

What If We Owned It?

by Darnell Adams

There are many purposes to dreaming, and there are different kinds of dreams. Some dreams hold longing—a vague memory of what once was that can sustain one through hard times. Then there is the kind of dream that leads to action, activated when the conditions are right. Like a seed that sits dormant until the rains finally come.

The story of Black co-ops and alternative economics in the United States is one of violence and persecution—but it is also a story of hope and determination. The history of Black cooperative economics and its leaders has remained largely—and intentionally—hidden from view; but that knowledge has been brought back into mainstream awareness with the 2014 publication of *Collective Courage: A History of African American Cooperative Economic Thought and Practice*, Dr. Jessica Gordon Nembhard’s gargantuan work of gathering and remembering the histories of Black communities that, despite the ongoing threat of violence, practiced economic cooperation throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.¹ Bolstered by this renewed understanding, many BIPOC communities are creating their own paths for liberation and healing by focusing on the solidarity economy in its many forms. And Black co-op leaders across the country are playing a key role in innovating new solutions to address the old systemic challenges. One space in which this is happening—the space of food co-ops—is experiencing something of a renaissance.

ORGANIZING FOR SOVEREIGNTY

I want to know safety and joy more than I know about pain and anxiety.

I want wholeness, Black love, held equity based on a membership model, infrastructure that builds an economic base; resources that are not moved into hierarchy but into the streets.

—Erin Dale Byrd,

Fertile Ground Food Cooperative, Southeast Raleigh, North Carolina



For over a century, Black people have organized and run food cooperatives, farm cooperatives, cooperative schools, insurance mutual groups, and credit unions. Why has this history been lost?

Wanting to take a closer look at the emergent Black leadership in the food cooperative movement, I spoke with nine colleagues, representing six co-ops from around the country. I posed the question “What does organizing for sovereignty look like?” This led to deep reflections about the underlying nature of the communities they are working to support.

Black Americans have always relied on cooperative economics for their survival. Cooperative economics in Black communities has demonstrated the potential not only to provide for individual needs of food and shelter but also to play an important role in the development of political agency within the community. In his book *Economic Co-Operation Among Negro Americans*, W. E. B. Du Bois described how groups of enslaved people would work together to save enough money to buy individuals out of slavery.² Citing Du Bois and Frederick Douglass, Nembhard writes, “For two centuries they did not earn a regular wage or even own their own bodies, but they often saved what money they could and pooled their savings to help buy their own and one another’s freedom (especially among family members and spouses).” In addition, Nembhard writes:

Du Bois notes that the African American “spirit of revolt” used cooperation in the form of insurrection to establish “widespread organization for the rescue of fugitive slaves.” This in turn developed, in both the North and the South, into “various co-operative efforts toward economic emancipation and land buying,” and those efforts led to cooperative businesses, building-and-loan associations, and trade unions.³

More recently, the Freedom Quilting Bee project offers a beautiful example of how cooperative economics works.⁴ In 1966, a collective of Black women in rural Alabama—under the leadership of Estelle Witherspoon—founded the Bee to support local people who lost their income and/or home after registering to vote.⁵ These quilts, made during the winters, were sold in stores like Bloomingdale’s and Sears and exhibited at the Smithsonian Institute. With the money

raised from the sale of the quilts, the collective was able to buy twenty-three acres of land in 1968 to build a sewing factory where it could produce more quilts. The collective sold eight lots to farming families who had been evicted from land they rented from white landowners; it leased part of its building from 1970 to 1996 to a day care center; and it became a member of the Artisans Cooperative. In Syracuse, New York, a group of women opened a store called the Bear Paw specifically to sell the Bee’s quilts and other products the Bee had expanded to making, such as place mats, aprons, and pot holders. Until 2012, when it closed after the passing of the last original board member, Nettie Young, the collective continued to develop products and explore new enterprises.⁶

For over a century, Black people have organized and run food cooperatives, farm cooperatives, cooperative schools, insurance mutual groups, and credit unions.⁷ Why has this history been lost? In an interview with Laura Flanders, Dr. Nembhard offered the following insight:

It was dangerous, especially in the South. Your stuff could get burned, you could get lynched. Why? Because you’re being either too uppity by trying to do something on your own, or because you’re actually challenging the white economic structure. And you weren’t supposed to do that. The white economic structure actually depended on all these Blacks having to buy from the white store, having to rent from the white landowner. So they were going to lose out if you went and did something alternatively.⁸

The Emergence of Black Food Co-ops

Throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the sabotage of Black cooperative practices has shape-shifted from acts of overt violence to less visible forms of obstruction. In terms of Black food cooperatives, the latter takes the form of an industry development model that uses data to exclude the communities that are most in need of access to healthy and nutritious food. Meanwhile, food

As with many other lack-of-access issues—employment, healthcare, transportation, clean water—lack of access to fresh food is a racialized and well-documented problem that has been decades if not centuries in the making.

cooperatives and community-supported food systems become ever more necessary. Grocery stores have either pulled up stakes or altogether avoided Black and Brown communities, creating a long-standing issue regarding access to fresh food.

This is not a new phenomenon. As with many other lack-of-access issues—employment, healthcare, transportation, clean water—lack of access to fresh food is a racialized and well-documented problem that has been decades if not centuries in the making. According to a 2014 Johns Hopkins University study, “[at] equal poverty levels, Black neighborhoods have the fewest supermarkets.”⁹ This problem has pushed neighborhoods to address the root causes and create businesses owned by the communities and designed for the benefit of the communities.

Mikaela Randolph, Board Chair of SoLA Food Co-op in South Los Angeles, reflects on this point:

We are the recipients in our community of not having an adequate amount of grocery stores. So, when you're talking about food access and sovereignty, it's like freeing ourselves from limitations. Because we are limited in our immediate community of South L.A.—which is actually really large—with respect to having adequate access to, adequate quality of, foods—and we also have high incidence of comorbidities: high blood pressure, diabetes. We see dialysis centers popping up in our communities, and not grocery stores—right?

The standard development model currently used to determine the viability of a food co-op relies heavily on data regarding household income and, inevitably, skews the outcome toward more affluent communities. A common (not publicly shared) calculation included in these market studies is aptly titled the “Natural Foods Propensity Score.” The calculation highlights who is likely to purchase natural foods, and where those people live. Based on census data, this score has reinforced an assumption that for a co-op to

be successful, it needs to be situated in middle- to upper-middle-class communities. Why this assumption? The models and business development frameworks for co-ops have largely focused on predominantly white, middle- to upper-middle-class college-educated communities.¹⁰

As recently as five years ago, developers were saying that they didn't have the data to support development of food co-ops in areas like South L.A.; Dayton, Ohio; Detroit, Michigan; Cleveland, Ohio; and Southwest Raleigh, North Carolina. To this assertion, Black co-op leaders across the country have been responding: “If you don't have the data, we'll figure it out ourselves.”

Exploring ways to solve for the specific needs of their communities, Black co-op leaders have asked, “Does the majority of food in a co-op need to be natural—in other words, minimally processed—or can there also be selections of conventional foods that are more processed but less expensive?” Five or six years ago it was a radical notion that a co-op could have a large percentage of conventional or “clean conventional” foods—foods that have been processed using minimal chemicals or perhaps none, but which have not undergone the expensive process of being certified “organic.” The decision to bring in conventional foods alongside natural and organic foods is one way that Black co-op leaders are innovating the co-op model to address the challenges of their communities.

We are seeing a remarkable shift in a short period of time. This past summer, Gem City Market, founded in 2015 in Dayton, Ohio, opened a 12,000 square foot full-service grocery store offering everything from fresh produce to a hot food bar.¹¹ They lean heavily toward local foods but also have a large array of conventional and clean conventional foods.

Reflecting on the increase in the number of food co-ops currently organizing in the United States, Stuart Reid, executive director of the Food Co-op Initiative, says: “We can go back five years, but before that there were relatively few

One thing that's become clear to many Black co-op organizers in the food cooperative movement is that they are ready for this time, *because they have been doing the work all along.*

active [Black-led] start-up efforts. We started seeing more inquiries around the time that Renaissance [Community Cooperative] was making news, and it has continued to increase, with a major bump after the combined impact of COVID and George Floyd's murder."¹²

Indeed, over the past two years, forces operating within and around us have brought us all to a full stop and opened the space for reevaluation. One thing that's become clear to many Black co-op organizers in the food cooperative movement is that they are ready for this time, *because they have been doing the work all along.*

HEALING FOR SOVEREIGNTY

Trauma decontextualized in a person looks like personality. Trauma decontextualized in a family looks like family traits. Trauma in a people looks like culture.

—Resmaa Menakem¹³

In 2017, I was the project manager of a start-up food co-op in Boston and responsible for community organizing and business development. One morning, I was standing in line at a local coffee shop, when a Black woman approached me and started yelling, "What are you doing working for a bunch of white people who are just trying to gentrify this community? How dare you even do anything for them?" Everything around us came to a halt.

My first reaction was confusion. I remember thinking, What is she saying? What is happening? My second reaction was curiosity. I thought, I'm just going to listen to her. I knew her anger couldn't be personal, because she didn't know me. I took a breath and let her say the things that she needed to say.

When she was done, I said, "Thank you. But I disagree with you. I'm the one who's managing the project." I explained that the cooperative was owned and controlled by the community members for the benefit of the community members, and that the rumor of a "white lady" who owned the co-op

was untrue. What was true was that there were a few white ladies on the board. However, this was a collective effort emerging from the community that would benefit from it.

Our exchange ended on a note of calm. "I just hope you know what you're doing," she said. I told her that I was glad that we got a chance to talk.

In the two and a half years that I worked to organize this food co-op, I was met with curiosity and enthusiasm but also distrust, frustration, and anger. I heard and felt the mistrust about the project, especially around the idea that it was a white, gentrifying project. At community meetings, members expressed anger that nothing ever seemed to change.

I have been hesitant to write about such experiences, because I do not wish to contribute to the narrative that Black folks are broken. I do not believe that. What I do wish to acknowledge is that the terror that lives within us from generations is both in the past and the present. But it is not our only story. To the degree that there is trauma, there are equal amounts of strength, creativity, and love. If this weren't the case, we would not still be here. If there were only trauma, there would be no hope, no dreaming. I have come to trust that speaking to the trauma that is present is helpful in healing. To acknowledge what is present can be used as a springboard to building a culture that gives people more opportunities to thrive.

In *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies*, somatic therapist and trauma expert Resmaa Menakem writes about traumatic retention: "Oppressed people often internalize the trauma-based values and strategies of their oppressors. These values and strategies need to be consciously noticed, called out as traumatic retentions and challenged."¹⁴ Menakem notes: "Another fairly common traumatic retention is a reticence to own a home or a business, or even to be part of a start-up food co-op. It's not hard to see how people whose ancestors were considered property

would not be delighted by the concept of ownership.”¹⁵

While organizing in a community that had been historically disinvested, I found myself straddling the vision of the future and the multiple realities of the past and the present. There were indeed many concrete examples that folks shared with me about promises of adequate economic investments that seemed never to come. Community input about predatory practices that led to loss of homes and businesses also didn't appear to be valued or was outright ignored. Based on these truths, it was absolutely rational to be reticent to enter into a community business venture like ours. The traumatic and sometimes violent past was not so long ago as to be disconnected from the present.

Completing the Action That Was Thwarted: Moving through Trauma

In therapy a traumatic experience is sometimes described as an attempted action that got thwarted and became stuck in the body. A common first step in the mending of trauma is completing the action that was thwarted. This releases the trauma energy stuck in your body. You can then use this energy to metabolize the trauma.

—Resmaa Menakem¹⁶

Co-op organizing requires action. It requires the coming together of hundreds of people to not only imagine a new future but also move oneself and marshal all resources over a span of many years—in the form of outreach, networking, community meetings, door knocking, political maneuvering, capital raising, and self-governance. Action is key to mending the trauma. As Menakem writes,

*In the healing of intergenerational trauma, you may also complete an action that was attempted and thwarted by a traumatized ancestor. The trauma got stuck in their body, and then passed down to you. Even though you may be cognitively unaware of this trauma—or of your ancestor's experience and incomplete action—your own efforts simultaneously heal your trauma and release future generations from its grip.*¹⁷

Leaders in the Black food co-op movement have been speaking to the different manifestations of intergenerational trauma that are undermining Black communities. These leaders understand that healing in communities is not just about economic opportunities and access to nutritious food

but also about providing a sense of safety and dignity to the shopper and worker. It's this experience of sovereignty that leaders in this movement are working to provide.

The food co-op leaders I spoke with, while deeply entrenched in the day-to-day aspects of organizing and opening a cooperative grocery store, also spoke about love of self, love of others, and healing from trauma. I was struck by the complexity of their vision—one that made space not only for economic thriving but also for the physical and mental well-being of their communities, and which often spoke explicitly, if indirectly, to this neurobiological understanding of how integral stuck, interrupted action is to trauma that doesn't get healed, even across generations.

For Kenya Baker, director of Unified Power, Co-op Dayton, a key question is what to do with the trauma. “How do we release it?” she asks. “One of the things our community has started doing is healing circles. We come together with other community members. Not to drink, not to smoke, not to party, not to kick, not to gossip—but to deal with our trauma. To process trauma. To release it.”

Unhealed trauma can lead to distrust and resistance when it comes to genuine community development. Baker spoke to the resistance she encountered while building support for their project.

We're not used to seeing development in our community, so immediately the thought is, it's not for us. But that's part of the self-hate. Because we don't believe we deserve it. We have never done it for ourselves. I had so many naysayers from the community who were Black nationalists, or Black organization leaders. And a lot of them, I'm really proud to say, are now members of the grocery store. But it was a process. I tell people this grocery store is a community-led development. If it is to remain a community-owned and -led development, you must get engaged. Three days after we opened, the president of the NAACP called me and said, “I think I'm ready to get my membership.”

As Janet Howard, board member at the Fertile Ground Co-op, noted, “Our experience in America has led us to all of this distrust, and to easily lash out at our own rather than finding the source—which would amount to being in conversation with political leaders about how they disinvested from our community.”

In organizing to create a cooperative—in the unknown places where there is no one roadmap—all the community’s wisdom, gifts, and skills are needed.

Given the context in which Black communities are organizing cooperatives, it is not surprising that healing from trauma is not far from the minds of Black co-op leaders—in particular, the practice of visioning the space, and the processes of group learning and striving. Information gathering—the gaining of new knowledge—is also a route toward healing. Common Share Co-op Board President Kinga Walker-McCraven described ways in which to create the space for people’s trust and engagement to emerge. She sees it as a process of growing capacity within individuals and community.

One thing that I’m working on right now is really diving deeply into each person’s personal values, strengths, talents, and natural gifts that we can highlight and affirm, and help them to grow even deeper and find their place. It really does come down to each person being able to really sink into who they are, what they offer, where they’re comfortable. I want to develop that in our board and in our community, so that we have a high-functioning community of people.

Baker adds:

You have to have a level of faith, because it makes dreaming safe. COVID slowed things down a lot. It gave people an opportunity to reimagine—because these structures that create obstacles for people to be able to self-determine were dreamed up and put in place by man. This is our opportunity to reimagine and then cocreate, with our brothers and sisters, what we want our future to look like.

In *My Grandmother’s Hands*, Menakem writes about “clean” and “dirty” pain:

Experiencing clean pain enables us to engage our integrity and tap into our body’s inherent resilience and coherence, in a way that dirty pain does not. Dirty pain is the pain of avoidance, blame and denial. When people respond from their most wounded parts,

become cruel or violent, or physically or emotionally run away, they experience dirty pain.¹⁸

Menakem offers a process in which a traumatized body can move through pain “cleanly.” One step is to “stay present and in your body as you move through the unfolding experience with all its ambiguity and uncertainty, and respond from the best parts of yourself.”¹⁹

Indeed, moving through trauma is not only an emotional and mental journey but also one of activation of the body. In organizing to create a cooperative—in the unknown places where there is no one roadmap—all the community’s wisdom, gifts, and skills are needed. In this coming together, this building of relationship, this learning together and making decisions together, comes the opportunity to heal from our collective trauma—to complete the thwarted actions of our parents, our great-grandparents, and beyond.

BUILDING FOR SOVEREIGNTY

Food co-ops focus on addressing the immediate and long-term needs of their communities. This provides the framework for alternative business practices to those of traditional grocery stores. Co-ops place emphasis on job creation, procuring products from local producers, and having proactive policies to minimize environmental impacts of their operations. These business practices have a multiplier effect that filters through the local economy. Indeed, the data tell the story: “For every \$1,000 a shopper spends at their local food co-op, \$1,604 dollars [sic] in economic activity is generated in their local economy—\$239 more than if they had spent that same \$1,000 at a conventional grocer in the same community.”²⁰

Building a community-owned food co-op requires intensive business development—as one might expect with any multimillion-dollar business—but co-ops are unique, in that they have international guiding principles that are of great benefit both to start-up co-op business ventures and those that already have their doors open. “Co-operation Among

DEVELOPING A FOOD CO-OP: 7 PRINCIPLES

The consumer-owned food co-op model requires not just business development but also community development. As with many business ventures, coming up with a solid business plan with strong pro forma (financial forecasting), obtaining capital, and assembling a team that can execute the operations are key steps. The development of a food co-op is a process that requires the community to invest its time, energy, and skills for as long as five years to learn about cooperatives, spread the word, create the governance and business structures, and sell equity shares.

It's a complex endeavor, and one that requires communities to marshal their resources to reach their goal. The co-op exists way before the physical store is built: to sell equity shares in the business, it must incorporate. Co-ops begin to organize before the incorporation. How else would you know if people want a co-op? So, those conversations—the sharing of ideas, dreams, and possibilities—happen for a long time during the process. The co-op development process itself is a master class in power, relationship building, self-determination, and how to share information. Thankfully, there is guidance—guardrails on how co-ops should conduct their work.



Seven Internationally Recognized Co-op Principles of the ICA (International Co-operative Alliance)

1. “Voluntary and Open Membership.”

Co-operatives are voluntary organizations, open to all persons able to use their services and willing to accept the responsibilities of membership, without gender, social, racial, political or religious discrimination.”

WHAT THIS MEANS IN PRACTICE: In adhering to this first principle, food co-ops cast a wide net for those who can join and participate. Importantly, the choice remains in the community members’ hands—choice for oneself, as in self-possession: the power to decide one’s involvement, level of risk, and reward.

2. “Democratic Member Control.”

Co-operatives are democratic organizations controlled by their members, who actively participate in setting their policies and making decisions. [Individuals] serving as elected representatives are accountable to the membership. In primary co-operatives members have equal voting rights (one member, one vote).”

WHAT THIS MEANS IN PRACTICE: For consumer cooperatives, boards are elected by membership, and any member in good standing can run for the board. Big decisions that will tangibly affect the co-op and by-

law changes are voted upon by membership. Can this get messy? Yes. Democracy can be a messy process. However, the board works on behalf of the membership. Members have the power.

3. “Member Economic Participation.”

Members contribute equitably to, and democratically control, the capital of their co-operative. At least part of that capital is usually the common property of the co-operative. Members usually receive limited compensation, if any, on capital subscribed as a condition of membership. Members allocate surpluses for any or all of the following purposes: developing their co-operative, possibly by setting up reserves, part of which at least would be indivisible; benefiting members in proportion to their transactions with the co-operative; and supporting other activities approved by the membership.”

WHAT THIS MEANS IN PRACTICE: In a nutshell, the money is put to use for goods, services, and employment that the community needs. But this principle is not meant to function in isolation from the co-op principles and values. Indeed, shared social aspirations and needs are just as important.

continued next page

4. “Autonomy and Independence.

Co-operatives are autonomous, self-help organizations controlled by their members. If they enter into agreements with other organizations, including governments, or raise capital from external sources, they do so on terms that ensure democratic control by their members and maintain their co-operative autonomy.”

WHAT THIS MEANS IN PRACTICE: The members and the cooperative are the primary beneficiaries of the cooperative enterprise, both in terms of the services that are provided and eventual surpluses. The cooperative is a community asset. The shareholders are in the community—not an outside corporate entity. The co-op members are agents of their own business venture. They determine what they wish it to accomplish and how it will be accomplished. The promise of cooperative business is that a business of scale can be built and run with the community needs at the center. For many Black and Brown communities, this is often not the case, with ownership residing elsewhere and profits siphoned off for the benefit of others.

5. “Education, Training and Information.

Co-operatives provide education and training for their members, elected representatives, managers, and employees so they can contribute effectively to the development of their co-operative. They inform the general public, particularly young people and opinion leaders, about the nature and benefits of co-operation.”

WHAT THIS MEANS IN PRACTICE: Some cooperatives have an open (accounting) book system and extensive training for staff, so there is not only financial transparency but also the opportunity for broader input, business planning, and problem-solving from the team. In all cooperatives, the business is required to give regular financial reporting to the board and to the co-op members. Board members often need financial training to understand financial statements. For start-ups, extensive cooperative training for organizers takes place for years through organizations such as the Food Co-op Initiative, CooperationWorks!, state-run cooperative development offices, and a variety of cooperative associations such as the National Black Food & Justice Alliance.

6. “Cooperation among Co-operatives.

Co-operatives serve their members most effectively and strengthen the co-operative movement by working together through local, national, regional, and international structures.”

WHAT THIS MEANS IN PRACTICE: This principle guides the behavior and support within the cooperative sector. In this way, while a particular food co-op is a highly autonomous business, it fits into an ecosystem where folks from other communities work in support of one another. One organizer from Raleigh will call another organizer in Detroit to share how they went about acquiring a site for the store or how they capitalized their project. Documents are shared, advice given, ideas copied—so much so, that the sharing has been lovingly referred to as “P6-ing.” This is important. This work is hard, and it is almost impossible to go at it alone. Autonomous, yes; alone, no. For communities healing from years of folks either swooping in with solutions derived from outside the community or from not having access to larger networks with information and resources, Principle 6 is a remarkably different and healing way to do business.

7. “Concern for Community.

Co-operatives work for the sustainable development of their communities through policies approved by their members.”

WHAT THIS MEANS IN PRACTICE: The relationship of the co-op to the community beyond the members of the co-op is important. Relationship building goes beyond the point of organizing to grow membership: It also requires care and thoughtfulness regarding what is important to the neighbor next door who chooses not to become a member or shopper, to the business viability of the farmer and fair treatment and appropriate compensation of farm workers, to those who are fighting to keep housing affordable.

The seven principles as laid out here were adapted from Guidance Notes to the Co-operative Principles, (International Co-operative Alliance, 2015). You can find the full, original guide here: www.ica.coop/sites/default/files/2021-11/ICA%20Guidance%20Notes%20EN.pdf.

Co-ops”—the sixth principle of the guide “7 Cooperative Principles,” decrees that co-ops support one another by providing technical assistance and capital through local, regional, national, and (sometimes) international structures.²¹

Further, there is an ecosystem of food co-op development supports, such as the nonprofit Food Co-op Initiative (FCI)²² (whose mission is “to increase the number, success, and sustainability of new food cooperatives delivering access to healthy food in diverse communities across this country”) and the National Co-op Grocers (NCG), which “exists so that member co-ops are successful, and the total cooperative grocery sector grows in size and scope.”²³

Gerardo Espinoza, executive director of the Local Enterprise Assistance Fund (LEAF),²⁴ a national lender that focuses on cooperative businesses and housing, considers food co-ops to be “the best of both worlds.” Food co-ops have “both the kind of support that a major corporation like Star Market has *and* have the autonomy and independence and flexibility of an independent grocer.” What he means is that large supermarket chains have corporatewide processes and systems that maximize efficiencies that are out of reach for smaller, independent stores. But for communities starting a food co-op, a whole support system is in place regarding “what point of sales I should buy, what refrigeration equipment [I should] buy, how to do the merchandising, how to do the member campaign, how to negotiate the lease,” notes Espinoza. This support, he affirms, reduces risk, which is extremely important for sustaining small businesses.

In addition to this ecosystem of support, there is the strength of the community ownership itself. The sustained volunteer effort and the matrix of cooperative support systems have helped to provide business stability, making food co-ops a viable option for many communities wanting to address food-access issues and for providing an economic boost to those communities.

Yet, building a cooperative grocery store is a daunting task that requires years of effort and significant capital to make the dream a reality. This effort includes predevelopment costs that support:

- business planning and market research;
- deep learning of governance systems;

- enormous community-organizing efforts;
- cost of real estate;
- hiring of architects and store planners;
- purchasing of equipment;
- hiring of staff;
- and stocking of shelves with food.

JQ Hannah, assistant director of the Food Co-op Initiative, reports:

To compete in these times, start-up food co-ops must not only do excellent organizing pre-open but also open very professional grocery stores that are excellent shopping experiences. Because of this, the full cost of opening as a start-up generally ranges from \$3.5 million to \$5.5 million, depending on the size and scope of the store. These costs are not only showing no sign of coming down but are rising rapidly.

So, despite the benefits that communities can derive by owning a food cooperative, there are many obstacles, especially with regard to funding. Randolph highlights this tension, pointing out that our system is economically structured so as to discourage and impede small-business ownership.²⁵ “That can be really disheartening,” she says, especially because “if we were able to go back to a cooperative model” then this would meet “so many different needs” for so many communities—needs that otherwise remain unaddressed. Randolph pointedly asks: “Why aren’t we funding that more? Why isn’t there more federal funding? Why isn’t there more state funding and local funding?”

While co-op members put in a certain amount of equity, there remain sticking points for getting needed capital, especially when it comes to traditional lenders. A food co-op has hundreds of owners, and no one person provides a personal guarantee. In addition, in a situation where a store is having difficulty repaying a loan, in most cases the value of the collateral, such as the refrigeration and shelves, are not worth enough to cover the amount of the loan. This can be a full stop for traditional lenders. Espinoza elaborates:

I think many people are surprised that even the government sometimes is not flexible. For instance, with the SBA [Small Business Administration], I believe that it’s only relatively recently that they have been willing to consider worker co-ops as a small business. But even though it’s a small business, it’s still requiring

“Are the projects that are funded projects that are trying to make this fundamental shift in power? . . . Or are these groups just trying to reform conditions within a system where the people who are in power are still fundamentally in power?”—Malik Yakini, Detroit Black Community Food Security Network

collateral. So they made progress, but not the progress that is needed. For me, it's always fascinating how a government organization—which should be the first in line to support this type of initiative because of all the characteristics of wealth distribution, and so on—is not at the table. So, that would be one instance of flexible capital—or, in this case, *inflexible* capital.

The vision is not just to open a store but also for that store to grow and thrive—to become an economic engine, create dignified jobs, and, of course, provide access to healthy food. To have all of those things become a reality, the store needs to function well in the first few years until the point of being profitable, and then continue to grow—sustainably. Not having enough cash on hand in those early years can be a fatal blow in an industry that runs on between 1 and 2 percent margins. A high debt load with immediate repayment is equally detrimental.

Patience and flexible capital are necessary financial conditions for a food co-op's success. Those two concepts must be intertwined to be effective. Impatient investors needing quick returns would tend to siphon off very-much-needed cash from the new store. Flexibility may need to look like seeking other ways of measuring risk and/or willingness to restructure a loan if there are challenging financial conditions. Funders such as LEAF, Cooperative Fund of New England, Shared Capital Cooperative, and The Working World understand the unique nature of cooperatives and strive to support them with patient and flexible financial tools.²⁶

Grants are also an important part of the capital equation, particularly in lower-wealth communities. Co-op members in communities already struggling financially may be limited in the amount of equity and loans they can provide. Grants can fund those hefty predevelopment costs, increasing the chance of a shorter and more successful development process. And, importantly, grants can also be used as part of how capital stacks up to fund the store.

John Guerra, director of retail and store development for National Co+Op Grocers, underscores this point:

It's important, in terms of starting up, to have capital to actually bring to the table—to say [to banks and other investors], “This is the money [we have] to spend on this thing [the co-op].” That's important to show, in terms of community support. But also, you have to have 20 to 30 percent just to get banks to come to the table. In terms of equity, I would say grants can often function in that same way.

Grants that support organizations whose mission is to support food cooperatives, such as FCI, are yet another piece of the financial puzzle. They have the line of sight and expertise to assist organizers in the many places across the country where communities have decided to take on this vision of sovereignty by sharing the responsibility, risk, and eventual benefit of a cooperative.

As communities respond to the growing need for more access to food and for spurring economic development, many are turning to the cooperative model as a viable way to bring goods and services to areas abandoned or ignored by traditional grocery stores. For funders whose missions support fundamental shifts in power, the cooperative movement may align with those aims. Malik Yakini—cofounder and executive director of the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network and board member of the Detroit People's Food Co-op—astutely asks:

Are the projects that are funded ones that are trying to make this fundamental shift in power, which will ultimately give more autonomy and sovereignty to people? Or are these groups just trying to reform conditions within a system where the people who are in power are still fundamentally in power, and are still making mega-profits, and we just have a kinder and gentler capitalism? And so [funders must have] some kind of clear analysis themselves that this isn't just about, you know, minor reforms, but about a

fundamental shift in power: *the fundamental shift in how resources are distributed*. And then [funders must try] to identify those groups that are striving for those fundamental changes, as opposed to those groups that are doing just the kind of window-dressing reformer things.



There are many purposes to dreaming, and there are different kinds of dreams. Some dreams hold longing—a vague memory of what once was that can sustain one through hard times. Then there is the kind of dream that leads to action, activated when the conditions are right. Like a seed that sits dormant until the rains finally come.

As food apartheid continues to plague Black and Brown communities, and food cooperatives and community-supported food systems become ever more necessary in communities across the country, Black co-op leaders are engaged in both kinds of dreaming. They are remembering and honoring the dreams of the lineage of organizers upon whose

shoulders they stand as they move forward in action by learning together and supporting each other—particularly through the National Black Food & Justice Alliance, which holds regular virtual meetings for members.²⁷

Back when I was working to organize that food co-op in Boston—sitting in community meetings, door knocking, going to City Hall, and talking to economic development people—I had this vision of what we were all working so hard to accomplish together:

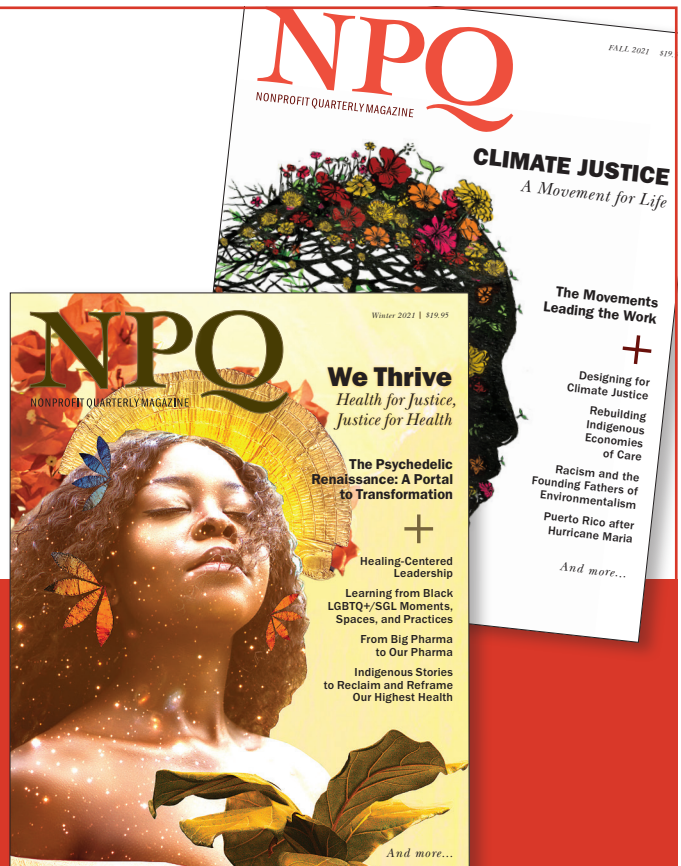
It's a new building, built on the footprint of what had been a business many decades ago. When I walk in, I see a cross-section of the neighborhood, from the folks stocking fresh produce to those ringing up the groceries. The shelves are full. Prices are fair. Bright colors are on the wall, and a large sign greets me: "Everyone Welcome." I recognize these folks, even if we've never met before. They look like me. It's a grocery store envisioned by community members who asked, "What if we owned it ourselves?"

Subscribe TODAY!

"The Nonprofit Quarterly is the Harvard Business Review for our world."

NPQ

NONPROFIT QUARTERLY MAGAZINE



NOTES

1. Jessica Gordon Nembhard, *Collective Courage: A History of African American Cooperative Economic Thought and Practice* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2014).
2. W. E. B. Du Bois, *Economic Co-operation among Negro Americans. Report of a Social Study made by Atlanta University, under the patronage of the Carnegie Institution of Washington, D.C., together with the Proceedings of the 12th Conference for the Study of the Negro Problems, held at Atlanta University, on Tuesday, May the 28th, 1907* (Atlanta: The Atlanta University Press, 1907).
3. Nembhard, *Collective Courage*, 31, 34.
4. “Freedom Quilting Bee,” Rural Development Leadership Network, accessed February 15, 2022, ruraldevelopment.org/FQBhistory.html. See also “Freedom Quilting Bee: History, Activities, Plans,” Rural Development Leadership Network, accessed February 15, 2022, ruraldevelopment.org/FQBhistory.html; and Stella Hendricks, “A Timeline of the Freedom Quilting Bee,” *BMA/Stories*, Baltimore Museum of Art, March 8, 2021, stories.artbma.org/timeline-the-freedom-quilting-bee/.
5. “Freedom Quilting Bee.”
6. “Freedom Quilting Bee: History, Activities, Plans”; and Hendricks, “A Timeline of the Freedom Quilting Bee.”
7. Nembhard, *Collective Courage*, 61–77.
8. Laura Flanders, *Jessica Gordon Nembhard: Cooperative Economics and Civil Rights*, The Laura Flanders Show, April 8, 2014, video, 15:28, youtu.be/_TVIghQMkBg.
9. Kelly M. Bower et al., “The intersection of neighborhood racial segregation, poverty, and urbanicity and its impact on food store availability in the United States,” *Preventive Medicine* 58 (January 2014): 33–39.
10. It is largely understood that food co-ops in the 1990s and through the 2000s were being built in wealthy, college-educated communities, and focused on natural/organic foods. Like many assumptions of this sort, this is not written down as a business model, per se, that I’m aware of. I have, for instance, images from a presentation by a co-op market study analyst that hints at the implicit principles/assumptions: “Very few preliminary market studies have been conducted for conventional foods co-ops, therefore there is no track record”; and “A person that has the propensity to purchase natural/organic food. . .” (i.e., a person who has higher education and income levels that give them that level of purchasing power).
11. “Now Open!,” Gem City Market (Community Co-op Grocery Store, Dayton, Ohio), accessed February 15, 2022, gemcitymarket.com/.
12. Unfortunately, the Renaissance Community Cooperative closed its doors in 2019. For more on this, see Marnie Thompson, Sohnie Black, and Ed Whitfield, “The Ballad of the RCC, or ‘Nice Try. Now Try Again.’,” *Nonprofit Quarterly*, December 17, 2019, nonprofitquarterly.org/the-ballad-of-the-rcc-or-nice-try-now-try-again/; and Steve Dubb, “Anatomy of a Failed Co-op: Lessons from Greensboro’s Renaissance Community Cooperative,” January 3, 2020, nonprofitquarterly.org/webinar-anatomy-of-a-failed-co-op-lessons-from-greensboros-renaissance-community-cooperative/.
13. Krista Tippett, “Resmaa Menakem: ‘Notice the Rage, Notice the Silence,’” *On Being with Krista Tippett*, On Being, June 4, 2020, onbeing.org/programs/resmaa-menakem-notice-the-rage-notice-the-silence/.
14. Resmaa Menakem, *My Grandmother’s Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies* (Las Vegas: Central Recovery Press, 2017), 79.
15. *Ibid.*, 80.
16. *Ibid.*
17. *Ibid.*, 179.
18. *Ibid.*, 28–29.
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Healthy Foods, Healthy Communities: Measuring the Social and Economic Impact of Food Co-ops* (Iowa City, IA: National Cooperative Grocers Association, 2012); and “Cooperative identity, values & principles,” International Co-operative Alliance, accessed February 15, 2022, ica.coop/en/cooperatives/cooperative-identity.
21. *Guidance Notes to the Co-operative Principles* (Brussels, Belgium: International Co-operative Alliance, 2015).

22. "New Food Co-ops Start Here," Food Co-op Initiative, accessed February 15, 2022, fci.coop/.
23. "National Co+op Grocers (Carrboro)," National Co+op Grocers, accessed February 15, 2022, ncg.coop/partners-find/nc/national-coop-grocers-carrboro. And see "Harmony Natural Foods Co-op," National Co+op Grocers, accessed February 15, 2022, ncg.coop/.
24. "Since Its Founding Over 30 Years Ago, LEAF Has Invested and Leveraged Over \$122 million, Resulting in the Creation or Retention of More Than 10,300 Jobs," Local Enterprise Assistance Fund (LEAF), leafund.org/.
25. "Bringing Fresh, Healthy Food to South LA," SoLA Food Co-op, accessed February 15, 2022, solafoodcoop.com/.
26. Cooperative Fund of the Northeast, accessed February 15, 2022, cooperativefund.org/; "Flipping the script on who has power and who benefits in our economy," Shared Capital Cooperative, accessed February 15, 2022, sharedcapital.coop/; and "Our system is in crisis.," The Working World, accessed February 15, 2022, theworkingworld.org/us/.
27. "Collectively Creating a Just Food & Land Revolution," National Black Food & Justice Alliance, accessed February 15, 2022, blackfoodjustice.org/.

DARNELL ADAMS, co-owner of Firebrand Cooperative, is a dynamic, Boston-based leadership coach and business strategist with over two decades of experience in nonprofit, for-profit, and cooperative businesses. Adams develops and facilitates strategic plans, special projects, and workshops, providing expertise and training on an array of topics including implicit bias, power, and equity.

To comment on this article, write to us at feedback@npqmag.org. Order reprints from <http://store.nonprofitquarterly.org>.

\$19.95 back issues

We've Got Issues


Complete your collection of the *Nonprofit Quarterly* and gain a critical reference guide to nonprofit management. To get your back issues today, visit www.nonprofitquarterly.org

NPOQ Winter 2021 | \$19.95
We Thrive
 Health for Justice, Justice for Health
 The Psychedelic Renaissance: A Portal to Transformation
 +
 Healing-Centered Leadership
 Learning from Black LGBTQ+/SGL Moments, Spaces, and Practices
 From Big Pharma to Our Pharma
 Indigenous Stories to Reclaim and Reframe Our Highest Health
 And more...

NPOQ Fall 2021 | \$19.95
CLIMATE JUSTICE
 A Movement for Life
 The Movements Leading the Work
 +
 Designing for Climate Justice
 Rebuilding Indigenous Economies of Care
 Racism and the Founding Fathers of Environmentalism
 Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria
 And more...

NPOQ Summer 2021
The World We Want
 In Search of New Economic Paradigms
 Reshaping the U.S. Social Contract
 +
 America's Infrastructure Needs
 Creating Pathways for Reparations
 The Transformative Promise of a Solidarity Economy
 And more...

NPOQ Spring 2021 | \$19.95
Radical Leadership
 Visioning Lines of Flight
 +
 Becoming Sovereign
 Backlash, Burnout, and BIPOC Leaders
 Edge Leadership
 Infrastructure for a New World
 And more...

NP  The largest multimedia platform in the nonprofit sector

- Creating knowledge for civil society
- Connecting leaders in social movements, nonprofits, and philanthropy to move from what's wrong to what's next
- For more information, visit nonprofitquarterly.org