, wasn't agrarian in the sense that enslaved Africans, and even free Africans, did not contribute to this economy in those ways. People did, more so, by working in bakeries and working in cannon yards and shipyards.

The African presence in Baltimore, historically, is, just like many places in the United States of America, one of early servitude. So we can’t talk about structural racism without ignoring that history and the trajectory of people from that lineage.

As we talk about the context of Black people and food and Baltimore currently being a Black city, that's the context. Baltimore, because it's a port city, and because it was open and available to different people, but still within the racist context of the United States of America, was historically a white town. A white town, blue-collar mostly, built in the factories of the industrial period. It's one of the steel capitals of the United States, along with places like Pittsburgh, Detroit, and others.

But you have, over time, this continuation of the division of labor and the racialization of labor that built the Baltimore that we know today — one that is attached and connected to housing policy, land use, and other aspects of our social and political lives. This is a city that is still largely segregated, but because it was designed that way: segregated by labor, segregated by class, and very much segregated by race. Policies like redlining helped to create and cement where people would live, what ZIP codes would be Black-ish or brown-ish.

Edmund Ruge: How would you explain the practice of redlining to someone who hasn't heard of it before?

Eric Jackson: Redlining was an unofficial political practice. And when I say political, it may not have been used explicitly by public officials, but public officials certainly knew about it. It was a political tool that literally used a red marker to create lines to designate and identify areas where Black people could live and where they could not, essentially. It was used largely by the real estate industry, but by the banking industry as well in order to cement where people lived. And interestingly enough, some areas that were redlined between the 1930s and the 1960s, in Baltimore City and elsewhere, are the same places where people are experiencing food apartheid today.

And not just food apartheid, but they are the Blackest areas, they are the poorest areas, they're the areas where the streets are holiest. And I don't mean holy — I mean full of potholes. Redlining, historically and contemporarily, can be used to predict life expectancy and health disparities and their history over time.

Edmund Ruge: And, just to be clear, we're talking about an intentional practice by white politicians, by real estate, by banks.

Eric Jackson: Absolutely. By the banking class, by the merchant class. It was intentional and it was very much about — this isn’t talked about often — maintaining white purity. Basically, the thought was “if we let them live with us, then we will be unclean.” So if one moves in, one of the practices within redlining is that, if a Black person actually has good

credit and they somehow found a bank that was willing to loan money or because they were a doctor or lawyer or upper-class Black person, it was almost like the saying, “There goes the neighborhood.” And people would actually move out. And what’s interesting is that there were some organizers who intentionally did those kinds of things to Blacken communities that were white, if you will. And that was a practice that, even though redlining had begun decades before that, continued into the 1960's civil rights struggle. Many Black lawyers would intentionally infiltrate, if you will, pure white urban neighborhoods.

Illustration: Juliana Barbosa

Edmund Ruge: Let’s get into the question of land ownership, agriculture, and food sovereignty, and the history behind it, in terms of the seizure of Black land throughout the 1900s. Does that change later? Or how does that interact with the urban context? Or how, if a Black family has land stolen from them, do they then migrate to an urban center? What's the interaction there?

Eric Jackson: There are a couple of factors here, working against Black people who were largely agrarian and largely populated in cities and towns in the South — and granted, of course, acknowledging the history of the movement of Black people throughout the United States. But as we talk about agriculture, there's this social phenomenon called the Great Migration that basically explains the movement of Black families from rural cities like Mobile, Alabama and Raleigh, North Carolina and other places to the North and the West, to California, to Maryland, to Michigan.

One reason for this was the changing of the national economy from agrarian to industrial. And that was forced as well, right? So, as an aside, we need to be clear that this process was no better than lynching and performing acts of physical violence.

That's one piece. But then there is the factor of political violence as well. There are limited jobs, just like we're dealing with now, with immigration. You pit people against each other and you want the cheapest labor, because that's just the nature of capitalism and the nature

of cheap and forced labor, which still happens. And so you pit the Black people against the white folks. The white folks are like, “No, we're not having that. We're going to lynch somebody.” And Black people are like, “No, we're not trying to have that. We're going to leave.” And especially in cases where people didn't own their land, they had to find opportunities where they could thrive.

And on top of this, there is also intentional policy violence, if you will: political violence that took place, like utilizing eminent domain to steal land; utilizing tax policy, land-use policy. So, all of those things that happened in the South end up happening in the North and in inner cities as well. And that’s where the connection happens.

But what's the result of all that? You have generations of people who are disconnected from this agrarian type of living and away from the land — and I want to stress that this shouldn’t just be seen as physical separation. It’s true that people are not able to grow their own food, yes, but there's a spiritual aspect to it as well, when you talk about people who come from the land and who have practices on the land. You can't perform those practices if you're not on the land. And then also, generationally: families’ stories and skills and heirlooms get passed along. If families are disconnected because some stayed and they couldn't move, then you lose this interconnectedness.

Families lose a bit of their culture. They lose a bit of the know-how, they lose a bit of the family stories. And I think that *this* is the invisible piece that we don't often talk about, and that's why we wanna lift that kind of narrative up. We talk about people not having the skills and people not having good food but I think the important piece, as well, is about culture. All peoples are cultural peoples. Every human group, social group, has a culture. Either you teach it and the younger people, the next generation, inherits it, or somebody else gives it to you. And typically, the way that racism works out is that it's given.

It's either given or it's sought out because if you assimilate, then it's easiest for you. It's easier for you, it's easier to navigate these systems that are not for you if you become closer to white… as close as you get to white, whether that's through credentials, or physical attributes, or the way we talk, all those types of things.
And I think that that's the one lens that I want to really focus as well, because food

apartheid is not just about not having good food, but about the disconnect from ancestral food and ancestral lands.

Edmund Ruge: Getting into that question, could you explain what a food desert or food apartheid is? And maybe explain the push to describe the issue as apartheid rather than a desert?

Eric Jackson: Words are important, and it’s important to recognize that terms like food desert have been given to us. They’re given by well-meaning scholars. Food deserts, food swamps, etc, these are all fine. I'm not taking anything away from them and, in fact, I think there's a utility for them to make connections. But I think we also need to push that envelope.

Food apartheid speaks to the power dynamics and the recognition that it is an intentional and structural disconnection from the power that would afford communities the right to arable land and other food resources.

And that is based in race and class — mainly race — and as a result, you have a lack of grocery stores, an inundation of morbidity and mortality in these communities, lower life expectancy and those things. But those are results; those are not the problem. The problem is the lack of power distribution and the historical intentionality. That's the problem.

The result or the side effect, if you will, is the things that food desert and other progressive — or what we call Pollyanna — language, seeks to lift up. But we use food apartheid because it refers to a root cause.

Edmund Ruge: Just to paint a picture though, for someone who's never been to Baltimore, if you were to take them to a neighborhood that someone would describe as a food desert, what does that look like? What effect does that have on nutrition or eating patterns?

Eric Jackson: In an area that might be described as a food desert — or food apartheid as we might say — the first thing you will see are potholes. That’s what I was talking about

when I said “holey” streets. That's what you're going to see. You also are going to probably find yourself questioning and scratching your head, "Where is the grocery store? How do people get groceries?" Literally, fresh groceries. "Where are the garden plots?" And the neighborhood I have in my head as I'm answering your question is Cherry Hill, which is in South Baltimore. It’s one of the most Southern neighborhoods or communities in Baltimore, the city of neighborhoods. You’ll find no grocery store there. And there hasn't been one in 15 years.

This is a community that is about four to six miles across. And the people in the community at any point have to travel two miles to get groceries. And with a lower vehicle ownership, they have to go through a number of hoops just to get their food. Largely, people are relegated to getting prepared food from carryout or from a convenience store.

This is food that is not only calorically-dense and high sodium, it's also going to be sold to you by someone that doesn't live in your community. And so when you engage in the act of purchasing what in Baltimore we call a “chicken box,” which is chicken wings and fries, you are not only purchasing food that will be problematic for our health, you’re also giving our money to a business that's going to take it out of the community.

And in these areas you may also have many churches that have soup kitchens and food pantries, where people, if they are on hard times and they can't get to the grocery store that's two miles away, can actually be fed. And those are just the things on the surface. And that's why, with our language and our framing of food apartheid, it's like, "Great. Yeah, well, people can at least get food." And at some level, yes, but the truth is, it still shows a corporate control of the food system, because most of the food that's coming to churches or goodwill for social welfare are coming from corporations.

The food system is not owned or controlled by the people on the ground. But also, something that you won't see unless you're deep in a community like this, in areas that experience food apartheid, you also see people trying to figure out what the hell to do, as is the case in Cherry Hill.

What I mean by that is you have what people have called cottage industries: smaller enterprises that come out of people's houses, or where people utilize resources like old bread trucks or old school buses that they retrofit to sell goods — what we call candy buses. It’s not always healthy food they’re selling, but you'll see that. You'll also see other efforts like what we're doing, and other people who are actually growing food on unoccupied land.

As I said, one of the impacts of food apartheid is the disconnect from ancestral land and ancestral practices. For example, in a community like Cherry Hill, you may have young people who literally can't cook. They have children of their own, they have their own houses, but they never learned how to cook. Or you have the psychological issue, where when we think about hunger, which is a physiological response, we think hunger and then we think commercialism. We think about how to buy from somebody else rather than having the skills to produce for ourselves.

You'll also see a disconnect from one generation to the next around certain stories around food, or certain recipes from the family, because somebody passed away at 40 years old and they couldn't give it onto the next generation.

The one last thing I have to talk about is cultural relevance. Even in areas where people do have grocery stores, people don't have culturally appropriate food. Food that people would deem as Black or brown food is sometimes, even in the best cases, relegated to one aisle that's marked “international.”

In terms of racial heirlooms, you're not able to get those unless you grow them yourselves or you have your own institutions. And when we don't, we don't control that.

So yes, there are the more visible aspects: you won't see a grocery store, you will see potholes, you will see trash on the ground, you will see carry-outs. But one of the other things we talk about, for example, is that food apartheid impacts us psychologically.

When we ask questions about, “Well, if people are dealing with this, why aren't they doing something about it?” … because we've been actually taught that it's okay. We've been

programmed to accept that other people control our lives, what we eat, what we are exposed to. And even in poor communities that experience food apartheid, even if folks decided and stood up and said, “Look, we're going to be a healthy community. We declare that we're going to do it," capitalism has a way of maintaining free markets.

Edmund Ruge: Speaking of capitalism, how do you respond to someone that says, "In the system we live in, there aren't grocery stores there because grocery stores need to turn a profit and they know that in a lower-income neighborhood they're not going to be able to get as much money. So this problem is purely economic." How do you address comments like that?

Eric Jackson: What I would say is you're absolutely right. It is purely about economics. However, it is a matter of will, right? For me, if grocery stores are not in communities for those very reasons, that makes sense. But this also takes place along racial lines, especially if a community has been redlined and historically has been pigeon-holed to be a poor community. For example, from an urban design standpoint, in Cherry Hill about 45% of housing stock is public housing on land that is owned by the federal government and has been largely populated by Black poor people for decades, since the community has been around since the 1940s.

That is the problem. And then people make the business case that no grocery stores can operate in communities like that, I say, absolutely. You're right. And here's the problem with politicians and public agencies: folks are often trained in institutions of higher learning to think about outsourcing rather than preparing the people for it. In the contemporary context, urban communities have found a way to still erect the grocery stores through cooperative models. But there aren't loan programs, low-interest loan programs, or training programs to prepare people to be ready to cooperatize our resources and have our own institutions like in other countries where people literally use cooperative economics in order to survive.

But with capitalism and individualism, folks don't think about that. They're like, “Who can we bring in?” Instead of saying, “How can we equip the people to be ready?” That speaks to what I believe is the unspoken belief that folks can't solve their own problems. And that's

why we're trying to turn it on its head by what we are saying and by practicing cooperative economics. We're establishing a grocery store in the community, and we also grow food as well. But the point is, we have to be able to control our own institutions.

And so, I would say that they're absolutely right. But I also would say that it's because of the business model, the extractive business model, that it doesn't work. It's not that grocery stores don't work, because the truth is, in a community like Cherry Hill, people still go to the store. So it's not that people can't support a grocery store, but we have to have questions about, "Well, what about the size? And what is available? And what about the pricing?" Because it still is business, right? We still operate within the context.

I'm not trying to be a purist and say that even with our co-op, that we don't have to operate on profits, because we know that you have to pay people, you have to pay rent and all of those things. But the truth is, the real issue around why there aren't any grocery stores is not an economic one, it's one of imagination and it's one of power. If you want certain people to be empowered, then they need to make decisions based on a framework — a people-centered framework built by people on the ground, the same people who create candy buses or sell things out of their homes. These are the same people who can figure out how to have a grocery store.

But without power and resources, you can't do that. That's what our job is, to organize our people, to motivate our people and inspire our people to remember that co-operative economics is our friend. Self-determination is our friend, and that's the way we're going to get away from these things.

Edmund Ruge: That concept is a big part of this magazine, too. One of the founding principles of *Peripheries* was to demonstrate and offer proof that solutions exist within communities already, and that it's either a question of remembering historical strengths, or giving value to local solutions and innovations that people have already developed. The solutions to so many of these modern problems, rather than coming from the government or from a large NGO or something, are actually already present within the communities themselves.
Eric Jackson: And we have to amplify those. But we also affirm that in order for that to

happen across the board, you do have to scale up. Yes, it’s true that scaling can happen through government, that's fine. But I believe that systems change has to happen through self-control or self-determination.

So we start with self-governance. We figure out what we can. We measure it. We show what actually works and what doesn't work. We control our own data. We control our own inputs and all of those things, even if we get money from outside supporters. And then you say, “Look, I wanna make the case,” “This is how you do this thing, because we tried it over the last five years or ten years. And here's our next step.” Right? And there's precedent for that. In the United States, most children in public school systems don't have to pay for lunch if they hit a particular threshold.

In Baltimore in particular, no matter what your income is, you can take part in FARMS, free and reduced-price meals for schools. And that comes out of a tradition, out of the Black Panther Party for self-defense. So you're talking about breakfast, free breakfast and free lunch programs for school-aged children. Now, they won't get all the credit, but the federal government took that on as a program, as a federal program, after seeing its effectiveness in inner cities like Oakland and Chicago and Baltimore. But that is something that came out of a small community group that had affiliates all over the country: their survival program is the reason why many Americans have free lunch today.

There was no precedent for that. They won't get credit for it, but that's what I mean when I talk about systems change through self-governance. Now, this is one of the cases where the Black Panther Party got demonized, and then the idea of co-ops hopped in. But if we can learn from that experience, then what I believe that we can do is, again, learn as much as we can, scale it as best as we can, take our data and share that with folks and then grow from there. That's what policy looks like, in my opinion, policy in action.

Illustration: Juliana Barbosa

Edmund Ruge: Bringing up the question of data, something you hear a lot in Rio is the idea of being the subjects of research rather than the objects of research. You have a lot of

academics, bless their heart, they come into the favelas, and study the favelas and study favela residents. But the counter movement is, "Well, no. Let's produce academics from the favelas, and let's produce our own research." Or, "Let's research the researchers." Raise the question of "Why are they researching us?" and then say, "Well let's research them."

Eric Jackson: Yes, absolutely. Absolutely.

Edmund Ruge: Then, producing knowledge from the community itself and creating your own data. How does that then fit into the battle for policy? Or does it have more to do with education?

Eric Jackson: I think it's both, actually. I think it's policy and education. When I talk about education, I think first, let's talk about ethno-education: the ways in which people learn from our own ways and our own cultures, and things that are going to allow us to continue as who we are. And then let public education actually help people navigate instructions and help them live together. But I think that data collection and owning our own stories, our own information, and creating knowledge, has to be a part of this.

And this is in order for us to change how people talk about these issues and get support from "outsiders," if you will. Whether it's from the philanthropic community, government agencies, corporations and whomever else is going to help us, or just independent, well-meaning, wealthy folks who want to help what we're doing on the ground, we need to be able to, I believe, tell our own stories.

I would argue that research is not an exclusively academic tool. It's not the tool of white institutions or Western institutions, even if the academy itself is a Western institution. But all that is to say, I think that we have to be able to own our own data and be able to tell our stories so that we are shaping how things look and then changing policy, if you will, on the ground and in the community, but on the policy level as well. And regardless of whether that policy is at the municipal or local, state, and federal levels, whatever we decide or wherever it goes, I think that the first level that we have to deal with is community policy.

Through the data and the information that we produce, and through the knowledge that we create, I think we gain the ability to, one, help people remember, as in popular education. But we are also able to utilize that to engage people in the work and then push elected officials to actually move money and programs to support community solutions.

Edmund Ruge: In a city like Baltimore, how much of your efforts do you dedicate to community organizing, and how much to getting members of the community elected to public office? Do you go through the channels of politics and policy, or do you empower the people first?

Eric Jackson: I think that they are equally important. They have to be, because you have to prepare people to do all of it dealing with governance structures at the public level or at the community level, or even at the private level with corporations and small businesses. Regardless of where we are, there's a redefining that has to happen, in my opinion, around organizing, around community organizing. We need to be able to organize people within institutions, including the business world.

We have to do the organizing on both sides, on the inside and on the outside. And when I say inside, I mean politicians as well. Whether we put them there or not, I think that we have to do the work of political organizing — not just legislative lobbying, but putting people in those positions. That has to happen, because we're talking about a multi-faceted issue. We have to have multiple facets to bring about solutions.

And so I think you've got to prepare people and develop leadership on the ground. And they might end up being the politicians. But you also have to have a cadre of people who have developed analysis, collective analysis, collective consciousness, have trained together, have done work together and so hold folks accountable whether they're our folks or not. But I think you absolutely have to do both at the same time. You have to.

But I like to emphasize the need for preparing people. What I don't want to do is to reinvent in the 21st century what 20th-century organizing largely looked like, which was using people as tools. A lot of organizing approaches were like, “Alright, how do we bring 20,000

people out?" And it looks great, but then people go back home and don't politicize. We have to do politicization as we do the other work.

Edmund Ruge: Come back to the overall goal of Black Yield Institute. What does Black food sovereignty really mean and what's the end goal of all of this?

Eric Jackson: Black land and food sovereignty, in a nutshell, is the idea that Black people control the land and resources, and that we are stewards of and in our communities. That means controlling our own resources, but also controlling and building our own institutions, and some working with others to maintain what we do. Land, food, and health are all intertwined.

In terms of the end goal, I don't hold the answer to that, but I think that what it ultimately looks like is preparing Black people, Black communities, Black institutions and other people of color, other institutions of color and white folks who are in white institutions, to think about how to strengthen the capacity and strengthen the tendency of Black people, particularly in Baltimore, and in the United States across the board. It's about preparing Black and brown people to be able to shoulder the work of providing food for ourselves and controlling what comes into or community. That's what it looks like, preparing folks to do that.

And that's going to materialize in different ways. It might look like a farm in this area; it might look like the research and knowledge creation that we talked about. It might be connecting with churches to use their land for landless farmers. There's an organization, the Black Church Food Security Network, that's doing exactly that. It might be making sure that Black farmers stay on their land, and lawyers actually making sure that their land is not being taken from them. There are different facets to this, but ultimately, what it looks like is control. That's what sovereignty is, control. How do we have greater control of our destiny? That's the question.

And again, the answer to that question is still a question. How far can we get? And then for the next generation of us, where do we go from there? And we borrow from this language.

It's not our language, it's not Black Yield Institute's language, it's not Black folks' language.

But Black land and food sovereignty, the way I see it, is the branch of the same tree of food sovereignty that was lifted up by many people but particularly Cesar Chavez in California, and all the campesinos and peasants and agricultural workers around the world who have been oppressed by corporations, whether it's an urban or rural context. But what we're talking about is being able to have more control of our food and our resources, our lives.

Edmund Ruge: In this interaction between food security and Black food and land sovereignty, if you were envisioning, God forbid, another similar pandemic, 15-20 years from now, if you were able to really establish in Baltimore a much more solid food network that people really have ownership of, could that be sort of a defense against what we're seeing right now?

Eric Jackson: Definitely. And that's what I've been saying, just making the case for self-determination. What can people do? What kind of resources are there? What can we actually do to take care of ourselves?

I've been talking with my team about this and intend to talk with this action network that we're developing, or coalition, for lack of a better term. I've been pushing for a long time, outside of the organization, to coalesce our efforts and really get our plan solid. All of us in this area need to make sure that we actually have a solid sovereignty plan. I've been talking about this for the last six years.

And then, for our team, what we're thinking about doing is an emergency food plan. We've already been moving in that direction. But what does preserving and canning look like? What does emergency preparedness planning look like? And how do we do that from an African civil standpoint? How do we maintain a plan that can function even in our absence and can adjust to whatever political and economic moment we find ourselves in?

For me, I'm a planner, that's how I think. And I also think longitudinally, and intergenerationally. I'm going to be here forever. And one of the things that institutional

racism and white supremacy does is impact the imagination of all people. So one of the best tools that we have to confront the system is our goddamn imagination. So it's like, why not imagine a world where we don't see that? And then constantly work toward it.

It sounds simple, but that's kind of where I want my people to be in general — particularly the staff. And so, in our leadership development, political education, I'm trying to get people to that level. How can we imagine what doesn't exist? In fact, we are the materialization of the imaginations of our people.

So if our people can do it, we can do it. We just have to have a sense of responsibility in that way, to see ourselves, not our physical selves, but our descendants, whether they be biological or political or otherwise, in a position that we have seen in full. And that's how I want to live. Somebody prayed me into existence, prayed this moment into existence on the strong backs and the strong stories that we've learned from. There's a principle that you may know, a principle in West Africa, in the Twi language, called "Sankofa." And sankofa is embodied by a bird that is looking behind her to her eggling.

And the principle is to go and fetch it. And the “go and fetch it” meaning, in a historical context, asking “what do you come from?” That's why we have to document, create our own data, write down, and tell our own stories over history because that's the way that we gain strength, not just in political terms, but in order for us to build institutions. We have to do that by any means necessary. If I know that I will die one day, then I might as well prepare for that moment and prepare my people for that moment, including my children and other folks that I'm with. And so, that's why leadership development is critical to this work as well.

As we think about this moment, the smartest thing to remind ourselves is that we don't know how long we have. That's what this did for me. I know that I'm a part of a trajectory, and if I am, I have to prepare people to be in my place. It happened before; it’s going to happen again. So let us put some scrolls out there that somebody can get to later and they could be of benefit in 10 years or 20 years or 100 years. That's my thing.

Edmund Ruge: There’s an old proverb there, it’s like you're planting the seeds of a tree knowing that you'll never enjoy the shade of that tree.

Eric Jackson: That's what movement-building really is. Selfless, self-actualized movement-building has to be able to visualize this movement at a point where we'll never see it, but knowing that we're a part of the trajectory to get there. That's it.
