

# More Than Just Food

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FOOD JUSTICE AND  
COMMUNITY CHANGE

Garrett M. Broad



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## Food Systems, Food Movements, Food Justice

Combining an interactive mapping platform with data from the national census and a geographic directory of grocery stores from across the country, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) was proud to introduce its new online Food Desert Locator in May of 2011. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack explained in the official press release that the new tool would “help policy makers, community planners, researchers, and other professionals identify communities where public-private intervention can help make fresh, healthy, and affordable food more readily available to residents.”<sup>1</sup> The Food Desert Locator was emblematic of a broader push, picking up significant momentum over the course of the previous decade or more, to put healthy food access concerns onto the agenda of American citizens, activists, policymakers, and private businesses alike.

The term *food desert* was explicitly mentioned by the US Congress in the Food, Conservation and Energy Act of 2008—known colloquially as the 2008 Farm Bill—when federal lawmakers allocated \$500,000 to investigate existing problems and potential solutions related to places “with limited access to affordable and nutritious food, particularly such an area of predominantly lower-income neighborhoods and communities.”<sup>2</sup> Shortly thereafter, First Lady Michelle Obama publicly stated that 23.5 million Americans, including 6.5 million children, resided within these food deserts. Her national Let’s Move initiative included combatting these community-based problems as central to her goal of ending childhood obesity.<sup>3</sup> A few years later, the Obama administration’s Healthy Food Financing Initiative—a \$400 million, multiyear program operated jointly by the Departments of Treasury, Agriculture, and Health and Human Services—was rolled out with a stated aim of spurring food-related economic development in

food deserts across urban and rural America. The administration argued that these financing programs, which were kicked off in 2010 and expanded in subsequent federal budgets, would help “revitalize neighborhoods and communities by employing place-based approaches—strategies that target the prosperity, equity, sustainability and livability of places.”<sup>4</sup> Several years into the second decade of the twenty-first century, a consensus seemed to have emerged that inequality in the American food system was a reality, and food deserts were identified as both a cause and manifestation of this problem.

It was around this time that I offered my volunteer research services to colleagues at Community Services Unlimited (CSU). They were in the process of drafting a multiyear grant application to the Community Economic Development Program of the United States Department of Health and Human Services, and they asked for my assistance in outlining the relevant scholarly literature on food deserts and community health outcomes in South Los Angeles. For the proposed project, funds would be used to spur the growth of CSU’s social enterprise—the Village Market Place (VMP)—as the grant would allow for new hiring, youth job-skill training, and an expansion in the distribution and marketing of the program. “Scaling up the VMP would allow for the continued development of a vibrant local food economy in a community that has traditionally experienced economic and nutritional inequality,” the proposal, which was ultimately funded, asserted.<sup>5</sup>

CSU was in the process of growing its community-based social enterprise at a time when observers from diverse political perspectives agreed that the global food system was entering an era of significant strain. Climate change, intensifying droughts, the loss of fertile lands, and a host of market disruptions were spiking food prices and exacerbating food insecurity across the developing world.<sup>6</sup> In the United States, unhealthy eating habits were being blamed as a primary driver of the nation’s battles with obesity and other metabolic disorders, maladies that were particularly acute within low-income communities and communities of color. Articulating what had become a commonplace refrain, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation described the situation as “one of the most challenging health crises the country has ever faced,” insisting that medical costs and productivity losses were “hampering America’s ability to compete in the global economy” (3).<sup>7</sup>

Even in the face of these global and national food system challenges, however, I found that many advocates for food system reform continued to

propose a set of locally focused, community-based initiatives that combined governmental support with private entrepreneurship and the hard work of local residents and activists as viable solutions to advance health, equity, and sustainability across urban America. This chapter aims to explore why and how community-based approaches have become central to food activism, broadly speaking, and to food justice organizing, specifically. While hardly an exhaustive compendium on food system issues, it serves as a primer of sorts on the dynamics of the contemporary food system and of movements for food system change. My intention here is to help the reader situate the ethnographic research on community-based food justice that forms the heart of this book within relevant social, political, and economic contexts. To achieve this goal, the pages to follow highlight the networked structures and cultural narratives that characterize the past, present, and potential futures of the food system. The chapter provides a brief sketch of agricultural history, offers an overview of the central risks that have emerged as a result of food system industrialization, and describes the various alternative food initiatives that have taken aim at this industrialized status quo.

I argue that global and local food systems today are characterized by a paradox of coexisting abundance and injustice. As a means to remedy this structural inequity, locally focused program development has emerged as a driving force for twenty-first century food activism in the United States.<sup>8</sup> As I discussed in chapter 1, in the age of neoliberalism, decentralized strategies of community-based capacity-building—often spearheaded by shadow state nonprofit organizations—bring with them a set of inherent advantages and constraints. Alternative food activism offers a prime example.

Indeed, recent years have seen countless community-based food and agriculture initiatives take shape, all with overlapping aims to improve the economic, ecological, or nutritional health of the food system. While these programs have undoubtedly benefitted a number of food system stakeholders, their results have proved uneven. Notably, many alternative food initiatives have consistently overlooked the systemic racialized and economic components of food-related inequality, and as a result, they have failed to promote justice for all. In response to these intersecting concerns, a people-of-color-led movement for community-based food justice has emerged in urban America. Yet, as sympathetic critics of food justice organizing insist, that movement also faces significant challenges in its quest to advance sustainable community change.

## FROM SUBSISTENCE TO “CONVENTIONAL” AGRICULTURE

Food has long been central to the development of human civilization. It has served as a dynamic force for the emergence of cultural identity and societal stability and encouraged economic exchange and regional cooperation while stoking significant conflict and spurring long-term exploitation. Operating at local, regional, national, and global scales, the contemporary food system consists of complex networks of, to name just a few key players, individuals, organizations, transnational corporations, governments, and a host of other public and private institutions. It includes the states, corporations, and financial institutions that invest money and resources into food and agricultural development; farmers and laborers who grow crops; animals who are utilized in food production; processors who refine and package food; distributors and retailers who sell food; consumers who cook and eat food; and those involved with the infrastructures that deal with food waste. Over time, shifts toward a more industrialized food system have been encouraged by a widespread desire for the improvement of agricultural processes, the growth of capital markets, the rise of corporate food industries, advances in transportation and communication infrastructure, global consumer demand, and an ever-evolving set of other social and technological dynamics. Today, the multi-trillion dollar global food system represents one of the largest—and most important—industries in the world.<sup>9</sup>

From the start, there has been one basic question at the heart of these processes: can we produce enough food to support and nourish a growing population, or will we go hungry? At its core, the contemporary food system has been shown to offer great promise in the enduring quest to feed the world. Yet, on account of several intersecting economic, social, and environmental challenges, the system has fallen short of fulfilling this task, while the industrialization of food itself has created an entirely new set of risks with which society must grapple.

Of course, for the vast majority of humanity’s existence—some 190,000 years—the basis of the food system encompassed groups of humans who spent their time foraging, hunting, doing basic cooking, and traveling. The transition to farming and herding—which likely began between 10,000 and 12,000 years ago—represented perhaps the most fundamental shift in the organization of social life throughout all of human history. At some point in this range, groups of humans decided to abandon gathering and hunting as their primary modes of acquiring food and shift to agriculture. Over the

course of the next few thousand years, agricultural practices began to develop across a number of continents, with a rapid and large-scale adoption of plant and animal domestication occurring during the span of years approximately 10,000 to 7,000 years before the present time.<sup>10</sup>

Preindustrial agriculture was largely defined by slash-and-burn farming methods, a low-technology style of subsistence farming in which natural vegetation is cut down and burned away and crops are grown in its place until the area is deemed fallow, at which point farmers move to new areas. These subsistence practices call for the agro-ecological integration of multiple elements of the landscape—including cropland, forests, waterways, and seas—into a holistic process. Still practiced in similar forms by countless residents of the developing world today, slash-and-burn farming methods, along with other styles of small-scale subsistence agriculture, have hardly been easy rows to hoe, so to speak. The methods place food production at the whim of unpredictable weather patterns, crop and animal diseases, soil fertility and productivity constraints, and external strife and war. Collectively, these dangers have always threatened the ability of subsistence farmers to produce enough food to nourish local and rural communities, while the increasingly urban and global populations of the modern age unequivocally call for more intensive and reliable agricultural strategies.<sup>11</sup>

Food production practices developed in different ways across different regions of the globe, as innovations in plant and animal breeding, irrigation, organic fertilization, and food preservation came as a result of agro-ecological management that was specific to varied locales. Still, the fundamentals of agricultural practice remained mostly stable over the course of many centuries. It was starting in earnest around the fifteenth century that the development of cities, colonial expansion, increased trade, and technological advances in both agriculture and transportation began to shift this state of affairs. In the centuries to follow, exploitative European imperialism, which depended on slave-based agricultural labor as a foundational element of its economic base, pushed agriculture toward a new model of capitalist agro-industrialism.<sup>12</sup>

As the Industrial Revolution took hold in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, proponents of “scientific agriculture” in Europe sought to maximize agricultural production while using less land and fewer farmworkers. Through empirical experimentation and technological innovation, they worked to improve the efficiency of tools, provide better irrigation, and select and breed crops and animals that would yield more productivity. However,

as Europe and its colonial agro-industrial outposts began to specialize crop development and increase yields on wide swaths of land—abandoning a tradition of farming systems that had integrated all elements of the natural landscape—problems of soil fertility became paramount.<sup>13</sup>

It was at this time that advances in chemistry came into the purview of food production and an emerging capitalist agribusiness. Agriculture became a specific subfield for scientists and economists in Europe, in the developing powerhouse of the United States, and around the world. Increasingly intensive agricultural practices were seen as imperative for the advancement of nineteenth century technological progress, a way to finally eliminate the long-standing dangers of hunger for growing population centers while raising the standards of living for all. The introduction of nitrogen-enriched inorganic fertilizers, petroleum-based pesticides, and plants bred to optimally coexist in a landscape with these new chemical innovations laid the foundation for what is now often referred to as “conventional” or “traditional” agriculture. When considering the arc of agricultural history, however, it is clear that these adjectives are hardly appropriate labels, given that such a radical transformation had taken place.<sup>14</sup>

The push toward intensification would only grow more central to agricultural practices in the coming years. In the twentieth century, state-led development projects established during the Cold War touted further modernization of agriculture as the key to saving the bustling world from widespread hunger. Building on the ideology of intensive cultivation that had developed in the West in earlier centuries, this Green Revolution in agriculture was characterized by the industrialization of farm inputs and the massive application of petrochemical fertilizers and other chemical processes. Post-World War II, chemical corporations that had previously developed biocides as potential biological warfare agents were able to shift their productive capacity from waging war against foreign enemies to waging war against weeds and pests. In the immediate post-war years, these corporations and their partners in government successfully advanced a narrative that such natural nuisances, if not dealt with, would stand in the way of agricultural abundance, consumer freedom, and the long-term elimination of global hunger.<sup>15</sup>

In many ways, industrial agriculture in this post-war period provided a basis for the development and growth of modern global civilization as we now know it. The introduction of nitrogen fertilizers, pesticides, and insecticides boosted global food production to unprecedented levels. Concurrently,

global population growth accelerated from approximately 1 billion in 1800, to 3 billion in 1960, to 6 billion in 1999, to over 7 billion at the time of this writing (and the number is always rising). The increasingly intensive food production of the last several centuries proved to be a response to, as well as a trigger for, the ever-growing trends in global population with which we have become accustomed.<sup>16</sup>

What, then, became of the great promises of the Green Revolution in industrial agriculture? In wealthy nations like the United States, the Green Revolution's most clear accomplishment was in the domain of consumer purchasing opportunities. The heretofore unfathomable scale and relative consistency of industrial agriculture allowed for the development of modern-day supermarkets and produce markets, as strawberries became available in the wintertime and tomatoes began to look identical from grocer to grocer. Combined with scientific advances in transportation and chemical-based food preservation, industrialization also made possible the growth of massive industries in the production and sale of processed, fast, and convenient foods. Make no mistake—the scope and reliability of food availability across the developed world today is an inarguably remarkable break from the millenniums-long history of human society. Additionally, on account of Green Revolution technology and economies of scale, the food delivered to largely urban consumer populations has come to be sourced from shrinking rural communities in which fewer and fewer people are actually engaged in farming occupations, allowing more of the populace to pursue other nonagricultural lifestyles and professions.

When it came to the developing world—those global regions in which poverty was increasingly concentrated in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries—for a time, mechanization, industrialization, and chemicalization demonstrated some success in tackling the great, enduring challenges of hunger and malnutrition. In sheer numbers, the world began to reliably produce a volume of crops that could provide populations worldwide with sufficient caloric intake. Following the Green Revolution, several decades in the latter part of the 1900s witnessed decreases in the overall percentage of global citizens who experienced hunger. However, with global populations still rising, the Green Revolution hardly eliminated hunger, a fact that remains clear to the present day. Indeed, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations has estimated that, during the years from 2010 to 2014, somewhere between 925 million and 805 million people did not have enough food to eat, with 98 percent of those people residing in developing nations.

Many more suffer from micronutrient vitamin and mineral deficiencies due to lack of diversity in their diets.<sup>17</sup>

What is at the root of this paradox of agricultural abundance and stability, on one hand, and hunger and inequity, on the other? In the wake of the Green Revolution, widespread poverty, inadequate food distribution, geopolitical power imbalances, and a market-driven global agricultural system that emphasized the production of a limited set of commodity crops ensured that the promise of feeding the world would remain unfulfilled. As scholar-activists Eric Holt-Gimenez and Raj Patel have described, “The overlapping histories of development, the Green Revolution, Northern subsidies, structural adjustment and free trade agreements constitute an agrarian saga of global proportions and helps to explain why poverty and overproduction—not scarcity and overpopulation—are the main causes of hunger in the world” (25).<sup>18</sup> This paradox demonstrates that the key question of whether or not humanity could someday produce enough food to feed an ever-growing global population does not sufficiently engage with the challenges that characterize the food system in the age of neoliberalism. Instead, as society has been forced to grapple with the realities of inequitable allocations of risk, questions of justice have been brought to the fore.

## RISK AND INJUSTICE IN THE INDUSTRIAL FOOD SYSTEM

The networked actors of the food system today are required to engage with a historically novel set of economic, environmental, and public health risks. Indeed, crises in the contemporary food system are in many ways typical of what scholars Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens, and others have termed “world risk society.” “The threats and uncertainties in question,” Beck wrote, “in contrast to earlier eras, are not the result of the errors of modernization but of its *successes*” (7, emphasis in original).<sup>19</sup> The newfound, self-generated risks that have emerged bring with them local and global implications, and they involve complex systems in their long-term management. Still, just as these risks have emerged, so too have a set of heterogeneous social-movement formations that, through varying means and on the basis of diverse sets of philosophies, have attempted to allay the risks that industrialization in the food system has engendered.

It is useful to think of contemporary risk in the food system as coalescing around three intersecting conceptual areas. First, there are economic and

occupational concerns—these issues are fundamentally grounded in the widespread corporate consolidation that has come to characterize the food system, and such dynamics have implications for how power is exercised and exploitation is enacted across the globe. Second, there are environmental and nonhuman animal concerns—notably, the practices of large-scale and chemically intensive industrial agriculture have proven detrimental to the well-being of natural resources and the health of nonhuman life. Third, there are dietary and public health concerns—a host of chronic diet-related diseases and food safety and access issues have joined hunger and malnutrition as central nutritive challenges that characterize the contemporary age.

From an economic perspective, buffered by market-based governmental policies and subsidies that support monopolistic growth, large-scale capitalist agribusiness has enforced widespread consolidation in the global food industry over the last several decades. A few major multinationals aggressively control the majority of global food production, processing, and distribution. In nearly every sector—including soybean processing (85 percent global control by top four firms), beef slaughter (82 percent global control by top four firms), wet corn milling (87 percent global control by top four firms), broiler chicken slaughter (53 percent global control by top four firms), and food retail (64 percent US market control by top twenty firms)—competition has decreased while market power has become more concentrated. An “hour-glass” picture of agricultural development has taken shape, such that, in the words of scholar Terry Marsden, “thousands of farmers feed millions of consumers through an increasingly corporately controlled system that involves webs of interconnected input suppliers, food processors and retailers” (138).<sup>20</sup> Names such as Monsanto, Dupont, Archer Daniels Midland, Cargill, ConAgra, Tyson, and Wal-Mart dominate decision-making from seed to table.<sup>21</sup> Bolstered by powerful public relations apparatuses and often unquestioned by major media systems, these dominant actors tell the story that the food system is a market just like any other, one that provides the greatest benefits when private interests are free to pursue economic gain.

Flexing this technological, economic, and ideological muscle, the United States has dominated North America and much of the global food system with a market-oriented model of agricultural production and distribution.<sup>22</sup> Consolidated corporate industries exercise significant power in shaping and marginalizing the practices of small US farmers, while the exploitation of low-wage and migrant farmworkers has become a normative reality across much of the American system of labor.<sup>23</sup> Many small- and medium-sized

farming operations across the globe, meanwhile, have found themselves in serious debt to corporate interests and are often put out of business. A rash of farmer suicides in India and collective resistance from farmers in nations as diverse as South Korea, Guatemala, and the Philippines points to the ways in which global corporate agribusiness has not had the best interest of local farmers in mind.<sup>24</sup>

A host of environmental risks have emerged in concert with these economic shifts. Ecological principles related to the long-term health of the land and concerns for biodiversity and public health have been fundamentally marginalized by a market-based ideology that idealizes a commitment to economic efficiency and technological innovation above all else.<sup>25</sup> Globalized industrial food production relies on heavy inputs of petrochemical fertilizers, pesticides, and a monocultural growing process, as single commodity crops—mostly wheat, soy, and corn—are grown over large areas of land to feed into global markets. Modern agriculture has developed processes in which the same piece of land can be used more frequently, increasing the specialization of productive crops in order to improve yields and ease the processes of mechanization. As former US Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz infamously described during his tenure in the 1970s, the mantra of this strategy is to “get big or get out.”<sup>26</sup>

Proponents of a second Green Revolution, characterized by the introduction of genetically modified (GM) foods and touted by multinational agricultural conglomerates, have promised that biotechnology could reduce agricultural chemical use and further increase yields. Essentially, the story told by agribusiness corporations and their allies in government and philanthropy has been that genetic modification will finally solve the interminable task of “feeding the world” through environmentally sound methods.<sup>27</sup> Some of the most vocal critics of this approach warn that the production and consumption of these “ Frankenfoods ” will lead to outright environmental devastation and the emergence of unknown cancers and other health risks. The reality is that both of these perspectives remain based on incomplete bodies of evidence. Decades after GM products entered the food supply, there remains little credible data to demonstrate that the worst direct health outcomes detractors asserted would inevitably emerge have actually taken shape. Yet GM proponents consistently hype the limited successes of targeted agricultural interventions while overlooking the very real social and environmental risks that remain embedded in their strategy. In reality, GM agriculture has done little to actually increase agricultural yields, and its proliferation has reduced seed biodiversity while increasing monoculture. Meanwhile,

a growing body of evidence demonstrates that, when supported through investment and competent management, diversified organic farming practices can be just as successful in boosting yields as chemically intensive or GM strategies—while also supporting local economies and promoting sustainable livelihoods. Within this landscape of debate about the merits of GM foods, perhaps the clearest conclusion is that its widespread introduction has continued to consolidate power into the hands of fewer and fewer major agribusiness interests.<sup>28</sup>

While the long-term benefits or drawbacks of GM products with respect to the environment remain unknown, we do know that industrialization in general has had serious negative ramifications for the long-term viability of soil fertility, pest management, ecological diversity, pollution control, and broader environmental sustainability. Emissions of greenhouse gases from industrialized agriculture, combined with drastic land use changes, have emerged as central drivers of climate change. The current practices in food production are ultimately causing fresh water, available land, and valuable energy inputs to rapidly disappear at the same time as the global population rises and demand increases. In addition, nutrient leaks from herbicides and fertilizers have been associated with the deterioration of fisheries, the development of “dead zones” in bodies of water like the Gulf of Mexico, and widespread soil erosion. As global demand for animal-derived products has skyrocketed, industrial farm animal production (IFAP)—commonly known as factory farming—has proven particularly environmentally devastating. IFAP has been identified as a leading emitter of the greenhouse gas emissions that contribute to climate change, while massive amounts of waste and agricultural runoff stand as a leading cause of air pollution, water pollution, and soil degradation. Additionally, concerns related to animal cruelty within IFAP are of course worthy of consideration in their own right.<sup>29</sup>

All of these various environmental concerns remain intricately linked to occupational and environmental justice risks. Low-income and migrant farmworkers have commonly been exposed to a variety of harmful and disease-causing chemicals, while those employed in industrialized animal production have been forced to operate at hazardous and exhausting speeds. In the United States and around the world, these laborers generally have little access to legal recourse to remedy the exploitation they face at the hands of major corporate players.<sup>30</sup>

Food consumers face their own set of challenges. In the United States, for instance, 14.3 percent of households (17.5 million) were “food insecure” at

some time during 2013, meaning that their access to adequate food was limited at some point by a lack of money or other resources.<sup>31</sup> Although increasingly under attack by so-called budget reformers, an emergency food safety net remains tenuously in place, preventing the type of widespread hunger that still exists in the developing world from becoming a part of the fabric of American life. As I mentioned in the introduction, over 46 million low-income Americans received food-purchasing support through the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as the Food Stamp Program) in 2014. As another indicator, in the 2012–2013 school year, 21.5 million children received free or reduced-price lunches as part of the National School Lunch Program.<sup>32</sup>

Ultimately, the story that tends to grab the most attention in public health and popular media circles is not necessarily the lack of overall foods available to Americans but rather the types of foods that have come to dominate the shelves of grocery and convenience stores across the nation. Minimally processed whole foods, such as fruits and vegetables, are generally agreed to be health promoting, but they make less money for the corporations involved in their production, distribution, and sales.<sup>33</sup> By contrast, ultra-processed foods, such as breads, meat products, sugary snacks, and frozen dinners—which have as their foundation oils, fats, flours, starches, and sugars and are then combined with complex additives to make them more palatable and habit forming—are, as medical nutrition researcher Carlos Monteiro has described, “typically branded, distributed internationally and globally, heavily advertised and marketed, and very profitable” (730). While aspects of the science behind their contentions remain contested, researchers and public health officials have attributed a significant portion of the rise in chronic diseases like hypertension, coronary heart disease, diabetes, and obesity to diet, linking the risk of contracting these diseases to the increased consumption of these poor-quality processed foods.<sup>34</sup>

In the face of growing criticism, the story told by dominant powers in food production and processing is that they are simply feeding consumer demand. There is plenty of evidence to suggest, however, that they have actually worked strategically to create a demand that must be fed.<sup>35</sup> In the name of offering “cheap food” to the consuming public, government has directly and indirectly subsidized the production of commodity grains—namely wheat, corn, and soy—that form the foundation of processed foods and animal products. Meanwhile, massive industries in food science and marketing have sprung up in order to encourage greater consumption. As food scholar

Marion Nestle has described, the combination of food advertising, convenience, larger portions, and the gustatory components of habit-forming processed foods, in conjunction with “systematic, pervasive and unrelenting” lobbying efforts, have ensured that more and more of these foods are purchased and eaten (26).<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, federal assistance initiatives like SNAP and the National School Lunch Program have proved to be dumping grounds where the worst of the worst low-quality processed foods are able to find captive consumer markets, while the consolidated food retail sector has provided another perfect outlet for ultra-processed food exchanges to take place.<sup>37</sup> This American-made model is now spreading across the developing world, where a so-called nutrition transition has wedded increased industrialization with greater consumption of ultra-processed foods and the subsequent appearance of chronic and degenerative diet-related diseases.<sup>38</sup> As sociologist Michael Carolan has explained, while this system may create foods that are objectively “cheap” at the check-out line, when we take into account the great economic, environmental, and public health costs that they eventually bring about, the food system can hardly be seen to produce an abundance of food that is truly “affordable.”<sup>39</sup>

This is not to say that processed foods do not bring some valuable levels of pleasure and convenience to eaters or that, in moderation, they can likely be part of a healthy diet. It must also be reiterated that, for many privileged global citizens today, the reliability of food availability and the diversity in eating options is undoubtedly greater than at any other time in the course of human history. What this admission brings to light, however, is the striking inequity that remains embedded in the food system, both between the developed and developing world and within developed nations themselves. In the United States, as an operative example, diet-related diseases affect residents of all social classes and ethnic backgrounds. Yet, as has already been established, low-income communities and communities of color are far more likely to live inside food deserts in which fast-food restaurants and unhealthy, cheap, ultra-processed options are far easier to find than fresh and affordable minimally processed whole foods. Residents who are surrounded by these poor food environments have been consistently found to have less health-promoting diets and higher rates of chronic disease and to suffer from a host of other health disparities.<sup>40</sup>

It is important to emphasize, however, that the local food environment *alone* does not provide a direct link between food consumption and health outcomes, as is sometimes interpreted. More plausible than a one-to-one ratio,

it seems, is that poor food environments in the United States and elsewhere contribute to a process of what has been termed *deprivation amplification*. That is, problems related to food access amplify the economic, environmental, and social disadvantages already faced by low-income communities and communities of color.<sup>41</sup> A host of intersecting concerns—related to poverty, the built environment, environmental injustice, education, racial bias in the criminal justice system, and a lack of economic opportunity, among other factors—intersect with food issues to influence health and well-being.<sup>42</sup> The chronic disease rates that have been connected to food deserts, then, are unlikely to be solved by simply adding a few more grocery stores or limiting the presence of fast food restaurants in such neighborhoods.<sup>43</sup> Instead, if food access initiatives hope to achieve their health promotion aims, they must be included as part of a more systemic movement for sustainable social change.

#### ALTERNATIVE FOOD MOVEMENTS AND THE TURN TO COMMUNITY

The dynamics of capital-driven, industrialized food production exponentially compound the landscape of risk faced by the already marginalized and exploited citizens of the developed and developing worlds alike. In the face of these unjust practices, recent decades have seen a host of local and global actors emerge as a productive counterforce. Activists have worked hard to inject new narratives into the food system conversation, while simultaneously constructing new networks that aim to advance food system sustainability and sustenance. In the United States and elsewhere, these new social movement activities have often been referred to as the “alternative food movement.”<sup>44</sup> Yet, as the prominent journalist Michael Pollan has pointed out, it is probably more accurate to describe the emergence of plural “food movements,” since these efforts are “unified as yet by little more than the recognition that industrial food production is in need of reform because its social/environmental/public health/animal welfare/gastronomic costs are too high.”<sup>45</sup> There is great diversity, in fact, with respect to the philosophical foundations, motivations, focus areas, goals, and strategies employed by the number of individuals and organizations who could be considered as engaged in these “alternative food movements.”

Try as one might, this diversity makes it extremely challenging to determine where, exactly, the dominant structures of the food system end and the

food movements begin. As Eric Holt-Giménez has described, a variety of initiatives for food system reform and improvement have actually been introduced by members of the “corporate food regime” itself. There is a clear recognition among many neoliberal power brokers—including major agrifood corporations, financial institutions, and the US government, as well as global humanitarian and social service institutions like the United Nation’s Food and Agriculture Organization and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation—that sustainably feeding growing global populations is a vital challenge of the twenty-first century. Still, these groups tend to fall short of being true alternatives to current practices. Instead, the story they tell—one that is amplified through powerful media and institutional channels—is that some combination of technological solutions, trade liberalization, food aid, and individualized consumer initiatives will best provide sustainable goods and services for all. Any transformation of dominant social structures or cultural values—that is, any shift that emphasizes how inequity in the food system has been shaped by legacies of exploitation and systemic injustice—is deemed unnecessary, if considered at all. As I will continue to explore throughout this book, alternative food movements remain in many ways linked to the structures and cultures of the corporate food regime. However, their efforts follow a distinctly different narrative—the global industrial food system, food movement activists argue, is fundamentally flawed, unsustainable, and in need of a drastic overhaul.<sup>46</sup>

Perhaps the most prominent food movement organization in the developing world, La Vía Campesina (The Peasant Way), serves as an illustrative example of how this global opposition has coalesced. A coalition of grassroots farmers’ organizations, La Vía Campesina was founded in 1993 and has developed into a leading voice for peasant farmers in global agricultural debates. Connected by collective organizing and the power of digital communication technologies, their work aims to advance what they call *food sovereignty*. Similar in ideology to the food justice approach, food sovereignty advocates tend to be centered in the Global South and are overtly radical in their critique of neoliberalism and its influences. Members of La Vía Campesina promote a sustainable and culturally oriented agriculture that “ensures that the rights to use and manage lands, territories, water, seeds, livestock and biodiversity are in the hands of those who produce food and not of the corporate sector.”<sup>47</sup> Far from being a singular and cohesive entity, though, the organization itself is actually made up of approximately 150 local and national organizations, representing 200 million farmers in 70 countries across all continents. Each

member group must therefore develop strategies that respond to its own specific set of conditions, opportunities, and constraints.<sup>48</sup>

Like *La Vía Campesina*, much of the food movement energy in the Global South has emerged from grassroots radicalism—activists advocate for the dismantling of corporate agrifood’s monopoly power, call for redistributive land reform, and seek a revival of agroecologically managed peasant agriculture. In the Global North, food movements have tended to be driven by political progressives, who work in pursuit of their own culturally derived visions of sustainability, equity, and justice. As geographer Rachel Slocum has described, the target of progressive activists in the United States has been “the conventional food system that privileges corporate agriculture, commodity subsidies, trans-continental shipping and foods high in fats, salt and sugars” (522).<sup>49</sup>

Recent decades have witnessed the creation of countless initiatives that respond to the varied economic, environmental, and nutrition-related risks of industrialized food in the United States. While some progressive food movement activists have concentrated their attention on advocating for alternative food policy on national and international scales, a larger number have focused on the entrepreneurial development of alternative food projects and programs. Many of these projects explicitly advance the interests of local farmers, as farmers’ markets, community-supported agriculture arrangements, and “buy local” campaigns have become commonplace across much of the nation. Other projects remain attuned primarily to environmental concerns, as advocates champion agro-ecological production initiatives, work to improve soil fertility and plant biodiversity, promote organic foods, and provide alternatives to factory farming. A host of school and other locally focused projects that are committed to using nutrition education, gardening, and farm-to-table initiatives to tackle the challenges of chronic diet-related disease and obesity have been implemented. Gastronomically minded “foodies,” represented by numerous local groups and national entities like Slow Food USA, have worked to highlight the pleasures of eating gourmet and culturally diverse cuisines. Other efforts remain grounded in a vision of greater justice in the food system, focused on advancing the rights and labor conditions of local and global farmworkers, building cooperative ownership in food retail, investing in healthy food projects in underserved communities, and promoting youth and economic development in historically marginalized neighborhoods of color. Many of these projects, of course, combine various elements of these intersecting agendas into their work, and they have

increasingly come together with actors in local government, business, and civil society to participate in collaborative bodies such as Food Policy Councils.<sup>50</sup>

Meanwhile, several prominent figures have garnered media attention to bring the story of alternative food to broader audiences. First Lady Michelle Obama catapulted nutrition issues onto the national stage with the launch of her Let's Move initiative in 2010. Dedicated to "solving the problem of obesity in a generation," Let's Move endeavored to provide information to parents and facilitate public-private partnerships to foster healthy food environments in homes, schools, and communities.<sup>51</sup> Around the same time, British celebrity chef Jamie Oliver launched *Jamie Oliver's Food Revolution* on the ABC television network, hoping to "create a strong, sustainable movement to educate every child about food, inspire families to cook again and empower people everywhere to fight obesity."<sup>52</sup> *New York Times* columnist Mark Bittman, food studies scholar Marion Nestle, and Chez Panisse restaurant founder Alice Waters are among a number of prominent public intellectuals who are regularly granted high-profile media spaces in order to critique the food industry and offer suggestions for change. Several successful food system documentaries—including *Super Size Me* (2004), *King Corn* (2007), and *Forks Over Knives* (2011)—have also received widespread distribution and acclaim. Perhaps the most influential work in this genre has been *Food, Inc.* (2009), Robert Kenner's Academy Award-nominated film, which prominently featured the perspectives of Michael Pollan, author of *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, and *Fast Food Nation's* Eric Schlosser. The film took aim at the marginalizing power of corporate agriculture, highlighted the plight of low-income urban food consumers and rural farmers, peered inside confined animal feeding operations, and pointed to processed foods as villains in America's battle against chronic disease. Still, the film ended on an optimistic note, urging viewers to "vote to change" the food system "three times a day" (at every meal) and insisting that "you can change the world with every bite."

Taken together, this media storytelling has often been lauded as a game-changing wake-up call for the American public and the food industry alike. The call to "vote with your fork" has undoubtedly become a familiar refrain within progressive food circles.<sup>53</sup> For a variety of philosophically distinct proponents for food system change—from Michelle Obama on the reformist side to food co-op retail markets on the more radical side—individual consumption has been consistently lauded as a valuable entry point for activism

and empowerment. This rhetorical and policy strategy, however, has not gone without criticism.

Indeed, on the political right, governmental and public support for particular food purchasing decisions has often been derided as a “nanny state” approach, one that encroaches upon individual liberty and pushes the nation toward irrational elitism.<sup>54</sup> On the other side of the political spectrum, critics from the left have been consistently disappointed that food reform initiatives do not go far enough. Changing individual consumer habits, they argue, may be valuable for one’s personal health and peace of mind, but can it really serve to reshape our broken food system? And, given the preponderance of alternative food movement spokespersons who come from upper-income backgrounds—sometimes with close professional ties to the corporate food regime itself—do their consumer-oriented solutions really reflect the voices, needs, and desires of those Americans who daily experience food injustice?<sup>55</sup>

It is my contention that an important element is often missing from all sides of this “vote with your fork” debate. Notably, the conversation tends to hover around the limits and potential of *individual* action in transforming the food system, but in doing so, it overlooks the parallel role played by the *community* in these popular initiatives. In chapter 1 of this book, I explained how the logic of neoliberal governmentality has encouraged the ascendance of a shadow state of third-sector organizations, those nonprofit groups that promote health and wellness at the community level in the United States. Above all else, the action of the American alternative food movement has been characterized by the rise of nonprofit organizations with this type of community-based orientation. Indeed, these efforts have not only urged individuals to use consumer power as a force for health and sustainability but also consistently emphasized the importance of cultivating family, community-based, and institutional environments that support these “good food” decisions.

The term *community food security*, for instance, has been coined to encapsulate this perspective. It is a concept defined by food scholars Michael Hamm and Anne Bellows as “a situation in which all community residents obtain a safe, culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet through a sustainable food system that maximizes community self-reliance and social justice.”<sup>56</sup> From the late 1980s up through the present, a new funding infrastructure has emerged as a means of advancing these community food security aims. While some community food projects have been designed as wholly or partially self-sustaining through entrepreneurial revenue-generation, most depend upon

significant support from public, private, and foundation-based grants and donations. Advocacy from a coalition of alternative food movement practitioners, for instance, led to the inclusion of the USDA Community Food Projects Competitive Grants Program in the 1996 federal Farm Bill. Offering multiyear grants of up to \$250,000 to organizations, the initiative has provided millions of dollars for community-based food and agriculture projects, and it has also shaped the direction of community food activism through its training and technical assistance programs.<sup>57</sup> The W.K. Kellogg Foundation—with its \$7.3 billion endowment—has emerged as another key funder, with “food and community” established as a signature focus area in its broader pursuit of family and child health promotion. By providing funds to strengthen community and school-based food systems and fostering collaboration across networks of community-based food movement practitioners, the foundation works to promote “a nation where all children, families and communities have equitable access to good food.”<sup>58</sup> As the movement’s profile has grown, community food security initiatives have also relied upon the funding and technical support of countless local and municipal government authorities, donations, and pro bono assistance from private philanthropists and volunteers and partnerships with businesses and food companies as part of corporate social responsibility campaigns.

As diverse as the alternative food movement networks of the early twenty-first century have come to be, they have found widespread appeal in a narrative that champions the value of community-led approaches blended with some entrepreneurial initiative and smart individual decision-making on the path to food system transformation. Given what we know about the challenges of the contemporary food system, however, it begs the question—does this community-based approach do enough to combat the structural power of the corporate food system? Or does its reformist scope and vision ultimately reinforce the tendencies of an exploitative, unsustainable, and unjust status quo?

### COMMUNITY-BASED FOOD JUSTICE

As alternative food movements have picked up steam in the United States, a number of sympathetic critics have called into question the capacity of community food security projects to make any real dent in the dominant practices of the food system. The food justice movement has emerged largely in

response to this, rooted in two intersecting critiques of progressive food activism—the first critique cultural, the second structural. From the cultural perspective, progressive initiatives have been criticized for what scholars David Goodman, Melanie DuPuis, and Michael Goodman have deemed an “unreflexive localism.” That is to say, in scholarship and practice, the value and capacity of local action has been romanticized as offering a utopian vision for food system change, one free of thorny social justice concerns or imbalances of power.<sup>59</sup>

In truth, progressive food movement projects have been shown to disproportionately benefit and serve the interests of those who are already economically advantaged and, most often, white communities. In whose neighborhoods, for instance, are new farmers’ markets or community gardens being constructed, and based upon whose knowledge and experiences are nutrition education programs being devised? The argument follows that alternative food movements are permeated by a normative whiteness and an ethos of “color blindness.” Projects are too often initiated and controlled by well-meaning but uninformed privileged whites, and their programs consistently ignore racial and cultural difference with respect to inequities in the food system—an ignorance that prohibits such initiatives from achieving transformative and sustainable goals. In this reading, alternative food initiatives have not done enough to make sure that residents and activists in low-income communities, particularly people of color and residents with other marginalized cultural identities, are in control of the conceptualization and management of these projects from the start.<sup>60</sup>

The structural critique takes on the political and economic foundations of alternative food movements. Notably, the commitment to notions of local entrepreneurial economic development and individualized consumer choice that remains at the heart of many progressive projects is criticized as limiting at best and regressive at worst. Reflecting what Julie Guthman has called a “fairly delimited conception of the politics of the possible” (277), such practices have been seen to reify market-based solutions and bolster a neoliberal ideal that absolves government and policymakers of responsibility. From this perspective, these initiatives create uneven and spurious solutions at the community level while downplaying the need for transformative structural change across the entire food system.<sup>61</sup>

The food justice response, therefore, has taken shape as a counter not only to the injustice of the industrial food system but also to the structural and cultural deficiencies embedded in the alternative food movement itself. At a

basic level, movements for food justice expand on “environmental justice” activism that initially developed as reaction to the limits of environmentalism in the 1980s. Traditional environmentalists were accused of being disconnected from the environmental hazards that everyday people—and particularly people of color—faced in those spaces where residents “live, work, and play.”<sup>62</sup> In the twenty-first century, food justice efforts have built upon this concept to include concerns over places where residents “live, work, play, and eat.”<sup>63</sup>

Universalized concerns over racial equity, economic opportunity, and community-based self-determination are at the root of the food justice approach, and the concept has been applied to a variety of causes across the domains of food production, distribution, and consumption. In *More Than Just Food*, I focus on a central community-based strain of this broader food justice perspective. In urban America, food justice has proved particularly resonant as a framework for guiding alternative food movement practices that are established in historically marginalized, low-income communities of color. While a variety of community-based alternative food projects have operated in these neighborhoods for some time—school gardens, urban farms, community-supported agriculture projects, and nutrition education programs among them—food justice has expanded the narratives and networks of these initiatives. What I refer to as “community-based food justice” groups have blended alternative food movement organizing with critical perspectives from the environmental justice movement and a historical understanding of struggles against economic and racial exploitation.

Since at least the early twenty-first century, new people-of-color-led community-based food justice groups have formed, some as extensions of already existing community-based nonprofit organizations, others created specifically to tackle food injustice in their local areas. CSU is one such group—deeply connected to its community of practice, it is also linked through formal partnerships, shared funding sources, and a host of informal personal and organizational exchanges with other community-based food justice groups from across the United States and around the world. Together, these groups are bound by a mission to use food as a vehicle to advance broader projects related to social justice, economic empowerment, and urban sustainability, using local food organizing to combat legacies of discrimination and inequity within their own communities. Each group brings with it a set of contemporary and historical particularities, shaped by the personal and cultural backgrounds of its membership, constituency, and geography.<sup>64</sup>

For instance, since delving into food justice organizing, CSU has built connections with groups like the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network, an organization that has focused since 2006 on building “community self-reliance” and works to “change our consciousness about food” through urban agriculture projects, local policy development, and cooperative buying.<sup>65</sup> Another networked peer of CSU, the Milwaukee-based Growing Power, has emerged as a leader in creating jobs through promoting local food systems, guided by a mission to “transform communities by supporting people from diverse backgrounds and the environments in which they live through the development of Community Food Systems.” Other networked connections have been forged by CSU in the Los Angeles area with groups like Inglewood’s Social Justice Learning Institute, an organization that uses critical food system education and agricultural projects as a way of furthering its mission of “improving the education, health, and well-being of youth and communities of color by empowering them to enact social change through research, training, and community mobilization.”<sup>66</sup> In recent years, direct opportunities for discussion and collaboration between these and other groups has helped the food justice movement grow and evolve. Participation in a variety of conferences and events—including the W.K. Kellogg Foundation’s Food and Community Gathering, Growing Power’s Growing Food and Justice Initiative, and the Rooted in Community network’s annual summit (which is detailed in chapter 4)—has allowed for local, national, and transnational consciousness-raising and strategizing on food justice concerns to be sustained over time.

While community-based food justice organizations are still a minority in the broader landscape of American alternative food movements, their numbers have risen exponentially in recent years, while the possibilities of these people-of-color-led food system initiatives have been championed by a host of scholars and practitioners. To some, food justice has signaled that a new type of movement has the ability to transcend the histories of white supremacy that have characterized the oppressive dominant food system and permeated the alternative food movement itself. As Malik Yakini, a founder of the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network, articulated, the status quo of white-led programming “suggests that their worldview should universally be accepted, that their standards of behavior are best and that their theories of change should define how social movements proceed.” He added, “we should defend the right to define what is best for our communities based on our understanding of the historical

factors that have created our circumstances and on our own lived experience.<sup>67</sup>

Others emphasize the potentially powerful capacity of these efforts to move activism beyond the logics of neoliberal capitalism en route to food system transformation. Focusing on the work of Mesoamerican and Latin@ farmer groups in the United States, anthropologist Teresa M. Mares has argued that both food justice and the related food sovereignty movement “transcend geophysical boundaries to challenge the political and market-based structures that are responsible for food injustices” (35).<sup>68</sup> In a piece they wrote together, Mares and fellow anthropologist Devon G. Peña offered the case of the South Central Farmers of Los Angeles, a group of mostly Latin@ immigrants whose urban farm was destroyed after a lengthy property rights battle with a developer. Despite this injustice, the South Central Farmers persisted and were able to maintain an eighty-acre farm in a nearby county. Championing the resistant and revolutionary potential of people-of-color-led food activism, the researchers argued that the practice and scholarship of alternative food movements should do more to “focus on the possibility that autonomous food cultivation practices enable the families and communities working in these landscapes to create and sustain decommodified relationships to food” (205).<sup>69</sup>

For some sympathetic critics of alternative food movements, however, food justice has not demonstrated itself to be particularly transformative at all. From the perspective of these critics, although the movement’s emphasis on racial inequity and class consciousness has certainly provided a valuable response to the heretofore dominant whiteness of alternative food practices, food justice is still limited by many of the same neoliberal tendencies as its more mainstream counterparts. Critical geographer Julie Guthman, for one, has argued that food justice remains constrained by its being embedded in market-driven systems, by its reliance on community-based educational and entrepreneurial strategies, and by its often-isolated focus on the plight of urban consumers at the expense of other injustices in the food system. “Precisely because social movement possibilities are so constrained by neoliberal logics of the market,” Guthman argued, “many dedicated activists barely see other ways forward besides educating people to the qualities of food and bringing good food to low-income people in acts of charity or through nonprofit subsidies in the name of health and empowerment” (154).<sup>70</sup> Alison Hope Alkon levied a similar critique in her ethnographic analysis of the West Oakland Farmers Market, a green economic project

whose African American participants consistently pointed to the example of the Black Panther Party as an inspiration for their community-based initiatives. Since the Black Panther Party was, in Alkon's interpretation, "radically opposed to capitalism," it was an inherent contradiction to map what was a historically socialist agenda onto a new market-driven initiative. The social justice potential of farmers markets, Alkon argued, is severely constrained, since "the broader context of neoliberalization pushes activists toward adopting green economic strategies, even as they profess visions of justice and sustainability that are strongly rooted in anticapitalist histories and traditions" (146).<sup>71</sup>

The chapters to follow engage with the tensions that are brought to the fore in these debates. In one sense, I remain indebted to the scholars and activists who have articulated the ways in which knowledge and power is deeply embedded—and too often overlooked—within historically marginalized communities of color, those who could and should help lead the charge toward sustainable community change. With that said, I am also skeptical of rhetoric that situates community-based food justice efforts as fully "autonomous" or "decommodified" movements for food system transformation. As Guthman and Alkon's critiques intimate, in the time that the concept of food justice has increased in salience, so too has the movement's interaction with market-based logics, governmental structures, and philanthropic initiatives—a topic that is explored in depth in subsequent sections of this book. The Detroit Black Community Food Security Network's acquisition of a \$750,000 multiyear grant from the Kellogg Foundation—funds that will be used, in part, to create a retail co-op—and the organization's involvement in the City of Detroit's Food Policy Council serve as operative examples of this.<sup>72</sup> Additionally, although it was glossed over in Mares and Peña's account of the South Central Farm, mentioned above, the South Central Farmers received substantial assistance from a variety of external allies—including pro bono legal support, the media advocacy of actress Darryl Hannah, an irrigation system installed by a local Toyota dealer, and the sixty acres of land that was gifted to the farmers by an anonymous donor, which is today being used to support the farm's nonprofit social enterprise business.<sup>73</sup> Similarly, as chapter 5 of this book details, the Black Panther Party, while anticapitalist in its initial ideological foundation, over time built relationships with a host of Black entrepreneurs and wealthy white capitalists. Such partnerships call into question Alkon's claim that the organization was "radically opposed to capitalism" throughout its history.<sup>74</sup> Therefore, in this networked context,

terms like “autonomous” and “decommodified” hardly seem to characterize the complex dynamics at play.

By no means do I make such points to denigrate or foreclose the potential of community-based, people-of-color-led food justice activism. Quite the contrary, while I take seriously those critics who believe food justice’s relationship to neoliberalism constrains its social change capacity, I also push back against the tendency to dismiss the potential of those food justice activists who operate “in the shadow of the shadow state” to creatively navigate, and at times overcome these very barriers.<sup>75</sup> Indeed, in the pages of *More Than Just Food*, I advocate for an open-minded perspective that neither romanticizes nor overlooks the capacity of community-based social justice activism. My aim in this work is to understand how food justice actually operates, what potential for social change it represents, and in what ways it is limited in its capacity to promote food system transformation. Ultimately, the story of community-based food justice activism that this book tells is not one of decommodified autonomy nor of outright neoliberal co-optation but rather of ongoing and evolving structural and cultural hybridity. The working principles for sustainable community change, outlined in chapter 1, provide a framework for assessing the extent to which the ideals of community-based food justice can be achieved from within this complicated environment.

. . .

The aim of this chapter was to situate the contemporary movement for community-based food justice in urban America within its proper social, economic, and historical contexts. Tracing the food system from its early agricultural foundations up through the age of industrialization and into the era of biotechnology, I highlighted the networked structures and cultural narratives that have served to define food production, distribution, and consumption through these epochs. Research demonstrates that today’s food system is characterized by an enduring paradox—for some citizens of the world, it is an infrastructure that promotes abundance and nourishment, while for others, it operates as a force of injustice and unsustainability. In the face of this paradox, activists engaged in alternative food movements—working throughout both the developed and developing worlds—have entered public life. Together, they insist that the modern industrialized food system has not lived up to its promise. Yet they do not speak in a unified voice. Motivated by

varied economic, ecological, and nutritional concerns, the diversity of their concerns is matched only by the diversity of their proffered solutions.

*More Than Just Food* highlights a promising movement from within this set of movements. What I refer to as the movement for community-based food justice has emerged in recent years—largely driven by locally focused nonprofit organizations, these groups work to breathe life into urban food deserts while promoting health, equity, justice, and sustainability. Importantly, this movement has taken shape not only in response to the failures of the industrialized food system but also in response to popular American progressive food activism, which has too often ignored issues of race, class, and injustice in its programming and organizing efforts. Advocates for community-based food justice insist that their organizing strategy offers the potential to catalyze social transformation, within historically marginalized urban communities and beyond. Critics of this approach, however—even those who are sympathetic to its social justice aims—have expressed concerns that it is not fully equipped to motivate social change in the age of neoliberalism

CSU and its South Los Angeles community of practice offer particularly valuable sites through which the possibilities and limitations of community-based food justice activism can be ethnographically explored. For one, the warm climate of Southern California offers nearly year-round opportunities for urban agricultural growth. In the early twentieth century, in fact, Los Angeles County was the top agricultural-producing county in the entire nation. While mid-century urbanization pushed intensive food production into other areas of California, Los Angeles remains a top urban agricultural producer today; in 2013, an estimated 1,261 urban agricultural sites existed across Los Angeles County, including 761 school gardens and 118 community gardens.<sup>76</sup>

This agricultural abundance, however, is accompanied by persistent food injustice across the region. Indeed, the “community food security” concept was initially pioneered by researchers and activists in Los Angeles after the widespread civil unrest following the Rodney King verdict in 1992. These events, in the words of a group of urban planning scholars from the University of California, Los Angeles, “shed harsh light on the disparity in services available to Los Angeles’ many communities, a condition replicated in cities across the country,” at the same time as they highlighted the “seeds of innovation which, if cultivated, could grow into a strong and stable base for community food security” (2).<sup>77</sup> In the intervening decades, countless progressive

food projects were developed and deployed across the city, and the Los Angeles Food Policy Council was formed in an attempt to harness the collective power of these efforts. CSU's work is demonstrative of the community-based food justice organizing that has taken shape within this context. With this in mind, the next chapter ethnographically investigates the core of that organization's community organizing practice.