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## Food Sovereignty in Everyday Life: Toward a People-centered Approach to Food Systems

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**ABSTRACT** *This paper proposes a theoretical approach that de-centers ‘food’ in food-related research, placing social life as the point of departure for a critical analysis of food systems and the search for alternatives. Using a relational conception of food as a nexus of multiple, intersecting social-historical processes, a ‘people-centered’ approach illuminates the social elements that can inform resonant and locally inflected strategies for food sovereignty, particularly for urban communities in the USA. Building on theoretical concepts of primitive accumulation, articulation, and everyday life, as well as empirical work with the Chicago-based Healthy Food Hub, this paper explores the relationship between everyday food practices and historical processes of proletarianization as they are produced, reproduced, and contested at multiple conjunctures. In these spaces of contestation, the capacity for diverse communities to re-articulate social relations through everyday food practices could provide a potentially powerful pathway not just to food sovereignty, but an alternative to life under capitalism.*

**Keywords:** food sovereignty, urban agriculture, food systems, cooperatives, African-American communities, Chicago

### Introduction: The Social Lives of Food Systems

The sons and daughters of what used to be here in Pembroke—the largest black farming community north of the Mason–Dixon line—came here and did not want to know how to farm. They did not want to know anything to do with dealing with the land . . . we kept meeting this experience of people being in a lot of pain with the earth. And so we literally buried the pain here . . . not only did we put the pain back into the earth, we also picked up our power, of our relationship with the earth. We have strawberries for love and forgiveness, and calendula for wound healing . . . fellows came from Uganda and Kenya, and they shared in it . . . maybe we can begin to do a global process

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where we'll release our colonialization and our suffering, and regain our power again. (Dr. Jifunza Wright, co-founder, Healthy Food Hub)

In recent years, the terms 'sustainable food', 'food justice', and 'food sovereignty' have entered common parlance in the academic and popular political discourse. The 'perfect storm' of converging economic, ecological, and agrarian crises has affected communities the world over, from peasants in the Global South to poor families in the decaying urban cores of the post-industrial United States. Protests against various aspects of the global capitalist 'food regime' (McMichael, 2005) have animated some of the most high-profile social movements in recent memory.

Many of these movements, as well as the bodies of critical scholarship that inform them, have eloquently demonstrated the failings of the prevailing food system and their relationship to broader socio-economic injustices. Articulating practical alternatives to the system, especially ones that can encompass the varied and seemingly disparate struggles of affected communities, has been less clear. In other words, we know quite well what food justice, food sovereignty, and sustainable food systems are not; what they are, and what transitions to more just and sustainable systems could look like is far more complex and difficult to define in practice.

This paper attempts to look with a fresh perspective at the multifaceted nature of crises in the global food system, aiming to formulate new strategies to address the environmental, social, and political aspects of the broader crisis of which problems in the food system are an integral part. While critical food scholarship and discourses within food movements have mostly concentrated on the 'food' in food systems—the technical, political economic, and social developments that surround food, as the saying goes, from the field to the dining table—this paper proposes a theoretical approach that de-centers 'food' as the focus of study. Instead, it emphasizes everyday practice and social life as the central point of departure for a critical analysis of the industrial capitalist food system and the search for alternatives. Centrally, this article is concerned with ways of addressing the challenges and prospects for food sovereignty in a US-based context (and a Global North context more generally), and how a 'people-centered' approach can speak to the particular concerns surrounding food sovereignty in the USA, especially in urban-based communities.

Underlying the many difficulties in adapting food sovereignty to a North American and urban context is the fact that this concept emerged from peasant-based struggles and rural movements in the Global South. The central demands of food sovereignty—autonomy, access to land and means of production, and preservation of 'traditional' agrarian foodways and farming systems—are easily understood and expressed in arenas where there are clear referents for comparison: spaces of peasant production, traditional social formations, and moral economies that warrant defense against the encroachment of capitalist social relations and the industrialization of agriculture. But what does it mean to preserve 'traditional' ways of life, or 'peasant spaces', in a situation where people are far removed from any kind of referents for what these mean in practice, and where they may not have any immediate knowledge, experience, or even desire to engage with them? In a global metropolis, the diversity of experiences that exist within even a limited local context can imply very different meanings of food sovereignty for various communities.

The seeming incongruity of the US experience vis-à-vis that of the Global South also brings up the question of how US-based movements for food sovereignty can build international connections and solidarity across disparate cultures, as well as with social justice movements within the US concerned with labor, racial and gender inequities, housing, and other pressing

socio-economic issues. In the absence of the kinds of concrete referents that inform peasant movements, imaginaries associated with sustainable food systems are often presented as abstract and utopian ‘visions’, based on an affective connection with land and nature. The assumed universality of these imaginaries—especially as commodified in the ethics and esthetics of food consumption—could help to explain some of the failures of US food movements to connect and resonate with communities that are struggling with more immanent social problems.

In shifting the theoretical lens from ‘food’ to the social formations and historical trajectories that produce particular experiences of food, a relational, historically and culturally grounded, ‘people-centered’ approach can highlight the social elements that create and/or strengthen resonant, locally inflected political strategies for food sovereignty in urban communities. Seeing food as an essential means of reproduction also entails questions of the production and reproduction of human beings as labor, and labor-power. Thus, the theoretical approach outlined in this paper explores the ways in which proletarianization must continually be reproduced, is increasingly partial or incomplete, and is contested at multiple conjunctures—in which food, as an essential means of subsistence, becomes a key arena for struggle.

This ‘people-centered approach’ to food sovereignty rests on two main theoretical premises. First, a relational conception of food, building on Stuart Hall’s notion of articulation (Hall, 1996), helps to re-situate the deep connections among diverse experiences in varied local contexts. Instead of an iterative ‘impact’ framework, in which global processes simply impose themselves on local communities, this approach highlights the interconnected roles various communities and localities play in constituting the global process as a whole, revealing conditions of possibility for uniting spatially and culturally disparate forms of struggle.

Second, a focus on everyday life—as a structuring principle of food relations and a potential source for contestation and alternatives—helps make explicit the connections between food and other social phenomena, such as class exploitation and racism, that shape particular experiences and struggles. Drawing upon Henri Lefebvre’s dialectical view of the contradictions and possibilities posed by everyday life (2002) this approach also calls attention to the production of space and meaning through social practice, and how these manifest in and through a community’s foodways.

I explore these themes empirically through my ethnographic work with the Healthy Food Hub, a community-based cooperative market on the South Side of Chicago. The Healthy Food Hub utilizes collective purchasing of food items, mainly grown in Black farming communities, as a means of not only getting good food for less money, but also building cultural ties and creating economic opportunities for community members. In the face of deindustrialization, soaring levels of poverty and unemployment, and an urban food crisis, the predominantly African-American families that comprise the Healthy Food Hub are developing innovative forms of food praxis whose effectiveness stems directly from revival of household practices carried over from rural origins, a ‘culture of collective working’,<sup>1</sup> contemporary connections to rural Black farming communities, and a fundamental commitment to self-determination. For the dispossessed former industrial workers of Black South Chicago, access to fresh and healthy food through the Healthy Food Hub is not about ‘chasing our piece of pie in the new green economy’.<sup>2</sup> It is, rather, a point of entry into a larger project: to build forms of ‘community wealth’ that can provide them with much-needed autonomy and resilience against the forces that continue to lay waste to their communities.

### **Forks over Justice: Limits and Contradictions in ‘Food-centric’ Discourse**

Stemming from a common critique of the industrial food system, critical food scholarship and food movement discourses have elaborated the interconnected historical processes that have transformed the global food system from one end to the other. Many critiques have focused on the technical and spatial aspects of food production, documenting the environmental and health impacts of industrial agriculture, while calling attention to the ecological and nutritional benefits of alternative farming systems such as agroecology (Altieri, 2009). Others concentrate on the political economy of food production—economic impacts of Green Revolution technologies, the ‘pesticide treadmill’ and high input costs on small farmers (Perfecto, Vandermeer, & Wright, 2009), labor conditions for farm workers (Brown & Getz, 2011), and the ways in which the dynamics of global ‘food regimes’ adversely affect multiple aspects of smallholder production, while yielding the lion’s share of economic benefits to large agribusiness corporations (McMichael, 2005).

On the other end of the supply chain, other domains of critical food scholarship focus on various issues relating to food consumption and the rise of alternative food networks (AFNs). Much of urban-based food scholarship falls within this area, addressing issues of fair trade, relocalization, urban agriculture, and access to healthy and adequate food, particularly in communities of color (Alkon & Agyeman, 2011). Studies (and critiques) of popular food movements abound, examining multiple facets of AFNs from farmers’ markets and school-based food initiatives to community garden projects and municipal/regional food policy reform efforts (Goodman, Goodman, & Dupuis, 2011).

Food movements and the perspectives informing them, particularly in the USA, tend to share a common orientation toward the ethics and esthetics of food consumption, a ‘narrative linking the production and consumption of local organic food to positive economic, environmental, and social changes’ (Alkon & Agyeman, 2011). This often leaves the concerned reader or activist with an impression that the best way to resist the industrial food system is to ‘vote with your fork’—a market-based solution based on ethical consumption (Pollan, 2006). Policy-oriented efforts in the institutional domain of governments and NGOs advocate for technocratic solutions that can be applied generally over a wide variety of local contexts (Pelletier, Kraak, McCullum, & Uusitalo, 2000).

While a critique of the global capitalist economy is often implicit, and sometimes even explicit, in some of these analyses, many of the solutions promoted by mainstream food movements have proved compatible with, and have even been adopted by, large food and agribusiness corporations whose practices contribute to the very problems the food movement purports to address. In this way, various currents of food movement scholarship and discourse ‘seem to produce and reproduce neo-liberal forms, spaces of governance, and mentalities’ (Guthman, 2008b). In addition, questions of difference—race, class, gender, and the legacies of slavery and colonialism—are often elided in discourses around food. As a result, popular approaches to solving food-related problems often reflect and reproduce the cultural sensibilities and economic privileges associated with a white, middle-class subjectivity (Alkon & Agyeman, 2011).

Where mainstream food movements have addressed communities of color and the ways in which food issues intersect with other historical oppressions such as racism and poverty—for example, in the ‘food desert’ discourse (Gallagher, 2006)—those communities are often perceived through a ‘deficit’ lens, requiring top-down educational, technocratic, and aid-based solutions that rely on a high level of intervention on the part of outside actors. Even where grassroots approaches to food issues within urban communities proliferate, the utopian

universalism as well as the ‘deficit thinking’ (Valencia, 1997) that pervades much of mainstream food movement discourse often ignores the specific histories and differential ways that structural inequalities affect minority and low-income communities in urban centers. In doing so, these efforts not only fail to engage the very communities they are trying to reach (Guthman, 2008a), but also fail to recognize potentially useful forms of knowledge and social practice that already exist within those communities.

In contrast to these approaches, the discourse of food sovereignty—which asserts the ‘right of nations and peoples to control their own food systems—markets, production modes, food cultures and environments’ (Wittman, Desmarais, & Wiebe, 2010), places questions of power, difference, and democracy at the forefront of its critical perspective. The Nyeleni Declaration on Food Sovereignty:

suggests that there are a range of conditions that are necessary for food sovereignty to obtain, such as a living wage, tenure security and security of housing, cultural rights, and an end to the dumping of goods below the cost of production, disaster capitalism, colonialism, imperialism, and genetically modified organisms (GMOs), in the service of a future where, among other things, ‘agrarian reform revitalizes interdependence between consumers and producers’. (Patel, 2009, p. 669)

Food sovereignty’s radical imperative is to consider social justice not simply as an additive property to a sustainable food system, but as the very foundation from which such a food system must be built; corrections to historical and structural injustices are among the essential ‘preconditions before food sovereignty can be achieved’ (Patel, 2009). The primacy of the social in the ideas and goals of food sovereignty, therefore, seems to suggest a reorientation in the critique of food systems toward the social, and the organization of society as a whole. It compels us not only to interrogate the juridical, economic, and legislative structures governing the production and consumption of food, but also to consider food systems first and foremost in terms of their social lives. It requires an examination of the transformations that capitalism has wrought on every level, from global macroeconomic structures to the most intimate spaces of everyday life. From that vantage point, it becomes possible to see how banal acts of daily subsistence reflect and reproduce capitalist social relations, express their contradictions, and contain the seeds of their overcoming.

### **Land Grabs and Big Macs: Food as a Modality of Living in Capitalism**

An approach that starts with people at the center of a food system takes into account how space, power, and meaning are implicated within the system, engages with the particular struggles and histories of a community, and identifies the ways in which social transformations affect, and are affected by, the lived experience of food. It suggests a reconceptualization of food itself: from a discrete ‘object’ of research (e.g. as an economic commodity or ecological factor) toward a relational conception in which food—as material content and lived experience—is perceived as an *ensemble of relations*, a kind of nexus in and through which social processes at varied spatial and temporal scales converge and interact. This dialectical reformulation replaces ‘the common-sense notion of “thing” . . . with notions of “process” and “relation”’ (Ollman, 2003).

Thinking about food relationally is useful not only for an analysis of what went into its physical production, but also for the production of meaning through food practices, and their capacity to produce and reproduce social relations *in general* through the lived experience of obtaining, preparing, and consuming food. In this sense, the center of analysis shifts from the production of food (as in a commodity chain) to considering food as a kind of prism through which the

underlying relations of society are revealed; a means of unpacking the different ways in which capitalist social relations are produced, reproduced, and articulated in particular places and historical conjunctures.

With an understanding of food as a historically and socially produced ensemble of interconnected processes, there now appears the question of *how* to connect larger scale processes (such as global political economy or historical oppressions) to the lived experience of food. What does racism, or land grabs, have to do with last night's dinner? How can we make a clear and credible account of these connections? And how can we use such an analysis to advance food sovereignty in a way that can speak to the linkages among the diverse, seemingly unrelated ways in which people are affected by these processes, up and down the food chain, in localities that seem worlds away from one another?

Stuart Hall's conception of *articulation* 'has the considerable advantage of enabling us to think of how specific practices articulated around contradictions which do not all arise in the same way, at the same point, in the same moment, can nevertheless be thought together' (Slack, 1996). In writing about the relation between race and class, Hall emphasizes the historically specific ways in which these social divisions are interlinked and come into being in and through one another. The articulation between race and class, or among any other social phenomena, is conceived as a dynamic link, constructed in myriad ways through concrete social practices in historical time. Articulation is the product and arena of struggle, as Hall asserts in his central thesis: 'Race is . . . the modality in which class is "lived", the medium through which class relations are experienced, the form in which is appropriated and "fought through"' (Hall, 1996).

For a subject such as food systems—with its global scope, multiple mechanisms, and diversity of local effects—Hall's 'concept of articulation in its extended sense . . . is useful not only in clarifying diverse and interrelated trajectories of sociospatial change but also in suggesting how struggles in different sociospatial arenas and across spatial scales might link with one another' (Hart, 2007). The bond between dispossessed peasants in the Global South and unemployed workers in South Chicago may not be readily apparent; their experiences, while both related to the global political economy of food, seem vastly different from one another. However, their articulations into a global 'food regime' (McMichael, 2009)—whose hunger for land on one continent, and markets for cheap fast food concoctions on another, swell the ranks of the poor and malnourished on both shores—could shed some light on how their situations can be linked together in a common struggle.

If 'race . . . is the modality by which class is lived' (Hall, 1996), perhaps it can also be said that food is a modality by which capitalism is lived and made tangible in everyday experience. Throughout the roughly 500 years of its existence, the dynamics of global capitalist development have engendered deep transformations in social life, which has, as a consequence, transformed the ways people encounter and experience food. Aspects of everyday life that are structured by the demands of wage labor and the market—long work hours and/or strict time discipline (Thompson, 1967), pressures of market competition on small artisan producers (Bertaux & Bertaux-Wiame, 1981), spatial dislocations such as migration to urban centers or long work commutes (Coleman-Jensen, 2009), and even the transformation of rural communities through the growth of migrant labor and remittance economies (Hecht, 2010) can qualitatively affect and constrain people's options for the kinds of food they obtain on a daily basis.

For example, a study of low-wage women workers living in the northeast USA found that a majority of them 'made "quick stuff" or bought fast food because they did not have energy or time to cook' (Jabs et al., 2007). Often working two or three jobs to make ends meet, many

workers do not have the time to obtain and prepare food at home, making them more dependent on cheap, unhealthy convenience foods. In urban communities of color—where the deleterious effects of deindustrialization and economic crisis are compounded by long histories of racial discrimination, redlining, and, more recently, epic rates of foreclosure—the strained relationship between economic circumstances, spatial–temporal production of deleterious environments, and everyday food choices is even more pronounced (Block, Chávez, Allen, & Ramirez, 2012).

### **Subsistence on the Side: Alienation and Resistance in Everyday Life**

Seen in their eminently social, historical, and relational contexts, everyday experiences of producing, obtaining, and consuming food are, quite literally, visceral manifestations of multiple and intersecting processes that continually seek to subordinate the lives of human beings to the logic of accumulation, competition, wage labor, and the market. Struggles over food, therefore, can be seen as struggles over proletarianization and alienation; of the material and meaningful ways in which capitalism produces and transforms everyday life. These processes, however, are never quite as totalizing as their boosters, or their critics, purport them to be.

For Marx, the historical *sine qua non* for the development and maintenance of capitalist social relations is primitive accumulation: the separation of the producers from their means of subsistence, forcing dispossessed laborers into a dependent relationship with capital in order to survive. The capacity to produce food, or to access adequate sources of food, is an essential means of subsistence for human beings; one that is ripped away from the producer in the violent course of capitalism's 'original sin' (Marx, 1968). Processes of primitive accumulation are generally associated with the separation of peasants from the land that provides their immediate means of subsistence.

But Marx's definition alludes to a second dimension in which primitive accumulation entailed much more than separation from land. It was also a radical attempt to close off all possibilities for non-capitalist forms of life through the violent erasure of myriad forms of self-reliance and social subsistence, in order to present wage labor as the only survival strategy available to human beings. As Michael Perelman observes,

Primitive accumulation cut through traditional lifeways like scissors. The first blade served to undermine the ability of people to provide for themselves. The other blade was a system of stern measures required to keep people from finding alternative survival strategies outside the system of wage labor. (2000, p. 14)

This highlights capitalism's imperative to continually reproduce the conditions by which capitalist social relations are established and maintained, naturalizing those relations in its drive to 'colonize all life' (De Angelis, 2004).

Henri Lefebvre, in his *Critique of everyday life* (2002), saw capitalist modernity as characterized primarily by the subordination of real life to the 'brutally objective power' of the abstract logic of capitalism. This logic produces and reproduces itself through everyday social practice in profoundly material as well as ideological ways; it is 'a practical illusion, with its basis in everyday life and the way everyday life is organized' (Lefebvre, 2002). Thus humanity, in all its infinite fullness and potential, becomes transformed through its subordination to abstract economic categories and functions into something not quite human:

a tool to be used by other tools (the means of production), a thing to be used by another thing (money), and an object to be used by a class, a mass of individuals who are themselves 'deprived' of reality and truth (the capitalists). (Lefebvre, 2002, p. 166)



Lefebvre notes that ‘there is a name for this fixing of human activity within an alien reality which is at one and the same time crudely material and yet abstract: *alienation*’ (2002).

However, Lefebvre notes that the domination of abstractions over everyday life is necessarily limited; alternative social practices continue to exist and thrive because of the inimitably creative and untamable nature of everyday life. Central to Lefebvre’s analysis is the relationship between the real world, experienced and lived as a totality, and the necessary but limited abstractions we use to make sense of it:

Everyday life, in a sense residual, defined by what is ‘left over’ after all distinct, superior, specialized, structured activities have been singled out by analysis, must be defined as a totality . . . [these] activities leave a ‘technical vacuum’ between one another which is filled up by everyday life. Everyday life is profoundly related to *all* activities, and encompasses them with all their differences and their conflicts; it is their meeting place, their bond, their common ground. And it is in everyday life that the sum total of relations which make the human—and every human being—a whole takes its shape and its form. (2002, p. 97)

This, he argued, was a fundamental contradiction in capitalist life: necessarily limited by the categories it seeks to impose, the abstract logic of capitalism can never truly encompass the totality of everyday life. Everyday life as an ongoing, living process is continually ‘leaking out the sides’, so to speak, of capitalist structures; its ‘residue’ confounding the attempts of abstraction and alienation to contain it. In this residue, one can catch fragmented glimpses of possibilities for a life not dominated by alienated social relations: the ‘substance of everyday life—“human raw material” in its simplicity and richness—pierces through all alienation and establishes “disalienation”’ (Lefebvre, 2002). Real life, in a sense, is always running one step ahead of capitalism, which is constantly pursuing, but never fully achieving, its goal of colonizing all life.

The twofold character of primitive accumulation—physical separation from land as a means of subsistence and the suppression of alternative forms of social production that challenge the absolute primacy of wage labor—also helps us think about different aspects of the contemporary food system in relation to one another. On the one hand, the restructuring of global, national, and local economies as a result of the 2008 financial crisis—which precipitated dramatic increases in food prices worldwide (McMichael, 2009)—crucially impacted food security for working people and the poor at both ends of the food chain. In the Global South, the ‘triple crisis’ of food, energy, and finance (McMichael, 2009) spurred a wave of accelerated land consolidation and rural dispossession, characterized as ‘new enclosures’ (White, Borras, Hall, Scoones, & Wolford, 2012); while in the cities of the Global North, the decimation of living-wage employment and social safety nets undermined the purchasing power of urban populations.

On the other hand, the consequences of the food crisis have perhaps opened up conditions of possibility for re-articulating social relations around food, allowing alternatives to the ‘corporate food regime’ (McMichael, 2005) to proliferate. Lefebvre’s expansive notion of ‘everyday life’ as a creative and undisciplinable universe of social praxis, simultaneously produced through capitalist development and developing in ways that move beyond the purview of capitalist logics, gains particular relevance in the current era of mass dispossessions and the proliferation of ‘wageless life’ (Denning, 2010). The sheer scale of unemployed, superfluous labor in urban peripheries the world over has created vast spaces where self-reliance has become a vital necessity; as African urbanist Abdoumalig Simone notes, ‘Self-responsibility for urban survival has opened up spaces for different ways of organizing activities’ (Simone, 2004).

These not-quite-proletarians are engaging, inventing, and jerry-rigging an untold number of experiments and strategies for survival and resistance within the liminal spaces in which processes of primitive accumulation have left them. These could include rediscovering long-forgotten

practices that reveal deep connections to rural places of origin, and learning new ones from people and groups they encounter. Political movements for land, rights, and urban citizenship can also be products of this conjuncture (Holston, 2008). In other words, in the spaces that capitalist development has left behind, people are forging new articulations with the system and helping each other out of whatever resources, skills, and social networks are available to them.

These everyday social forms of subsistence, especially as they relate to food, could be a fertile ground for building the kinds of self-determined food systems that food sovereignty seeks to champion. In the spaces where people resist, or are discarded by, the march of capitalist development, the diverse social networks, practices, and resources they have always marshaled for daily subsistence become salient building blocks for new social configurations of collective survival that—if recognized, cultivated, and defended by conscious political action—can potentially emerge as practically viable, culturally meaningful, and self-determined pathways to food sovereignty as a means of transcending life under capitalism.

### **Building an Ark: Resilience and Re-articulation in South Chicago**

Those who control food production and human reproduction have real power, have control over life and death. And we need to further our control, and build upon the foundation of our history and our ancestors, so that we make sure that we survive and come through this crisis, the way we came through the holocaust of the Slave Trade, slavery, Jim Crow, migration to the cities, the decline of industrial capitalism, and what the planet and society have in store for us in the future. (Healthy Food Hub member)

Seeing food systems in terms of their social lives—as sets of relations, articulations, and conveyors of meaning—helps food analysts and activists to avoid the universalisms that, unconsciously, attach food movement discourse and practice to a particular set of class and cultural subjectivities while alienating others (Guthman, 2008a). This approach, when applied to the empirical case study of the predominantly African-American members of Chicago's Healthy Food Hub, reveals the vexed relationship many Black folks have with mainstream food and environmental sustainability discourses. It also helps us to more fully appreciate what they have built, and why it resonates so powerfully with the community members who come into its orbit.

Located in an area once defined as both a 'food desert' (Gallagher, 2006) and an 'urban sacrifice zone' (Gottesdiener, 2013), the Healthy Food Hub was established in 2009 with the aim of pooling the resources of its members and surrounding communities to 'bring home healthier, tastier, fresher food for less'.<sup>3</sup> This is mainly achieved through collective purchasing of wholesale organic produce, as well as food production on rural farms in the historic Black farming community of Pembroke Township, Illinois, located about 60 miles south of the city. It is a membership-based organization, serving around 500 families in several South Chicago neighborhoods. The hub holds a Market Day every other Saturday at the Betty Shabazz Charter School, where members can pick up their orders, shop for additional food items, buy other sundries and gift items from vendors, and attend talks, workshops, and organizational meetings.

Preorders are the main mechanism by which the Hub obtains its food products; they also reinforce the cooperative and participatory culture that supports the Hub's aims for community building. There are two 'rounds' to the preorder process. Members submit the first round of orders on the Monday before Market day, over the website and over the phone. An email is then sent to members a couple of days later with details on what has been ordered, and how much more for each item must be acquired to receive the greatest bulk discount. Members can then choose to buy more, or recruit family and friends to add to their original order, so

that everyone can receive the lowest possible price for their food. One of the Hub's volunteers described the collective buying process as a 'reverse CSA':

It's not one farmer selling memberships, it's the eaters determining what they want to eat. And they're creating a system to support that . . . I know what you need, that way I only have to get what it is that my community recognizes they need.<sup>4</sup>

Market days, in contrast to the typical supermarket experience, are regarded as social events, fostering relationships among members and bringing together the diverse array of knowledge and resources they bring to the space. It is not unusual to spend the better part of an hour in the checkout line in conversation with fellow members and volunteers. Various presentations and workshops are held on diverse topics ranging from healthy cooking, herbal medicine, aquaponics (integrated fish and plant cultivation), disaster preparedness, and food growing techniques that stem from old farming traditions as well as newer forms of permaculture. This space allows members to share knowledge and ideas with each other, while also enhancing the scope of goods and services the Hub is able to provide.

The Healthy Food Hub also maintains a 40-acre production center and 'eco-campus' at the Black Oaks Center for Sustainable Renewable Living, located in Pembroke Township. At Black Oaks, organizers grow food, host school trips, and hold weekend seminars in ecology and permaculture for urban youth from the South Side. They have also launched a Rotating Apprentice Farmers' Training Program, an intensive agroecology summer course in which participants serve as apprentices to various Black farmers in the Pembroke community. By 2014, the program would have trained 40 mostly young new farmers in methods of crop and livestock cultivation.

The Healthy Food Hub's relative success stems not only from the goods and services it provides and the commitment of its membership, but also from an acute recognition of the material needs and cultural dilemmas faced by Black communities on the South Side. The neighborhoods from which the Hub derives its main membership are among the hardest hit by deindustrialization and the economic crisis: youth unemployment for Black males on the South Side approaches 50%, foreclosures have depopulated wide swaths of these neighborhoods, and in recent years, the area has endured unprecedented levels of violence (Malooley, 2013). The last Black-owned grocery store on the South Side closed down in 1995, and the lack of access to fresh, healthy food in those neighborhoods became the initial impetus for the creation of the Hub.

A historicized understanding of the articulations by which deindustrialization, economic marginalization, and the legacies of slavery and Jim Crow are implicated in food and everyday life in South Chicago is also essential for explaining the unique nature of the Hub's project, its particular difficulties, and its ultimate goals. Most of the Hub's older members are first- and second-generation migrants from four counties in the Mississippi Delta; as the children of sharecroppers, they fled the region with their families in the 1950s and 1960s to escape the racial violence following the murder of Emmett Till. Thus, the experience of agrarian life, in the collective memories of these urban transplants, appears to be less of a nostalgic feeling of transcendental connection to the land than that of being bound to a landscape of fear and oppression. One woman, venting her frustration at the well-intentioned but naive efforts of white food and environmental activists, expressed it thus:

You want me to go plant a tree, but you hung us from a tree. A tree is not a symbol of life; you hung our brothers from it, took our lives with it. No. I won't dig my own grave; that's what nature is to us, a grave.<sup>5</sup>

The legacy of slavery has perhaps been the most powerful influence shaping the difficult relationship between food, land, and the Hub's Black constituency. Land—a material symbol of autonomy and freedom for agrarian communities around the world—carries painful and traumatic connotations for former slaves who fled to the cities to escape bondage from the land. Fred Carter, co-founder of the Healthy Food Hub and the Black Oaks Center, highlights the contradictory relationship between food and slavery when considered in the context of its deep history:

It's a challenge not just confined to Pembroke, it's a challenge for us as a group, as a race of people, in this country and in the world. We entered slavery because of our ability to grow food, and because of our capacity to grow food and feed people, we were enslaved. That was one of the driving factors why they were importing us over here; we knew how to grow rice, we knew about this land . . . we were the powerhouse, we fed the planet. And because we were violated, enslaved and beat to serve whites, to feed them, it's a painful memory.<sup>6</sup>

However, just as poverty and oppression followed Black populations from the rural South into South Chicago, so did ways of surviving and coping, as a community, with the multiple forms of crisis imposed upon them. Along with the pain of their experience and social conditions in the rural South, positive and creative forms of collective endurance and resistance to those conditions also came with them, deeply embedded in social memory. These everyday food practices, derived from agrarian pasts, became essential parts of the Hub's toolkit for building collective means of community empowerment.

Collective purchasing—pivotal to the Hub's community project—carries particular importance as a household food practice for the Hub's founders, who migrated from rural Mississippi to Chicago as children. As Fred Carter recalls:

We always had a food buying club, that's how we ate as a family . . . when we got to Chicago, our whole extended family, or people from our hometown, would all live together on a block. And we would all put our money together to buy a cow, and divide it up amongst ourselves. It was just cheaper that way . . . I guess maybe that is where the Healthy Food Hub came out of.<sup>7</sup>

Collective food buying in Mississippi has historical roots in the complex and largely forgotten history of Black farmers' resistance to white capitalism. In the first few years of Reconstruction, 1 in 10 African-Americans settled in the Delta region hoping to climb the 'agricultural ladder' to the 'poor man's promised land' (Willis, 2000; Woods, 1998). These Black yeoman farmers pursued a number of individual and collective strategies for utilizing the advantages of land ownership, including efforts to build new kinds of agrarian society based on solidarity, self-reliance, and collective uplift.

As the encroaching power of white creditors began to subordinate the nascent Black farming class into the 'second slavery' of sharecropping, Populist organizations such as the Colored Farmers' Alliance formed, buying cooperatives in the region and imploring Black farmers to 'discover how the united purchasing power of Black agrarians can reduce your debts and end your reliance on white creditors' (Willis, 2000). By the twentieth century, these efforts had been violently crushed by the Klan and Jim Crow, their political importance largely forgotten by Delta farmers and their descendants. But the idea of pooling resources to acquire basic necessities at lower prices persisted; it simply made good economic sense to large rural households struggling to make ends meet.

Collective buying, born in a moment of economic resistance, thus found its way to Chicago, tucked away in individual memories and households until, in another time of crisis, it became a keystone for developing a new articulation between food and community power. How the Healthy Food Hub redeployed this household practice on a community level, in a post-industrial

urban context, may appear rather different in practice from its agrarian antecedent. The mechanisms for pooling and using resources are articulated through modern technologies, its infrastructure extends over rural and urban space, and—importantly—it does not isolate itself, spatially or economically, from the larger system in which it operates.

The ultimate objective of this practice—to build social formations based on solidarity, self-reliance, and collective uplift and to avoid and replace relations of dependency on forces that are oppressive and exploitative of them—is more than an artifact of the ‘blues development tradition’ (Woods, 1998) advanced by Black agrarians in Reconstruction-era Mississippi. It is a contemporary re-articulation of that tradition, one in which African-Americans, for over a century, ‘have continuously experimented with creating sustainable, equitable, and just social, economic, political, and cultural structures . . . the constant reestablishment of collective sensibility in the face of constant attacks by the plantation bloc and its allies’ (Woods, 1998).

The collective aspect of the Hub’s economic operations—inspired by the African socialist concept of *ujamaa*, or cooperative economics—serves as a powerful basis for re-inscribing understandings of community, sustainability, self-reliance, and resilience in and through cultural and material practice. In a city where the competitive, predatory dynamics, and ideologies of neo-liberal capitalism have left communities devastated, fragmented, and vulnerable, Healthy Food Hub members are struggling to rethink and redefine concepts of wealth and exchange along collective and self-determined lines. The members who contribute their money, material resources, time, skills, and knowledge to the Hub all do so with the intention of building, maintaining, and retaining control over their ‘community wealth’. As a Healthy Food Hub core organizer describes it, ‘We introduce economic opportunity, and then we try to circulate and grow that opportunity so that everyone can benefit from it.’<sup>8</sup>

The efforts of the Healthy Food Hub stem directly from an intimate understanding of Black communities’ historical experience: of slavery, racial oppression, the fallout of deindustrialization, and the ‘urban crisis’ in which foreclosures, unemployment, infrastructural decay, and gang violence have been devastating consequences. For them, the shattering of false hopes for gaining individual prosperity through capitalist means becomes an impetus for reclaiming cultural values of collectivity through building resilient forms of social subsistence. While the Hub is, essentially, a type of ‘social enterprise’, the manner in which its members consciously aim to protect the community from alienation and privation meaningfully distinguishes its practices from mainstream politics of market-based ‘conscious consumption’ that reproduce neo-liberal values of competitive individualism in the production and consumption of food.

The Hub’s commitment to collective self-reliance and self-determination has become all the more salient in the face of external pressures—not only from larger economic processes, but also from powerful nonprofit and political interests within the city who seek to impose their own models of sustainable development on the ‘food deserts’ of South Chicago. Healthy Food Hub members are

literally determined to hold their ground . . . to be able to transform the food deserts from within themselves, not from external inputs from people who don’t live in their communities and carry the majority of the wealth out of their communities. Our standing commitment for all of us has been to keep the wealth in our community, on every level—whether it’s social, intellectual, natural, political—we literally can create something different and new.<sup>9</sup>

### Conclusion: Burying the Pain, Picking Up Power

If the city is a huge intersection of bodies in need . . . how can permutations in the intersection of their given physical existence, their stories, networks, and inclinations, produce specific value and capacity? (Simone, 2004, p. 3)

In the interplay of ideas, debates, and movements struggling to define the ‘big tent’ (Patel, 2009) of food sovereignty, critique of the prevailing food system remains a dominant mode through which aspirations for a better food system—and by extension, a better world—is expressed. This is absolutely crucial: we must be clear about what we are against before we can proclaim what we are for. But critique, as such, places food sovereignty movements in an essentially defensive position. For urban dwellers in the heart of the industrialized world—primarily food consumers whose histories and articulations with advanced capitalism have produced a far more alienated relationship with food production, land, and nature—a proactive route to building and advocating for alternatives is far more difficult to imagine. What we are often left with is a host of utopian visions, constructed around the quality and value of food as a commodity; abstract models of ‘sustainability’ that often, in practice, end up reinforcing the social divisions and structures of alienated capitalist life.

Shifting the lens of analysis from food to the people and everyday social life at the heart of food systems suggests, perhaps, new strategies for research and action. It encourages a shift away from ‘deficit thinking’ in community-based research, toward a renewed focus on the resourcefulness and oppositional sensibilities that people sustain and develop in conditions of adversity. In terms of building and advancing alternatives through action, a ‘people-centered’ approach not only illuminates the power relations and injustices that lie at the heart of the food system, but also shows how the infinite array of relationships, resources, histories, struggles, and aspirations that express themselves in the everyday experience of food are the raw material from which many possible paths to a just and sustainable food system can be built.

The Healthy Food Hub is an example of one such path, a pragmatic reconfiguration of the memories, histories, resources, and knowledge of their members to build culturally grounded, self-determined, and resilient infrastructures for community survival and independence from the economic forces that have enslaved, exploited, and ultimately left them behind. At the time this research was undertaken, the Healthy Food Hub did not explicitly invoke concepts or ideas from the global food sovereignty movement; but their everyday practices reflected a critique of the corporate food system, engaged the community’s specific needs and histories, and incorporated available elements and strategies in ways that *worked for them*. Even though Healthy Food Hub members did not necessarily ‘talk the talk’, I argue that they have ‘walked the walk’ in terms of practicing food sovereignty. The act of re-articulating the relations of subsistence, to create and ‘own the pathways to healthy living’, becomes an act of building community power; a form of sovereignty collectively developed from the intimate spaces of everyday life.

I hope that a people-centered approach to food systems can also help us envision strategies for food sovereignty that go beyond invoking essentialist utopias of ‘sustainable urban living’. In contexts where the imaginary of an idealized agrarian past is not accessible, or, in the case of African-American descendants of slaves and sharecroppers, an extremely painful and undesirable option, a relational and historically grounded approach can help us recognize the actually existing, novel, ad-hoc food practices in these communities as potential grounds for social transformation. Instead of proposing blanket prescriptions for change, we can perhaps envision political trajectories for food sovereignty that engage diverse communities on their own historically and geographically specific terms, articulated in and through long-embedded processes of social

struggle. These trajectories could not only transform the food system as a whole, but also actualize the very notion of food sovereignty into a living, breathing global process where food producers and consumers, rural and urban, North and South, can, as Dr J from the Healthy Food Hub put it, ‘release our colonization and our suffering, and regain our power again’.

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### Notes

- 1 Remarks by Fred Carter, Healthy Food Hub Sustainability Address, 5 February 2011.
- 2 Black Oaks Community Center Newsletter, Vol. 1, No. 1.
- 3 Healthy Food Hub website, <http://www.healthyfoodhub.org>
- 4 Interview with Healthy Food Hub volunteer, 26 June 2011.
- 5 Radio interview with Kellen Marshall, Practically Speaking Radio Episode 11: Blacks in Green, 20 May 2013.
- 6 Television interview with Fred Carter, PCC Network Forum, 11 April 2012.
- 7 Interview with Fred Carter, 16 June 2011.
- 8 Michael Tekhen Strode, Healthy Food Hub promotional video. Posted at <http://livesharelearn.com/our-stories>.
- 9 Radio interview with Dr Jifunza Wright, Practically Speaking Radio, 20 May 2013.

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