LOCAL FOOD AND POWER DYNAMICS IN SOUTHEAST GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN

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LOCAL FOOD AND POWER DYNAMICS IN SOUTHEAST GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN

BY

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DISSERTATION
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Anthropology

The University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, NM

May, 2013
DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to Our Kitchen Table and the Southeast growers.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In the winter of 2008, I returned home to Grand Rapids, MI in order to conduct preliminary dissertation research and visit friends and family over the semester break. I observed the food insecurity and the gentrification impacting the lives of residents living in Southeast (SE) Grand Rapids. Based upon my interests in urban food gardening and studies of power, I began exploring the causes of this inequality and inquiring into different food security approaches. I described my research interests to a friend who directed me towards a local activist. This activist, along with a local food policy advocate, advised me to contact Our Kitchen Table (OKT). OKT is a grassroots group of women advocates who address the environmental racism and food insecurity that is inequitably affecting the majority low-income and minority residents of SE Grand Rapids.

I detailed my proposed research to the principal organizer of OKT, Lisa Oliver-King. This initial meeting ultimately led to our very dear and long-term friendship, initially based upon our mutual interests. I was inspired by OKT’s social justice lens, which influenced the theoretical orientation of this study. In return for OKT granting me the privilege to learn about their organization, I agreed to assist OKT with their activities and lend my skills as a researcher. Most of all, I am grateful and in debt to the members of OKT and the SE residents who made this study possible.

During my research, I met several individuals that lent their time and expertise. To preserve individual’s anonymity and confidentiality, I would like to extend a general thank you to everyone who allowed me to interview them, spent time with me, and
enriched this study with their worldview concerning local food security and information about their particular organization.

My dissertation committee, friends, family members, colleagues, and fellow UNM graduate students supported me during this most arduous and simultaneously rewarding process of writing this dissertation. I am grateful for these individuals. I would like to thank my committee—Beverly Singer (chair), Les Field, Catie Willging, and Jake Kosek—for their time, expertise, and support.

My committee, Grand Valley State University (GVSU) colleagues, former professors, and a few friends critiqued drafts of my chapters, providing much valuable insight and input. My former undergraduate professors Jan Brashler and Russell Rhoads of GVSU inspired me to pursue doctoral studies in anthropology and later on, as colleagues, provided feedback on my dissertation chapters. I am especially thankful for Jan’s above and beyond support as my mentor and friend. Melanie Adams, Michelle McCoy Reed Bassett, Jason Danely, and Patty Rader edited chapters of my dissertation and also have gifted me with their friendship.

I appreciate the kindness and encouragement of all of my friends, family, and fellow graduate students over the course of my graduate studies. The one-year that I was both roommates and fellow graduate students with Marnie Watson and Kelley Sawyer was one of the highlights. Moreover, I value the friendship of Kaila Cogdill and our discussions pertaining to the experience of what it is like to be a graduate student. Finally, I am grateful for my family who has been my “biggest fan,” especially my partner, Rob. Thank you Rob for your love and friendship. Thank you Jake and Amber for encouraging me by consistently asking if I was almost done with my “paper.” Thank
you Kalina; you provided me with the final motivation to finish and defend this
dissertation before your expected due date in May of 2013. You waited for me to
successfully defend my dissertation on April 9th of 2013 before you blessed us with your
eyearly birth on April 17th of 2013.
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ABSTRACT

Various types of “food security” projects essentially deliver little in the way of real opportunities for local food security among Southeast residents in Grand Rapids, MI. Nonetheless, developers justifying their gentrifying efforts are increasingly funded through large grants and public dollars by actually purporting themselves to seek solutions to reducing food insecurity in these Southeast neighborhoods. “Community,” “local,” “sustainability,” and “social justice” are common terms marketed as values to promote urban redevelopment, food security initiatives, and to sell local food. Food growers and activists challenge how these terms are defined and used for profiteering. Thus, there are competing value systems between food growers and activists with those of urban developers and different food security initiatives in Grand Rapids. A grassroots activist organization named Our Kitchen Table (OKT) has developed a local food-growing model to confront the structural racism and general inequality responsible for the food insecurity, health disparities, and gentrification altering the lives of Southeast residents. I situate OKT’s activism within a broader discussion of the politics of exclusion and inequitable distribution of power between stakeholders, local food security initiatives, and Southeast residents.
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<td>BFVG</td>
<td>Barefoot Victory Garden</td>
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<tr>
<td>BCC</td>
<td>Baxter Community Center</td>
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<td>BMP</td>
<td>Building Movement Project</td>
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<td>CHI</td>
<td>City Health Initiative</td>
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<td>CIW</td>
<td>Coalition of Immokalee Workers</td>
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<td>CDC</td>
<td>Community Development Corporation</td>
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<td>CRI</td>
<td>Community Research Institute</td>
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<td>CSA</td>
<td>Community Supported Agriculture</td>
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<td>DDA</td>
<td>Downtown Development Authority</td>
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<td>ETCA</td>
<td>Eastown Community Association</td>
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<tr>
<td>EMEAC</td>
<td>Eastern Michigan Environmental Action Council</td>
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<td>ENTF</td>
<td>Emergency Needs Task Force</td>
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<tr>
<td>EPA</td>
<td>Environmental Protection Agency</td>
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<tr>
<td>FTA</td>
<td>Fair Trade Agreement</td>
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<td>FDP</td>
<td>Food Diversity Project</td>
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<tr>
<td>FDA</td>
<td>Food and Drug Administration</td>
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<td>FPA</td>
<td>Food Policy Advocates</td>
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<td>FSFM</td>
<td>Fulton Street Farmers Market</td>
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<td>GPNA</td>
<td>Garfield Park Neighborhood Association</td>
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<td>GRFC</td>
<td>Grand Rapids Food Coalition</td>
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<tr>
<td>GE</td>
<td>Genetically Engineered</td>
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<td>GRIID</td>
<td>Grand Rapids Institute for Information Democracy</td>
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<td>IWW</td>
<td>Industrial Workers of the World</td>
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<td>ICCF</td>
<td>Inner City Christian Federation</td>
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<td>IMF</td>
<td>International Monetary Fund</td>
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<td>MST</td>
<td>Landless Workers’ Movement</td>
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<td>LEED</td>
<td>Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design</td>
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<td>LISC</td>
<td>Local Initiatives Support Corporation</td>
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<td>NAACP</td>
<td>National Association for the Advancement of Colored People</td>
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<td>SFA</td>
<td>National Student/Farmworker Alliance</td>
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<td>NFM</td>
<td>Neighborhood Farmers Market</td>
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<td>NAFTA</td>
<td>North American Free Trade Agreement</td>
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<td>OKT</td>
<td>Our Kitchen Table</td>
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<td>SAP</td>
<td>Structural Adjustment Plan</td>
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<td>SECA</td>
<td>Southeast Community Association</td>
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<td>SRG</td>
<td>Sustainable Research Group</td>
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<tr>
<td>UAW</td>
<td>United Auto Workers</td>
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<tr>
<td>USDA</td>
<td>United States Department of Agriculture</td>
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<td>HUD</td>
<td>United States Department of Housing and Urban Development</td>
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<td>UGFS</td>
<td>Urban Garden Food Suppliers</td>
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<td>UICA</td>
<td>Urban Institute of Contemporary Arts</td>
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<td>WEMEAC</td>
<td>Western Michigan Environmental Action Council</td>
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Introduction

Grand Rapids, Michigan is a mid-size U.S. city now in rebirth after the auto industry collapse and ensuing 2008 recession. A once industrial landscape has been transformed into an urban core of boutique shops and restaurants. Business stakeholders advertise Grand Rapids as having a “green” culture and as being a destination spot offering popular cultural activities, locally owned businesses, and locally made products. Local food is central to this bourgeoning cultural identity. This dissertation critically examines the values and practices of economic development initiatives that promote local food production under the guise of social justice, as well as those of food growers and local food security initiatives. Local food security initiatives are typically organized by non-profit groups, community development corporations, or health and social agencies, which often support larger development efforts and preclude community input. My analysis situates an ethnographic account of the lives of Southeast (SE) Grand Rapids food growers and the radically alternative food security approach of an activist group, Our Kitchen Table, within this context of power relations.

On its surface Grand Rapids appears to be an inviting place to entrepreneurs, yet a major facet of the growing popularity of the local food movement is concern over “food insecurity”—defined as little to no access to fresh, healthy, or affordable food—especially as it is experienced by residents from SE Grand Rapids. These residents continue to be negatively affected by economic decline and face serious health disparities resulting from an industrial legacy and high rates of food insecurity. Concurrently, the SE neighborhoods are undergoing rapid gentrification by stakeholders promoting local food production and claiming to address food insecurity.
Food security as a site of struggle engenders one significant basis of my dissertation research. Most “food security” projects essentially deliver little in the way of real opportunities for local food security among current residents of SE Grand Rapids. Despite this fact, developers are increasingly funded through large grants and public dollars by purporting themselves to seek solutions to reducing food insecurity. These solutions are embedded into stakeholders’ plans to improve business zone corridors and build or rehabilitate housing for expanding “local” enterprise with “sustainable” projects for “healthy communities.”¹

Proponents of food security and economic development initiatives use the popular terms of “community,” “local,” “sustainability,” and “social justice” as a marketing strategy to promote urban redevelopment and sell locally produced food. These terms are synonymous with values that appeal to citizens’ ever growing consciousness around environmental responsibility. However, actual food growers and community activists, who have a more critical understanding of these values, dispute claims of environmental responsibility and question how such terms are redefined and used for profiteering. My ethnographic focus, therefore, compares the competing value systems of food growers and activists with those of urban planners and developers who identify and support food security initiatives in Grand Rapids.

Our Kitchen Table (OKT) is a key activist organization at the center of organizing efforts to address environmental health and food disparities in SE Grand Rapids. OKT functions in spite of and in direct contrast to outside interventions called “food security” projects. I position OKT’s activism within a broader discussion of the politics of

¹ The term “healthy” was often used in conjunction with community and referred to not only physical health but streetscaping and reduced crime.
exclusion and inequitable distribution of power between city development and business stakeholders and SE residents who are often represented by those same health and social agencies collaborating with developers. Contrasting the work of OKT with other local food security initiatives explains how something as seemingly benign as the local food movement, when examined within the context of power dynamics, illustrates how a “food security” approach can either build the capacity of a community of people or justify gentrification and the further erosion of neighborhood community ties.

Underlying relations of power shape the local food movement and are identified in my dissertation. I explain how funding resources and academic data are brought together, bolstered by public policies, and end up as ventures that profit a social network of wealthy business leaders, local universities, non-profit groups and local politicians. Power is defined as the relationship between knowledge (commonly held values and ideology) and the social networks of people representing initiatives and having privileged access to resources (e.g., academic data on food deserts, land, city government support, public and private funding), which they distribute among themselves. Using this definition of power, I describe the politics of exclusion, the process in which community residents are denied access to these resources or having input in food security projects.

To better understand the contested issues affecting SE Grand Rapids citizens regarding food security and urban planning initiatives, I provide a detailed description of local garden projects and OKT members’ strategies and values that pertain to food insecurity. OKT’s alternative approach to food insecurity is central to this study, which commenced in November 2009 and ended in October 2010. OKT is a female-led group that advocates on behalf of women with children and those who are inequitably subjected
to food insecurity and high levels of environmental toxins in SE Grand Rapids.\(^2\) Grand Rapids at-large efforts around food security and environmental stewardship, for obvious reasons noted previously, do not address the structural causes and racism that compound these issues. For this reason, OKT created the Food Diversity Project (FDP). The FDP builds the capacity of participants to organize resident-centered activities, carry out public policy work, and reduce exposure to environmental toxins, as well as grow and share food, ultimately improving the health of residents. The FDP provides educational activities with a focus on justice, along with the necessary tools for growing a food secure system and reducing exposure to environmental toxins outside of residents’ homes, especially in the soil where food is grown. The FDP is a strategy for building an urban food system owned by community residents growing and sharing food from their household gardens.

Based upon the practices and ideologies of OKT and associated food growers, as well as the food security and development initiatives that were significantly involved in SE Grand Rapids through the duration of 2010, my research documents multiple dimensions of the Grand Rapids food system: (1) how food insecurity creates a context of economic opportunity that marginalizes those with different socioeconomic statuses and/or ethnicities; (2) alternative approaches, values, and reasons for involvement in the local food movement; and finally becomes (3) a narrative about justice as undertaken by a grassroots organization striving to build their vision of a food secure and environmentally safe community, independent of the mainstream neoliberal approaches.

\(^2\) According to Our Kitchen Table, in a report authored by Oliver-King (2008), high levels of lead in the soil and rates of childhood lead poisoning are prevalent in this area of the city, disproportionately comprised of racial/ethnic minorities and low or no income earners. Residents also suffer from high rates of diet-related illnesses caused, in part, by living in a food desert: an area deficient in the amount of grocery stores or available resources for fresh, healthy, affordable, and accessible food.
to food insecurity. This study of anthropological significance serves as a model to other urban cities in the United States of food system research in understanding different approaches to local food security and how such initiatives impact already disenfranchised neighborhoods.

**Theoretical Orientation**

In this ethnographic research, I paid close attention to the phenomena of place making and social networking in order to identify the ideologies and the different practices of participants involved in food security initiatives. According to Basso (1996), place making occurs when groups use “local knowledge”—commonly accepted values, beliefs, and social practices—to infuse places with social importance and meaning. Commonly accepted terms often associated with food security are “local,” “community,” “sustainability,” and “social justice,” all of which imply a shared value system, but are actually interpreted differently among participants in the local food movement. Participation in the local food movement ranges from planting a backyard garden to orchestrating multi-million dollar economic development projects that proclaim to address food insecurity.

“Place” refers to a specific physical locale, often a garden or a community house, as well as an intentionally designed sense of place such as a “revitalized neighborhood.” Developers often refer to gentrification as “revitalization,” which is defined as an improvement to a visibly blighted neighborhood. In the case of Grand Rapids, developers design space in order to evoke a “sense of place” in which people feel as if they belong to a community. “Sense” refers to a feeling of attachment to a made place
(Basso 1996). For instance, old fashioned street décor is one tactic for appealing to
people’s longing for and historical notions of what it once felt like to belong to a
community, before the hustle and bustle of contemporary life. Stakeholders involved in
the engineering of neighborhood redevelopment programs attempt to create a
“revitalized” sense of place with their utopic vision for the future of a “green city.”

People do not only make “places” within a given geographical location; they
make “places” by participating in social networks not necessarily attached to a location.
“Places” exist in the form of social networks circulating local knowledge among spaces
with amorphous dimensions. For example, Our Kitchen Table (OKT) participants’
mutual sense of place and identity is defined by acts of community organizing and
sharing food over a provisional geographical space.

Wolf (1999) argues that ideas and values propagate among social networks and
become grounded through communication in discourse and performance. According to
Feld and Basso (1996), observing communication allows one to draw upon “a broad
range of local symbolic materials—verbal, visual, musical, oral, graphic and written—
that connect ‘places’ to practices, social meaning, memory and the movement and
dwelling of agents that create social networks.” I attended an array of activities
throughout my time in the field and captured this symbolic data through the use of
participant observation, unstructured and structured interviews, and video documentation.
With these three methods, I documented the discourses indicative of the knowledge—
beliefs and values—common to social networks that are entrenched in relations of power.

During my research, I used the sociolinguistic concept of a ‘speech community’
in determining social networks and identifying what food security group or organization
individuals were associated with. A speech community is defined as a group of individuals who regularly interact (Hymes 1962, 1972, 1986; Gumperz 1968). Hymes’ (1962) *Ethnography of Speaking* indicates speech communities should be explored from the ground up through the eyes of actors and their many ways of speaking and speech patterns. The most ubiquitous speech patterns contain the identifiable cultural information (values and invested meaning) common to the social networks. Thus, speech patterns signify particular values typical to food security initiatives, whose members belong to various social networks. The sociolinguistic study of a speech community suggests a practical framework for identifying social networks and examining how cultural information is transmitted within and across Grand Rapids networks. I used this framework as a method for decoding the meaning people ascribed to building food security during the ongoing processes of place making and social networking that entail what Van Hassell (2002) refers to as a “community in praxis.”

The study of social networks allows social scientists to investigate differing approaches and ways people organize for discussing how to deal with everyday life (Trotter II 1999). Through the exploration of connections among people in the network and their bridges to other networks, one can locate primary sources of power, influence and communication in the network, as well as identify social roles (Trotter II 1999). I observed the general practices, power dynamics, and dialogue particular to the social networks forged among the SE gardeners and those of outside agencies intervening on their “behalf.”

Our Kitchen Table’s Food Diversity Project consists of backyard gardeners, community gardeners, and concerned citizens networking regionally across the SE

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3 I am not referring to the social networking technology of computers or smart phones.
neighborhoods to establish an autonomous food system to counter food insecurity. This is a type of community cultural production, in which people create social cohesion through the practices of networking and place making. Social networks that form around gardens facilitate the dissemination of knowledge about food systems, which builds social capital in the form of trust, civic engagement, the development of community leaders, and the equal distribution of services and information (Bellows et al. 2003; Glover 2005; Landman 1993; and Semenza et al. 2007). Tocqueville (1836) refers to this democratic value of sharing as the theory of social capital necessary for the civic participation vital to the survival of a community (Putnam 1993).

Wakefield et al. (2007) argue that a built community is a socially cohesive network of people who combine resources like land, income, and local knowledge to lessen the stresses of urban life. Gardens are also imagined as sites for community building, a space where community is forged in the face of issues related to poverty (Glover 2004; Twiss et al. 2003). The work of OKT extends beyond one community garden locale or isolated group of people and focuses on confronting structural institutional inequality.

Communities do not occur in isolation unaffected by larger forces. People are shaped by power relations and live with contradictions within their societies that are not to be viewed as homogenized coherent wholes (Bourdieu 1977). For this reason, Foucault (1978) challenges anthropologists to account for diverse discourses of knowledge among groups of people. Actors within communities all have their own stories of struggle situated in different relations of power (Ortner 1999). The position in which OKT members find themselves is in a disaffected power struggle among a larger
local food movement that involves a social network of government representatives, institutions, and the business sector. The stories collected for this study are narratives that generate what Chavez et al. (2003) and Behar (1993) refer to as “a democratic representation of oppressed voices.” Notably, OKT members consider themselves active agents in social change rather than “oppressed” people.

Foucault (1978) defines power as fluid and articulated into a set of relations that consist of discourse, knowledge, and the state. He employs Gramsci’s concept of hegemony to demonstrate how power becomes realized and embedded within people’s everyday discourses (Rabinow 1984). The application of Gramsci’s concept of hegemony fits Grand Rapids schematic of green capitalism. In Grand Rapids, people take for granted the language of “green” capitalism and the local food movement, which is signified by the terms of “community,” “local,” “sustainability,” and “social justice.” I argue that food security projects are institutionalized sites for the reproduction of these values and ideals that obscure the fact that these projects are a part of a neoliberal economic system that maintains poverty and food insecurity. Neoliberal policies supporting the privatization of public amenities, such as non-profit groups taking over the city’s public infrastructure duties, sanction the legality of businesses and development efforts gentrifying blighted inner city neighborhoods in Grand Rapids. In the process, research data are often used to secure private and public funding in order to “revitalize” neighborhoods; this is one example of ‘relational power.’

Foucault’s (1977, 1978, 1982, 1991, 1997) interpretation of ‘relational power’ and ‘governmentality’ instrumentally provide the theoretical foundation for my study. These concepts explain how the manifestation of structural inequality (e.g. gentrification) can
occur in the local food movement. Wallerstein and Duran (2003) argue that relational power is repressive in the sense that it is expressed through regimes of truth existing in a web of social relationships included and hidden in discursive practices, institutions, families, public policy, and research. Moreover, relational power is exercised through direct and indirect control over people’s opportunities for better education, employment, and living conditions. ‘Governmentality,’ as described by Foucault, is the ordering of people and things (nature or space) in an economy. He argues that ‘governmentality’s’ principal form of knowledge is political economy, the art of governing a population of people by economic processes without the appearance of government intervention (Li 2007). However, power only exists or is evident as it is exercised on others (Foucault 1982).

Cooke and Kothari (2001) indicate that the exercise of power is evident in projects addressing poverty in communities that often employ top-down and technocratic models of community organization. In Grand Rapids, local food projects designed by top-down model experts are imbued with pernicious aspect of power and control, evading grassroots community building efforts that have the potential to directly address the structural inequality of poverty. As noted by Bourgois (2003), common interventions designed for those who are poor do not address the structural, political, or ideological determinants of social marginalization. Thus, programs do not create long-term solutions led by those who are poor.

OKT activists acknowledge these problems characteristic of common interventions and mobilize community residents through community building activities around gardens. They encourage participants to tap into available resources and at the
same time to avoid dependence on those organizations and top-down schemes that seek to build “sustainable communities” and plan events on behalf of the “community.” OKT recognizes that these agendas are paternalistic and privilege the perspectives of “experts.” According to Escobar (1995), as witnessed by OKT, “experts” often do not incorporate the needs of individuals of different age, ethnicity, religion, or gender.

The goal of Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) is to avoid these pitfalls. Minkler and Wallerstein (2003) outline the basic tenets of this approach and describe practitioners of CBPR as mainly concerned with health disparities based on race, class, gender, and other socially constructed domains. The authors claim that CBPR researchers study power in order to find ways around it to engender social change and concentrate on disenfranchised populations of people. Creating partnerships with members of a community is a common method for democratizing knowledge and neutralizing relations of power between dominant and marginalized groups. Therefore, one CBPR approach is to expose and find avenues for integrating the local knowledge of community members into research seeking to remedy social justice issues. Minkler and Wallerstein (2003) claim CBPR aims to generate democratic social change for empowering community members. According to Greenwood and Levin (2007), empowerment involves the agentive ability of community members to independently and more effectively control their own destinies within a more just environment.

Discussion about the CBPR method with a founding member of OKT revealed that she is critical of CBPR’s central concept of “empowerment.” Her criticisms are

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4 Both I and OKT considered experts to be environmental and local food system advocates, community organizers, public health officials, collectors of data or designers of university-led research, committee members of city planning divisions, and etc. Experts did not necessarily represent the needs of the “communities” that were the target of their interventions.
similar to those of Cleaver (2001) who argues the term empowerment represents an ideal. “Empowerment” does not necessarily affect change, the transformation of “structures of subordination” through radical changes in law, property rights, and the institutions of society (Cleaver 2001). Rather, CBPR is based upon a concept of empowerment that is infiltrated by hegemonic ideas of cost effectiveness and individualism, the predominant discourses of development.

Christopher et al. (2008) provide a comprehensive critique of CBPR that also mirrors OKT’s concerns. These authors assert that CBPR operates under the premise that participation resolves issues of power within research, because it embodies the CBPR guiding concepts of “community,” “equality,” “empowerment,” “democratization of knowledge,” discourses of mutual decision-making, sharing of expertise, and ownership of data and products. The process of participation, however, is strongly influenced by “real world” power dynamics. These power dynamics mask and prevent the full realization of these concepts. Academics, first, must learn how to view community members as experts. Thus, equality in perspectives and expertise is not always achieved in CBPR due to the fact that data analysis and interpretation are often not a joint enterprise, and therefore, privilege the expertise of academics. Moreover, community members often do not have the opportunity to contribute their insights to the published knowledge or design the methods used for these projects. The researcher inevitably attains control over what is analyzed and published. Ultimately, academic and community members become overwhelmed by the commitment of time and resources necessary to prepare for this equitable engagement in all phases of the research (Cashmen et al. 2008). As a result, the goals of true partnership, empowerment, and using local
knowledge to effect social change are not fully implemented, especially when information and resources continue to be controlled by stakeholders outside of the community.

The founding member of OKT suggests an alternative approach to collaborative research, found in the work of Heaney et al. (2007) and Wilson et al. (2011). These authors are critical of CBPR that is not led, designed, or owned by community residents. Instead, they prefer a Community Owned and Managed Research Model as a guide for how Community Based Organizations can take the lead on a project and use university faculty and researchers for their own benefit rather than the other way around. Heaney et al. (2007) recognize that community members do not benefit in the long term when university-based researchers lead a so-called community-based project or research.

Even though I did not design a community based research project, I sought to avoid the shortcomings of precluding community residents’ input from my research design and findings, as well as not receiving any benefits related to my research. Therefore, I integrated OKT’s questions about food insecurity into my research. OKT and I co-authored papers and attended conferences together and continue to do so. I produced a short documentary, which OKT owns a copy to screen for critical educational purposes. In regards to my dissertation, OKT granted me permission to write from my perspective about their organization and projects. Influenced by public anthropology’s goal of finding solutions to societal issues, I designed this study and used my methods for supporting OKT’s mission of changing the structural causes of food insecurity. I shared my insights about power dynamics with OKT, investigated methods for enhancing food
security through a critical justice lens, and participated in organizing Food Diversity Project activities while remaining conscious of my role as researcher throughout.

**Chapter Overviews**

Chapter 1 is devoted to a description of the ethnographic setting and the three methods of participant observation, interviews, and video documentation that I used for conducting field research. I explain the rise and fall of industry in Grand Rapids and the formation of the ghetto region in the Southeast as it relates to structural racism and disparities in environmental health and food insecurity, as well as current economic conditions. Gentrification is occurring as city planners and developers are replacing Grand Rapids industrial legacy with the image of a green and “sustainable” city that has a “locally” based economy and “healthy communities.” Local food production ties into this image. Research findings contribute to an existing literature that has not heretofore considered the multitude of meanings and implications tied into the urban food security discourse of “community,” “sustainability,” “local,” and “social justice,” used to promote this image and economic initiatives. To varying extents, every chapter explores participants’ different interpretations of these values.

Food growers, often having no organizational ties, reference the idea of “community” when they embrace it as a value that they are applying to their daily lives. In this case, it is an aspect of their lifestyle in which they seek to socially bond with others and collectively own resources. Food security advocates and developers, on the other hand, do not define this term. Instead, a “community” is an inert entity to act on the behalf of or upon.
Concerns over the environment is another reason why people care about the food system, and often define “sustainability” as a value and lifestyle. For instance, food insecure SE communities with an industrial legacy view natural resources as a vital component for improving health status. A small plot of land to garden is a valued natural resource in a landscape poisoned by toxins. For others, the environment is one component of sustainability defined by the triple bottom line of environment, social wellbeing, and economic development. Activists, associated with OKT, abhor this latter definition of “sustainability” believing proponents use it as a technical buzzword with the intention of profiting from the economic component. A buzzword, in this sense, is defined as a term that markets food or goods to those desiring to make guilt-free consumption choices; they want to believe their purchases are supporting nearby jobs and protecting the environment.

Activists identify “local” as being another buzzword often used synonymously with the word “sustainability.” As with the one view of sustainability, by consuming food or products labeled “local,” people believe they are making ethical purchases. However, these beliefs are often misguided. What actually constitutes “local” is a disputed notion. People determine its definition depending on the distance and method food and goods travel to their plates or into their possession. An organization or person may consider an apple grown in Ohio as “local” when there are those, for example, who would define “local” as being within ten miles of their vicinity. Amway, a worldwide direct selling company and manufacturer of health, beauty and household goods, located just outside of Grand Rapids, is heralded as a “local” business that sells “green” products. In actuality, this is a corporation misrepresenting the values of “local” and
“sustainability” as evident by their outsourcing of jobs to other countries, which have laissez faire environmental laws and protections for workers (Smith 2010).

Finally, OKT and allied activists conceptualize the term of “social justice” as “being for the people and by the people” by taking direct action against systemic inequality. Activists criticize organizations that sometimes refer to themselves as “grassroots” or claim to have a “social justice” approach. From these activists’ point of view, groups paid to deal with food security issues, often non-profit organizations, are misappropriating the discourse of “community,” “sustainability,” “local,” “grassroots,” and “social justice” for their own intended purposes.

With polarized definitions, participants utilize these values to justify supplying local food in some sort of capacity. This ethnographic project does not define these terms, but critically explores how participants use and understand this language; the reasons people participate in the local food movement; and the relations of power in which these concepts and practices are rooted. I argue that different projects around food, ranging from individuals’ gardens to the redevelopment of a neighborhood, represent institutionalized sites for place making: the reproduction of local knowledge including the values of “local,” “community,” “sustainability,” and “social justice.” For the general population concerned with food issues, these are hegemonic ideals implying inclusiveness and equality. However, particular social networks exclude community residents and exploit this language, obscuring the fact that organizers operate within a neoliberal economic system that maintains poverty and food insecurity. This circumstance is possible no doubt because the design of local food projects depends on the guidelines of funding agencies that are stalwarts of the larger economic system.
Chapter 2 summarizes the major reasons for a growing consciousness around the importance of locally produced food in the face of a food system that is damaging to small farmers, the dispossessed, the environment, and consumers’ health. Situating the SE Grand Rapids problems in a larger context by examining global agriculture, I summarize policies pertaining to global agribusiness and to locally produced food. I examine the history of gardens in the United States as a popular approach for securing local food in the face of political and economic crisis. During my fieldwork, several advocates were attempting to institute policies supportive of urban agriculture, especially yard and community gardens. Describing these different land use policies, I introduce the public versus private debate of who should have access to and ownership of public spaces and amenities, the “commons.” I address the fact that segments of the population are denied the capacity to make decisions impacting the commons.

Chapter 3 highlights several food security initiatives taking place in the Southeast. Grand Rapids has a population of 188,040 (U.S. Census Bureau 2012). Thus, the city has a relatively small community in which almost everyone doing work around food issues is familiar with one another. Work includes that of individuals involved in non-profit organizations, community development corporations, city government, the health department, social service agencies, businesses, neighborhood redevelopment projects, farmers markets, nearby universities as well as colleges, a nature center, and the Grand Rapids Public School district. Among these participants have arisen overlapping social networks impacting the Southeast. With the exception of some charity-based groups, all groups view the production of local food as a necessary means for the creation of food security. However, organizations emphasize particular areas of interest: health, economic
development, social justice, beautifying the city, policy, charity, and education. Local food advocates observe the fact that food security work lacks solidarity and is fragmented due to the fact that groups disagree over what should be the focal emphasis of a project.

The Food Policy Advocates (FPA) is a non-profit organization involved in several projects with many of the above groups and its main activities took place in the Southeast during my research. The FPA organized the Neighborhood Farmers Market (NFM). One member of OKT co-managed and managed the market from 2007 until 2010. In chapter 3, I extensively detail the NFM. I devoted much of my time to the market along with the vendors who were gardeners from nearby neighborhoods.

There are food garden initiatives in the city whose members have no or minimal ties to these more formal organizations and/or are not paid a salary. At the most, they may depend on the patronage of a sponsor or a small grant of usually about five hundred dollars to cover the growing related expenses of seeds, tools, building materials, water, and soil. Community houses with gardens, church gardens, and community gardens are examples of such groups.

There is a distinction between types of local food initiatives because several members of the formal groups, as seen in chapters 3 and 4, belong to the social networks that are negatively impacting the SE residents in terms of power dynamics and exclusionary practices. Nonetheless, not every person or group can be put into the discrete categories of belonging to one particular social network and having a salaried, non-salaried, formal, or informal status. For example, an individual can network with those who are currently pioneering different food-based economic development schemes in the Southeast, where they happen to live. Here, one could start a community garden at
different intentional-living community houses and network at the grassroots neighborhood level while also participating in a social network with a higher power differential. Many local food advocates do not realize that exclusionary practices and power dynamics are linked to particular projects. Advocates assume they are improving the city’s image and others’ health status.

One social network is primarily comprised of some of Grand Rapids most wealthiest and powerful men prospecting for an economic niche, not only in agriculture and the popularity of the local food movement but in food deserts located in the Southeast. Food security is a major source of funding and is used for entrepreneurial development purposes. Tracking sources of knowledge, who spoke with whom, and how resources were allocated, I discovered hidden power dynamics evident in a myriad of overlapping business proposals and undertakings impacting the Southeast.

In chapter 3, I profile Grand Rapids Food Coalition (GRFC), a think-tank of people searching for a food security project in 2010; many of the members participated in the above social network and represented various organizations targeting the Southeast for food security or development reasons. In chapter 4, I describe the nascent development of the Downtown Market. It involved members of GRFC and is a prime example of revitalization efforts (gentrification) occurring in or near the Southeast. The Downtown Market, when completed, will host chic bars, upscale restaurants, and an indoor farmers market that will sell items such as artisan breads and cheeses. Detailed in chapter 4, OKT was opposed to this new development and took direct action against it.

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5 Housemates defined their intentional-living community houses as a purposeful attempt to create a community of mutual obligations usually through growing, sharing and cooking food, as well as sharing household related tasks.
One reason for OKT’s disapproval was because this market is receiving public funding dollars in addition to foundation money that is intended for addressing food insecurity.

In chapters 3 and 4, I outline different initiatives’ organizational styles, which lead to exclusionary practices. Community residents tend to have a reduced level of participation if they are limited in their decision-making capacity or access to information and resources. Communication problems cause projects to exclude participants in various ways. First, cultural differences and colliding worldviews lead to conflict, exclusion, and racism. Second, information is not always circulated in an accessible manner. Chapter 5 examines OKT’s organizational difficulties and this group’s attempts to fully involve participants in different projects.

Chapter 5 closely profiles OKT’s Food Diversity Project (FDP). OKT typically consists of six to eight African American women over the age of 35 with school-aged children or older, from different socioeconomic status, and concerned with growing food, reducing health disparities, community activism, and politics. Members live and/or are promoting urban sustainability in the Baxter, Southtown, Garfield Park, and Eastown neighborhoods of SE Grand Rapids. Drawing upon their members’ expertise, OKT organizes in response to local individuals interested in building toxic-free neighborhoods and a self-sustaining food system. To achieve this objective, OKT began facilitating a social network of household gardeners who share their excess harvest and resources (social capital) and teach others how to grow food. Members of and participants in OKT’s project are central to my study. They taught me about their capacity-building model and urban social movement predicated upon their fundamental principle of justice.
Chapter 5 outlines the role of OKT as part of a larger activist movement in Grand Rapids, the United States, and in the world that upholds the value of justice and whose political ideologies are tested. Justice is the changing of structural conditions responsible for inequality in order for all citizens to be afforded the same rights of food security, safe environmental conditions, and social opportunities (Shiva 2005). Through its capacity-building activities and foundational principle of justice, OKT’s FDP provides an alternative to common approaches to food insecurity and environmental health disparities in the United States. The FDP’s activities can be summarized as having four objectives, all related to aiding the community in dealing with systemic problems: (1) using popular education to raise consciousness around food and environmental issues; (2) mobilizing a self-determinative community to reduce health disparities caused by environmental toxins and food insecurity and to collectively own the means of production for growing food; (3) building a community that has a voice and takes ownership of its own project; and (4) changing policy.

The FDP addresses food insecurity and the broken food system, environmental health disparities, and structural racism; individuals most impacted by these issues tend to be from African American or Hispanic communities and/or earn little or no income. OKT members actively discuss the issues of structural inequality and racism. For example, they met as a group to read scholarly works such as Toxic Wastes and Race at Twenty 1987-2007 (Bullard et al. 2007). This report was the first to document the phenomenon of environmental racism. Per this report, race was identified as the most correlated variable for identifying where commercial hazardous waste facilities were located in the United States. Environmental racism is apparent when one observes health
outcomes that disproportionately impact non-White groups or those in lower socioeconomic groups (e.g., childhood lead poisoning) (Bullard 1993).

OKT’s educational activities around growing food in conjunction with avoiding environmental contaminants commenced during the spring of 2008. OKT collected data from previous projects in the region. These data revealed an overlapping presence of food deserts and high rates of lead and other environmental toxins in SE Grand Rapids, verifying both food apartheid and environmental racism in the area. In reaction, OKT decided to host a series of discussions with residents and community groups that were impacted by these disparities in the Garfield Park, Eastown, Souhttown, and Baxter neighborhoods. Community dialogue revealed that among residents who attended town hall meetings, the majority wanted to build their capacity around food security and minimize exposure to environmental pollutants. Residents stated that they felt ill equipped to grow food in their neighborhoods or lead projects designed to address food security issues. This was particularly true for single women who earned low wages, were unemployed or underemployed, and/or were the primary caregivers of children who were school-aged or younger. OKT’s solution to these concerns was to institute “food justice,” which is the right of all citizens to have access to fresh, affordable, and healthy food. OKT aligned their food justice approach with what Holt-Gimenez et al. (2009: 159) define, in part, as placing “communities in leadership of their own solutions and providing them with the tools to address the disparities within our food systems and within society at large.”

The FDP developed as a response to community dialogue and the aforementioned data. The main goal is to establish long-term and self-sustaining solutions to inequality.
Policy work and capacity-building activities that place residents in charge of creating food security and addressing environmental health disparities are crucial for establishing justice. Activities are modeled after the Building Movement Project (BMP), which is based upon Paulo Freire’s (1970) “popular education” model. The goal of popular education is to develop peoples’ capacity for social change through a collective problem-solving approach emphasizing participation, reflection, and critical analysis of social problems. The Michigan Coordinator from the BMP advised OKT members on how to analyze the relationship between power and the inequality in their lives and communities. Participants were taught, as outlined by Building Movement Project (2006), how to be agents in shaping social change through organizing others and identifying their own power (assets) in the community.

In accordance with the BMP, one of OKT’s goals was to train a group of women who were conscious about the pervasive problems in their neighborhoods. These women’s role was to establish strategies for building an infrastructure to address issues in the community and generate a cohort to serve either as peer educators or organizers. During the time of this research, OKT began to accomplish this goal by training women on how to transition from analyzing issues into becoming community organizers. In addition, OKT identified the first group of peer educators for the FDP. They were individuals who, with others, shared their knowledge about growing food or a related activity. For instance, peer educators served as gardening coaches for those first learning how to grow food. OKT paired new gardeners with an experienced group of gardeners and the goal was to have them recruit others to garden and provide advice when new gardeners encountered challenges. The objective was to strengthen a cooperative social
network of gardeners and to identify community assets for growing and sharing food as observed by the work of Glover (2005), Landman (1993), and Semenza and Krishnasamy (2006).

In 2010, the FDP involved several capacity-building activities related to promoting food security, avoiding lead exposure, and education on sustainable subsistence activities. Interactive workshops provided education on canning and seed saving, composting, starting plants from seeds, organic growing methods, growing winter crops, and selecting seeds for plant diversity. Walking and bicycle tour workshops were organized around both household gardens and naturally growing food in the neighborhoods. During these tours, examples of topics included lead in the soil; herbal gardening for health and culinary purposes; and urban foraging for edible fruit, nuts, and weeds that grow in public spaces within the city. Cooking demonstrations were another type of workshop, in which peer educators prepared food with both familiar and unfamiliar types of locally grown produce. Workshops encouraged gardeners to grow and share food, and diversify their gardens.

Maintaining biodiversity is a major tenet of the FDP. OKT encourages gardeners to grow varieties of different plant species to preserve cultural heritage, as specific varieties of fruits, vegetables, and grains are used for traditional cuisines and healing modalities. Diverse groups of people have cultivated seeds for generations; these seeds—some centuries old—are part of their cultural heritage (Klindienst 2006). Several SE gardeners who exhibited their gardens during the FDP’s food garden tours spoke about the link between their plants and their cultural or ancestral heritage.
Chapter 6 describes OKT members’ and gardeners’ experiences and reasons for growing their own food. I became acquainted with household and community gardeners through my involvement with OKT and the networking process of “who knows who” grows food. Gardening was reported as a means to practice values, build relationships, and circulate growing expertise. There were those who longed for a return to a simpler agrarian lifestyle; valued their health and the environment; desired to be self-sufficient during an economic crisis; loved to labor in the soil and see the fruits of their labor; felt a spiritual connection to the land; loved to cook; and preserved growing knowledge and cultural heritage.

The urban setting of SE Grand Rapids is enriched by the stories of different peoples’ connection to their food and land. Many of the African American elders who grow food migrated from the South and eat similar foods. Another group of gardeners consist of young college students possessing discernible characteristics: They are white, in their early 20’s, and collectively identify with a hipster/anarchist/punk sub-culture typified by the anti-consumerism practices of sewing circles, dumpster diving, veganism, and “growing your own food.” This latter group tends to be involved in various community gardens. Overall, gardeners share similar experiences and reasons for growing food despite one’s socioeconomic status, age, gender, sex, sexual preference, ethnicity, birthplace, and race. Almost everyone speaks of how they love the satisfaction of watching their plants grow and how it feels to have their hands in the soil.

The remainder of this dissertation is devoted to: (1) understanding the practices and values of food security initiatives and the SE gardeners; and (2) investigating how power is put into practice. Chapter seven concludes this dissertation. In this chapter, I
explore the implications of and why the politics of urban agricultural initiatives matter, as well as whether or not anthropology can advance social movements as they relate to efforts such as OKT.
Chapter 1

In this chapter, I provide a description of the field setting, focused at the Southeast Grand Rapids neighborhood level, though I also highlight facts about the state, county, and city. I write about the field setting’s history and current “revitalization” in relationship to health disparities and the local food movement. I then outline the ethnographic methods that I applied to this locale for answering my questions about power, observing varied values and approaches to securing local food, and detailing Our Kitchen Table’s (OKT) radical model that simultaneously confronts environmental health and food disparities.

Grand Rapids, Michigan as a Site of Study

A history of industry in Grand Rapids dates back to the mid-19th century and is one of structural racism in how food deserts and environmental toxins became endemic to the Southeast, the setting of my research. Jelks (2006) describes the social and economic history of industry in Grand Rapids. Lumber was the first industry in Grand Rapids and resulted in the city becoming chartered in 1850. The city’s economic and population growth stemmed from the surrounding hardwood forest. Lumber, along the Grand River, was shipped west to Chicago and north to Canada. The completion of the railroad opened up the nation as a market for the lumber. After the Civil War, the city became home to local manufacturers and companies of home furniture. Throughout the United
States, Grand Rapids became known as the “Furniture City” from then on and into the 1920s.\(^6\)

As depicted by Jelks (2006), the 1920s saw the growth of the auto industry. Michigan experienced the industrial boom of the 1940s when, during the war, the automobile industry switched its production over to assembling tanks and bombers. The war provided many economic opportunities to the auto industry and its workers. Both African Americans and whites migrated from the South to work in the plants. African Americans managed to gain entry into the United Auto Workers (UAW) union. Thus, they were able to secure employment at the Hayes Manufacturing Company that produced auto bodies and aerial bombs and at the General Motors plant that was producing aircraft parts for the war industry. Even after the war, there were many of these good paying jobs still available, not requiring a high school diploma. An anomaly occurred for a brief moment in history; uneducated African Americans, second and third generation immigrants, and whites could afford homes and to send their children to college.

Grand Rapids growing industry of various manufacturing plants later gave rise to the industrial pollution and environmental racism apparent today. Bryant and Hockman (2011) claim Michigan, with a large industrial sector, is a prime example of environmental injustice. Out of all the states, Michigan has among the largest numbers of toxic inventory citations, superfund sites, as well as brownfield sites and hazardous waste disposal facilities. Toxic sites tend to be located in communities of color, severely impacted by toxic induced and aggravated diseases such as respiratory problems and

\(^6\) Grand Rapids still has this nickname though it is now known as the home of office furniture. Grand Rapids and its satellite cities are the birthplace of internationally based Steelcase Inc., Haworth Inc., and Herman Miller Inc. Many of these jobs were shipped overseas beginning in the late 20\(^{th}\) century.
cancers. In fact, Bryant and Hockman (2011) report, approximately 1,291,706 or 13.9 percent of the state’s population is currently black with 60 percent living in Detroit. Moreover, as of 1990, 97.1 percent of the black population lived in urban areas; if not residing in Detroit, the rest of this population lived in Flint, Benton Harbor, Pontiac, and Grand Rapids—all cities with heavy industrial pollution in low-income communities of color. The authors conclude that Michigan is one of the most segregated states of the North in respect to race and income. OKT campaigns against this type of environmental racism reflected in disparate asthma and childhood lead poisoning rates, which are widespread in the Southeast, an area of Grand Rapids disproportionately populated with manufacturing plants and low income and/or communities of color. OKT concentrates its efforts on childhood lead poisoning and plans to deal more with asthma in the future.

The structural causes of health disparities are related to the enclosure of the Southeast. Jelks (2006) maintains an ‘embryonic ghetto’ was observed in 1928 and realized by 1947 when 99.8 percent of the city’s African American population lived within the segregated boundaries of Eastern, Grandville, Wealthy, and Franklin Streets, an area of about 30 blocks. He reports that the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People’s (NAACP) civil rights work in the 1940s sought to prevent a racial and economic ‘ghettoization’ from taking place in Grand Rapids. The NAACP efforts centered on middle class social reforms by trying to prevent schools from becoming completely segregated and fighting for labor rights alongside the UAW. Despite these struggles, what OKT designates as the Southeast closely resembles the boundaries of 1947s ‘embryonic ghetto.’
The expansion of ghettos intensified with the development of suburbs. Federal legislation was responsible for the rise of suburbs with the design of the car-house relationship. Williamson et al. (2002) cite two government policies that are responsible for this relationship. One policy, the 1944 G.I. Bill package included government mortgage guarantees, mortgage interest deductions, and hidden subsidies for private housing. Private developers, aided with government support, constructed generous single-family suburbia housing for white male veterans who were the head of their households. The other policy, the Interstate Highway Act of 1956 connected the suburbs to the cities. It provided for the construction of 42,500 miles of roads with 90 percent federal financing. In northern industrial cities, due to these policies, the post-World War II housing boom and the growing automobile market, the 1940s and 1950s was an era known as white flight; those fleeing from the core city to the suburbs left behind areas of increasing poverty as banks redlined neighborhoods and refused to invest in communities of color (Jelks 2006).

Deindustrialization—the outsourcing of jobs to developing countries—significantly altered the landscape of U.S. northern industrial cities during the 1970s and 1980s. It worsened the conditions of these cities in which the poor no longer maintained employment in industry (Bourgois 2003). Ghettos increasingly became marked pockets of poverty. Rather than highways and suburbs, public authorities constructed cramped multifamily housing for the poor, the elderly, female-headed families, and ethnic and racial minorities (Hayden 2006). Racial and economic divisions intensified.

Holt-Gimenez et al. 2009 report that during the time of white flight, the outgoing population took food resources away from inner-city neighborhoods. Big box grocery
stores followed those fleeing to the suburbs, because suburbanites were the ones with greater wealth. Outside of cities, there was space for grocery stores to expand in size and build parking lots. Those in the suburbs could afford to own a vehicle and drive miles away from their homes in order to purchase various goods. Before the era of white flight, many small individually owned businesses, in general, were being replaced by large corporate entities during the 20th century. In SE Grand Rapids, a March 1929 article in the Michigan Tradesman reported that none of the grocers on Wealthy Street could compete with the big chain stores; the last grocery store was vacated in the mid 1940s (Atomic Object 2011). Today, this food desertification continues throughout the Southeast as OKT’s Food Diversity Project (FDP) targets neighborhoods bordering Wealthy Street.

Liquor and convenience stores are now the most readily available sources for food, and fast food restaurants are the cheapest source for food. Therefore, consumers’ choices are limited to foods high in fat, sugars, salt, and refined carbon-hydrates. This is what is referred to as a food desert: an area of the inner city void of grocery stores that provide access to fresh, affordable, and nutritious food. According to Holt-Gimenez et al. (2009), the modern food system has left millions of people without access to healthy food and is one of the leading reasons for the prevalence of diet related diseases being highest among people of color. For example, African American women are 50 percent more likely to be obese than white women. In essence, “The modern food system has turned entire communities of color into unhealthy ‘food deserts,’ leading to charges of structural racism and ‘food apartheid’” (Holt-Gimenez et al. 2009: 160).
Rates of childhood lead poisoning and food insecurity in SE Grand Rapids correlate with data on race/ethnicity and income, demonstrating structural racism. Healthy Homes Coalition (2010) reports that in the year 2000, more than 90 percent of the 559 Kent County children 0-5 years-old, having elevated levels of lead in their blood, lived in Grand Rapids and were from families earning low incomes and receiving Medicaid assistance. Children of color comprised the majority of this population. Two out of every five children living in the Southeast’s Baxter Neighborhood tested for elevated blood lead levels. A report by the Kent County Essential Needs Task Force (2010) states that food insecurity, in Kent County, disproportionately impacts households with children that are headed by females (37.2 percent) or by men (27.2 percent), African American households (25.7 percent), and Hispanic households (26.9 percent). The report indicates, nationwide, those living below the poverty line—measured as a family of three or more with an annual income of less than $17,163—are four times more likely to be food insecure than those above the poverty line.

OKT partners with groups and individuals living within and near four particular SE neighborhood associations having the highest rates of childhood lead poisoning and food insecurity in Grand Rapids, as well as several community residents who express a willingness to participate in the FDP. Neighborhood associations include Eastown Community Association (ETCA) in the Eastown neighborhood, Southeast Community Association (SECA) in the Southtown neighborhood, Baxter Neighborhood Association in the Baxter neighborhood, and Garfield Park Neighborhood Association (GPNA) in the Garfield Park neighborhood.
All four-neighborhood associations have significant rates of poverty and sizeable African American and Hispanic populations. Grand Valley State University’s Community Research Institute (CRI) 2010 provides demographic information on race/ethnicity and income per neighborhood association. The race/ethnicity data is based on the 2010 U.S. Census. The data on poverty is based on the 2000 U.S. Census data on regions as small as the block level. The 2000 U.S. Census data does not accurately reflect 2010 poverty rates at the neighborhood level, which have inevitably and concurrently risen with statewide poverty due to the ongoing economic crisis.

Regardless, the data does reflect that levels of poverty are more highly concentrated among regions with non-white groups of people compared to other regions of Grand Rapids and beyond that have a majority white populous. The following table (Table 1) demonstrates data on poverty and race as reported by the Community Research Institute (2010). I do not include the numbers of other racial/ethnic groups that represent no more than 1-2 percent of each neighborhood association population.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Neighborhood</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Those Living in Poverty or Below 844</th>
<th>% Of Population African American 66</th>
<th>% Of Population White 75</th>
<th>% Of Population Hispanic 44.6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Baxter</td>
<td>2,395</td>
<td>844</td>
<td>17.2</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastown</td>
<td>5,257</td>
<td>927</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garfield Park</td>
<td>15,761</td>
<td>3,887</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>27.8</td>
<td>44.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SECA</td>
<td>4,901</td>
<td>2,095</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>28.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Eastown significantly has the lowest African American and Hispanic populations even though this neighborhood underwent white flight and still has maintained a range of cultural influences and income levels for about the last forty years. The Civil Rights Act of 1968 prohibited discrimination in the sale, rental, and financing of housing. According to the Atomic Object (2011), during the Civil Rights Era, many African American families moved into the neighborhood and settled south of Wealthy Street. In turn, many white families moved away, bringing the existing businesses. Atomic Object (2011) points out that college students, professionals, blue-collar workers, service industry employees, singles, and retired people all reside in this region. In fact, young white families and professionals and new business owners are increasingly moving back into the area.

As of the year 2000, 40 percent of the houses were rentals and college-age people represented 18 percent of the population (Atomic Object 2011). Eastown attracts college students, young families, and business owners because it is still a relatively inexpensive place to live and rent space. Moreover, the business district area is a popular hangout area due to the bars, restaurants, coffee shops, comic book store, tattoo shop, antiquated appeal of 19th century building stock and a brick street, and a celebrated hotdog restaurant. Typical people one may encounter are punk rockers, young college students from community houses, those in “hippie” apparel and young, middle class, white families. Eastown draws in people from around the city and the suburbs, in part, due to its restaurants offering an array of ethnic cuisines-Indian, Greek, Chinese, and Haitian.

One does not observe many African American patrons frequenting these businesses, though this demographic is concentrated directly south of the business
district, one of three located on Wealthy Street in the Southeast. The two other business
districts are attracting similar crowds of people. All three districts are displacing the
African American owned businesses and are located in or near the neighborhood
associations where OKT concentrates its activities. The region including Wealthy Street
and to the south is under the auspice of OKT. In close proximity of Wealthy Street is
where a majority African American and lower income population resides, as they are
being pushed further and further south. North of Wealthy Street is visibly more affluent
and inequitably white.

Food apartheid and environmental racism has extended into the Hispanic
populations. For example, Garfield Park Neighborhood Association is the furthermost
southern area involved with OKT. Again, 45 percent of the population is Hispanic.
Garfield Park lies east of Division Avenue. OKT’s focus area does not extend west of
this street, which arbitrarily acts as their west boundary for the Southeast rather than
Grandville Avenue, the boundary set by Jelks’ (2006) measurement of the 1947 ghetto.
Grandville Street now crosscuts what outsiders, in a prejudiced manner, refer to as “Little
Mexico,” where there is a majority Hispanic population and Hispanic owned businesses.
Near there is the Black Hills Neighborhood where the incinerator operates. Incinerators
are a major cause of asthma. As evident in Garfield Park and beyond, the Hispanic
population is rapidly growing and subject to health disparities. These individuals were
not involved in OKT or food initiatives targeting the Southeast. Unfortunately, there has
been little collaboration between ethnic/racial groups of people due to language barriers
and cultural differences. For example, along Division Avenue, there are several Hispanic
owned markets with fresh meat and produce. However, as described by an OKT member
who worked for the Garfield Park Neighborhood Association, the African American population living near Division Avenue still was experiencing the impacts of a food desert; they expressed discomfort about shopping in a Hispanic market that they believed was for “them.”

The two maps on the following pages demarcate the neighborhood associations and illustrate the boundaries for what OKT roughly referred to as the Southeast: Wealthy Street stretching south to Burton Street, between Division Avenue and Eastern Avenue, and portions between Eastern Avenue and a few blocks east of Fuller Avenue. Included in my analysis of the Southeast, and on the second map, is the Heartside Neighborhood Association, adjacent to the Southeast. This section is between Division Avenue and the Grand River as well as Fulton Street and Wealthy Street. OKT and I were interested in this segment of the city since this is the location of the soon-to-be Downtown Market. The gentrification has been ongoing here for the past ten years and is sprawling into the Southeast through collaborative projects described in chapter 4.

7 The Downtown Market is the multi-million dollar business detailed in chapter 4.
Map of Grand Rapids

Community Research Institute (2010)  

Figure 1
The different neighborhood associations are highlighted below on this map.

Neighborhood Associations

Community Research Institute (2010)  Figure 2
Grand Rapids is my hometown and has undergone tremendous change since 2005. I was absent for three years and returned in the summer of 2008. I moved into a neighborhood, one street north of Wealthy Street, bordering my focus area of SE Grand Rapids. My new place was located in a once predominantly African American and visibly blighted neighborhood. I was astounded at the transformation that transpired in only three years. As I settled into my new living arrangements, I noticed the many middle class Caucasian people in the area that strolled up and down the streets to eat at places selling “local” food that were adorned with names that conveyed an exotic or nostalgic sense of place. The Electric Cheetah restaurant and Winchester Pub were two such places. Available to the new inhabitants, including myself, was a huge array of trendy restaurants, boutiques, beauty salons, pubs, coffee bars, and art and home décor stores.

Progressive urban planners and developers have been revitalizing Wealthy Street, emulating a time in which a mass transit system (late 19th to early 20th century street cars) served neighborhood residents who owned the local businesses that provided their needed goods and services (Atomic Object 2011). The community to which I returned was now comprised of new businesses recast or remodeled from the original buildings with 19th century brick stock. Imposter old-fashioned wrought iron light posts had been added to the new streetscape, reminiscent of this epoch in history. Still intact, in places, was the original brick street. Amidst this created sense of place remained the dilapidated remnants of vacant buildings, many of which had chipping hot pink, deep purple, electric blue, or canary yellow paint. The windows were boarded up and plastered with building code violations.
Over the 20th century, economic downturns, white flight, and deindustrialization led to and facilitated the continued gentrification of these neighborhoods, hard hit by the recent economic crisis. Even so, Grand Rapids has experienced economic growth. Developers are buying up cheap foreclosed housing and vacant buildings and starting new businesses as white suburbia is returning to the city to “Live, Work, and Shop.”

Low (2006) points out that urban revitalization—the privatized development of urban cities to bring back suburbanites to shop and live—for the last 20 years has been a common response to inner city blight. It also causes cities to continuously experience high levels of residential segregation and the spatial separation of ethnic minorities and low-income earners based on discriminatory real estate practices and mortgage structures.

Downtown Grand Rapids, in general, is undergoing massive urban revitalization with developers seeking to attract business professionals in the informational technology industry, college students, and healthcare workers. In the last decade, three major state universities have built campuses or buildings in the downtown area. According to a report by Michigan’s Division of Labor and Economics (2004), healthcare is Michigan’s number one industry in terms of employment. The healthcare sector is a thriving business enterprise in Grand Rapids and, as stated in this report, Spectrum Health, located here, is the largest employer in West Michigan. Michigan Street, a major street that cuts through the city, is referred to as the “Medical Mile” and is lined with side-by-side healthcare buildings covered in mirrored glass that reflects the city’s glass skyscrapers. One building has glass pieces assembled to look like a wave. Grand Rapids is trying to

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8 This is one of the slogans advertised on light post banners in the new business zone districts in Grand Rapids.
become a “hip” city and the wave symbol is becoming iconic, representing the Grand River that flows through the city.

Individuals experiencing economic growth constitute the minority of Grand Rapids populous, many whom are unemployed. The state unemployment rate was 11.1 percent in September of 2011, compared to the national average of 9 percent in October of 2011 (The United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, November 2011). The unemployment rate has declined since the time I returned to Grand Rapids in 2008 when it was the highest in the nation at 15.2 percent as reported by the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics. The improvement in these rates is misleading and can actually reflect downturn rather than growth. Broadcasts of Michigan public radio news analysis often report that people have given up on looking for employment and are no longer counted in state unemployment statistics that are based on when people immediately report losing their jobs. If qualified, those that are unemployed receive state unemployment benefits as long as they are regularly searching for a job and meet certain criteria.

Many Michigan residents began losing their jobs over the last decade, when the automotive industry began outsourcing jobs and shutting down plants. Michigan’s economy has historically depended on industry, especially the auto industry. Detroit, Michigan is even nicknamed the “Motor Capital” of the world. Solnit (2007) observes that Detroit, with the fall of the auto industry, is like Cuba after the Soviet Union collapsed and urban farms (gardens) sprung up everywhere. Cuba depended on oil from the Soviet Union, vital to industrial agriculture. Without this, they were forced to farm as small-scale producers and not rely on the technology of the Green Revolution: an interdependent package of fossil fuels, industrial equipment, pesticides, etc. (Holt-
Gimenez et al. 2009). Essentially, people found it necessary to grow their own food to prevent starvation. As a result, unlike other non-developed countries that did not benefit from the Green Revolution, Cuba is now a self-sufficient microcosm of an ideal food system. Likewise, Solnit (2007) indicates urban agriculture is a current trend in Detroit for creating an economy of food, goods, and services independent from transnational corporations and the petroleum industry. I contend that the same is true for Grand Rapids, also suffering from Michigan’s soaring unemployment rate. Both cities have seen an exponential rise in people subsisting from their food gardens.

Marks (2010) provides an analysis of the 2008 global work/food/energy crisis that began in 2007 and was caused by the speculative practices of unregulated capitalism. In the United States, the crisis was evident in that people lost their homes and jobs. In addition to banks defaulting on homeowners’ loans, people were unable to make their mortgage payments; employees’ wages no longer reflected the real cost of living and/or jobs were being outsourced to other countries as the costs of oil and oil-dependent food skyrocketed. The Grand Rapids Community Foundation (2012) reports that 18,000 homes were foreclosed in Kent County between the years 2004 and 2011.

One measurement of economic downturn is the growing need for food assistance. In 2010, on an average monthly basis, 111,635—one out of six—individual and heads of household residents living in the Kent County limits received an average of $266 a month in food assistance (Department of Human Services 2011). The population of the entire county is 602,622 in which 188,040 people live in Grand Rapids (U.S. Census Bureau

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9 Due to international policy, the Green Revolution “created as many hungry people as it saved” (Holt-Gimenez el al. 2009). Chapter 2 describes this occurrence.
Low-income earners in need of food assistance typically live in the areas of Grand Rapids and the adjoining city of Wyoming (Emergency Needs Task Force 2010).

In response to rampant food insecurity, there has been a fast growing rise in urban food initiatives in Grand Rapids, Michigan due to the: (1) collapse of the industry along with the economy, and (2) ever growing popularity of the local food movement as an alternative to industrial agriculture. The local food movement is increasingly popular and is inexorably tied to the economic growth resulting from the redevelopment of already gentrifying neighborhoods, the healthcare sector, and the “green” building industry.

Grand Rapids is a growing city in the sense that new businesses are arriving and it is being revamped into a “sustainable” and “green” city with a skyline of Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certified buildings. Some of these buildings are new and others are old warehouses and furniture factories that have been converted into condos, up-scale restaurants, and bars for the college-age crowd. Grand Rapids is considered a national leader in the LEED movement due to these urban revitalization efforts. According to Mayor George Heartwell, in a keynote address at a Green Grand Rapids planning conference in 2008, it has the highest volume of green buildings per capita of any other city in the nation.

Grand Rapids received an award in 2010 presented by the Siemens Sustainable Community and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce for being the most sustainable midsized city in the country. However, the two awarding entities engage in unsustainable practices. Quoting Source Watch, Smith (2010) reports that Siemens is a global corporation that operates in the areas of information and communications, automation and control, power, transportation, medical equipment, and lighting. This company has
broken labor laws in China. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce has strongly opposed climate change legislation. Nonetheless, Mayor George Heartwell accepted the award on the behalf of Grand Rapids. Alongside Mayor Heartwell was Eric Van Dellen, Sustainability Program Manager for Amway—a worldwide corporation based outside of Grand Rapids. Smith (2010) also reports that Amway has eliminated and sent jobs to China and Costa Rica. The city takes pride in being “sustainable.” Yet, as further illustrated in the following examples, it does not appear that several of the city’s major stakeholders are concerned with preserving the environment or about securing local jobs.

The greening of Grand Rapids is the result of businesses “going green.” The board members and executive directors of particular businesses use the rhetoric of sustainability and search for innovative ways to profit from citizens’ growing consciousness around the environment and local food. For instance, Cascade Engineering is a plastics manufacturer that makes products for Ford Motor Company, dashboard silencers for Chrysler, as well as components for other industries. West (2008) interviewed Michael Ford, an executive at this company, and quotes him as saying, “We are in business to make money.” Ford goes on to explain that they are going to do this by turning eco-friendly, in the belief that reducing environmental costs of commerce will raise profits, boost the regional economy, and add to Grand Rapids claim to the title of being the greenest city in America.

Grand Rapids claim to being the greenest city is based on having the most LEED certified buildings in the nation. The national and Grand Rapids based companies of Herman Miller, Steelcase, and Cascade Engineering all have LEED certified buildings. Peter Wege, a philanthropist, is the retired chairman of Steelcase and son of one of its
founders. West (2008) writes that Wege is called “the father of green Grand Rapids.” He pioneered efforts such as recycling steel, for example, to cut costs at Steelcase. In addition, Wege gave 20 million dollars for the construction of the Grand Rapids Art Museum, the world's first LEED-certified art museum. During the time of my research, his foundation also provided the future funding for Blandford Nature Center’s greenhouse.10

West (2008) writes that Wege popularized the term sustainability as having the "triple bottom line" that includes social wellbeing, environmental responsibility, and profit. Today, he reports, it is the most common “eco-biz” buzzword in Grand Rapids. Wege (2006) even wrote a book titled Economicology: The Eleventh Commandment. As the title indicates, the book is representative of West Michigan’s conservative and Christian views relating to business and charitable efforts. In this book, Wege presents a perverse misinterpretation of Marxist thought. He writes, “Socialism’s Bible, The Communist Manifesto, actually acknowledged the fact that man’s for-profit motivations had improved life for the masses.” He then writes, “Karl Marx’s ‘Manifesto’ conceded it was the bourgeoisie who made the improvements in technology and communication that had drawn ‘all, even the most barbarian nations, into civilization.’” Contrary to these assertions made by Wege, the remainder of this dissertation provides several examples of “for-profit motivations” worsening “life for the masses,” and, at best, creating Band-Aid solutions for poverty-related issues in Grand Rapids and beyond.

Entrepreneurial business plans are often presented as humanitarian efforts, which are profitable to stakeholders even when they do not provide long-term solutions to social

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10 Blandford Nature Center is located on the outskirts of Grand Rapids and educates children about Michigan’s botany and wildlife. It also provides acres for educating Grand Rapids Public School’ (GRPS) children on how to grow food.
problems. “Most business people think of instituting sustainability as a zero-sum game,” said Cascade Engineering founder and CEO Fred Keller. "But it is the right thing to do and we think we can make it a good business, too" (West 2008).11 During my fieldwork, those designing “humanitarian” entrepreneurial business plans, heralded Keller as an innovative leader. Cascade Engineering developed a business model with the guidance of Aquinas College’s Sustainability Program.12 Cascade Engineering instituted a program that hired ex-prisoners whose social benefits and parole requirements were dependent upon them showing up for work. The self-proclaimed social good, in this case, was that Cascade Engineering was offering an opportunity to prisoners that are typically stigmatized and find it difficult to secure employment. This company benefited by having a highly available cheap labor force. Blandford Nature Center developed a proposal for a similar charitable business plan in which inner city children from Grand Rapids Public Schools would grow food for Blandford Nature Center to sell to Spartan Food stores. The children would benefit in that they would be able to take food home. This proposal failed. Nonetheless, after my fieldwork ended, Aquinas College’s Sustainability Program was exploring the possibility of partnering with Blandford in developing another undisclosed business model.

I attended a conference planned by Local First, a non-profit group described below, in which one of the panel presenters was from Aquinas College’s Sustainability Program. This presenter described Milton Friedman’s interpretation of the “social

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11 Keller is the founder and CEO of Cascade Engineering; chairman of the board for the Kellogg Foundation; the founder of Grand Rapids Community College’s Future Center that began the Urban Farming Pilot Project, which was a think-tank for how to find entrepreneurial ways to link local farmers to the economy in Grand Rapids; and he was the founder of the dissolved Delta Strategy, a community consultancy group that helped businesses more effectively run their projects.

12 Aquinas College is located in Grand Rapids and offers a liberal arts education rooted in the Catholic Dominican Tradition.
contract” as a business principle. Essentially, businesses carry out public duties since individuals are not willing to take a risk for the rest of society and potentially lose money. Individuals think in terms of “my profit.” According to the presenter, when entering a relationship with a stakeholder, one should ask how they are serving society. For example, Barbie dolls should not be adorned with lead earrings that can poison children. The presenter advocated for relying on corporations for meeting public infrastructural needs as long as they address some sort of social concern or need.

Local First is an example of how one non-profit group supports a social network of green capitalists and their supporting ideology. Local First is a network of almost 600 locally owned businesses and is a part of a larger national group, the Business Alliance for Local Living Economy. Local First helps “locally” owned businesses build connections within and between different sectors. Moreover, Local First claims to have six building blocks: community capital, a source of green building, independent retail, renewable energy, sustainable agriculture, and zero waste management.

One of Local First’s employees, Patti, was a member of Grand Rapids Food Coalition (GRFC), which she believed would draw people together for her vision of a “healthy community.” With Bill, the convener of GRFC, she sat on the board of Blandford Nature Center and was once an intern for the Downtown Development Authority (DDA). The DDA is funded by the Grand Rapids city council and captures tax dollars from businesses downtown to reinvest into the community for infrastructure improvements. These infrastructure improvements have included the Downtown Market

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13 Grand Rapids Food Coalition, a coalition of representatives from local food and/or food security initiatives, was brought together to create a vision and project around food.
and new business redistricting zones in SE Grand Rapids that host Local First businesses, including many of the restaurants offering locally produced food. Patti told me:

We’re really interested in local food because agriculture is the largest sector in Michigan’s economy right now. Food touches so many aspects of our lives. Obviously, for Local First it's an economic thing. And it's a healthy community thing.

Building local is profitable for economic development endeavors and is measured by how much money moves through businesses by square foot. On behalf of Local First, Civic Economics (2008) conducted a study of businesses in West Michigan that illustrated how profit increases by 329.8 percent, the closer the proximity of local businesses. One out of ten dollars spent locally is projected to create 1,600 new full time jobs and to generate 140 million dollars in new economic activity. As described in chapter 4, several non-profit groups are collaborating to develop and gentrify portions of the Southeast. The “local” justification for economic development projects was in its nascent stages during my fieldwork. Therefore, there were no reports on how many jobs were actually started and for whom, and how much money was generated and for whom.

I learned during my research that “local” was becoming the prime archetype of an eco-biz buzzword. Businesses recognized the rhetoric of “local” as a popular marketing tool due to consumers’ belief that they were purchasing locally produced products that support the local economy in an environmentally safe way. Local First marketed the terminology of “healthy community” and “sustainable” to the extent that the meanings of these terms became synonymous with their logo, a sign in the shape of a yellow diamond that says “Local First.” When people viewed the Local First sticker in a storefront window, they often assumed that the particular business practiced these values of
“community,” “sustainability,” and “local.” Therefore, as consumers, they could feel good about their purchases. However, all that is required to be a certified Local First business is to have the business headquarters physically located in the “community,” meaning a business located within the greater Grand Rapids area. National franchises are considered “local” if the owner is from the community, does not exercise the same financial decisions as the main franchise, buys into the franchise and receives benefits, or engages in joint marketing.

Some of these Local First businesses (e.g., Amway and Rockford Construction) use exploited labor from impoverished countries in the production of their products and/or have a significant record of employing environmentally destructive practices (Smith 2010). For this reason, one must question the exact meanings of “local,” “community,” and “sustainability.” Popular discourse often represents ideals masking harmful practices. In the case of Grand Rapids, many Local First businesses are a part of the gentrification occurring in the Southeast.

The new emphasis on eating locally has received the attention of the private sector. Investors recognize the market value of selling “locally grown and organic foods,” so much so that eating local and eating organic is a class issue in Grand Rapids. Smith (2010) provides an example of a local farm partnering with the J.W. Marriott to offer classes titled “What local, organic food brings to the table nutritionally and to the area’s economy.” The classes cost $125, leading Smith to the conclusion that they “do not take into account that most working class individuals and families have less leisure time to be able to prepare meals, but this fact also distracts us from the larger question of why healthy local foods are not affordable for everyone.”
Organizing and Gardening in the Field

To contextualize critical questions concerning the phenomenon of a food desert in which inhabitants lack access to fresh, nutritious and affordable food, my primary dissertation research began in November 2009 and lasted through October 2010. I developed a research design with the ethnographic methods of participant observation, interviews, and film. I used these methods to examine the practices of place making and social networking for determining the different power dynamics, practices, and common discourse particular to neighborhood residents or those targeting their neighborhoods.

I conducted 47 semi-structured interviews with a total of 50 interviewees since 3 of the interviews consisted of couples. Thirty of the respondents participated in different food security initiatives taking place in the Southeast or with organizations that had ties to this work or were interested in addressing local food or food security. Examples ranged from neighborhood based community gardens to formal organizations like Local First or the different constituents of the Downtown Market. Several of these respondents were food growers themselves and lived in the area. The remaining 20 interviewees were involved with OKT and/or were food growers living in the SE neighborhoods but had no attachment to any of the above organizations.

Interview questions were designed to determine values and reasons for participation. I asked questions about how an organization or garden was started; the anticipated outcome for a garden or food initiative; why a participant was interested in food systems; what continued their involvement and motivation; their personal stories around growing food, if applicable; and what inspired them to become involved. For ascertaining and later assessing the resources and knowledge typical to particular social
networks, I asked people whom they usually associated with or other food initiatives they belonged to.

Additional questions were designed to assess power in regards to the relationship between food security initiatives and the participants and/or residents living in the Southeast. Answers indicated how different types of exclusionary practices were realized through relations of power as evident by the distribution of resources (space, money, knowledge, political support, etc.) among social networks and a person’s ability to organize or have input in an initiative. I asked about the division of labor within the organization or garden and about who coordinated activities, how decisions were made, accessible resources, funding sources, the allocation of funding, internal associates and/or correspondence with other organizations, and membership rules about participation.

I informally asked the interview questions and made structured observations during participant observant activities in which most of my interactions occurred. Research activities included gardening, attending the board or committee meetings of organizers, and participating in community events such as potlucks, farmers’ markets, films and plant giveaways. I took part in events planned by OKT that included canning and seed saving classes, community meetings, workshops, cooking demonstrations, and food garden tours. Outside of formally planned events, I partook in participant observation activities with members of OKT or with food growers not formally involved in an organization. These experiences included eating dinner at people’s homes, visiting their gardens, gardening, bike riding (which is a popular form of transportation for
gardeners and environmental stewards), guerilla gardening, and other informal activities.\(^{14}\)

I spent a significant amount of time observing the work of OKT members and assisting with the Food Diversity Project (FDP) activities. I walked through communities and went house to house with members of OKT in order to locate different types of gardens or profile neighborhoods in regards to assessing environmental hazards and the availability of local food. We identified residents who expressed interest in the FDP and demonstrated their gardens during food garden tours. Spending time with participants mostly consisted of carrying out social justice work with local activists: Grand Rapids Institute for Information Democracy (GRIID), an online critical media group; members of the Bloom Collective, an anarchist group who hosts a library and informational workshops; and an environmental justice initiative in Detroit whose members assisted OKT in Grand Rapids.

I purposefully networked as a participant observation activity in order to identify social networks and sample interviewees. I stopped recruiting interviewees after I identified the major players in different initiatives, as well as OKT’s most active members and gardening participants. Thus, I attended as many activities and committee meetings possible that concerned local food security in the Grand Rapids area. I did this in order to meet people and decipher these connections. I asked people about whom they frequently interacted with concerning local food and suggestions for people to contact for my study.

\(^{14}\) Guerilla gardening is the covert planting of a public space to encourage growing food in urban areas, bringing nature back into the city, and an environmental ethic. Planting in vacant spaces and scattering sunflower seeds are two methods.
Participants suggested that I join Facebook. Different groups facilitated food events through listservs and the virtual social network of Facebook. By checking my emails and Facebook, I learned about events occurring in the area. As I met more people involved in urban agriculture, I was placed on more listservs and received additional “friend” requests on Facebook. Facebook was a useful research tool for being invited to food related events and a source of news about the local food system.

I did not use Facebook to track and observe participants everyday talk about their thoughts and reflections concerning local food. I erred on the side of caution given the possible ethical issues over whether or not my use of Facebook would have been a form of virtual participant observation or a type of surveillance for obtaining information that had not explicitly underwent the research process of obtaining consent. Utilizing this technology for researching dialogue and identifying social networks could have potentially violated “friends” privacy rights though they publicly documented aspects of their lives.

I have protected the identity and privacy of this study’s participants. For the writing of this dissertation, I use pseudonyms to protect the identity of those I formally interviewed and encountered during participant observation activities. I leave out identity indicators, where appropriate, such as position titles, grant names, and university affiliation. I conceal the identity of three of the organizations in this study and the titles of their projects. I do this to protect the individuals whom were participants in my study and would possibly perceive my portrayal of their organization as disparaging since I am situating it in a broader discussion of the politics of exclusion and power dynamics.
I do not use pseudonyms for those I quote from media reports of city and business affairs, Bryant Terry—an author that I quote from a public event, nationally recognized philanthropists, or large business stakeholders. I also do not use pseudonyms to replace the names of foundations, large corporations, or research and public institutions. These individuals and institutions were not directly involved in my study and their identity is too public to conceal. For instance, I do not conceal the identity of Grand Action who is planning the Downtown Market. This development scheme is national knowledge and publicly criticized. I did not interview members of this project; however, in chapter 4, I describe conversations between members of Grand Action and OKT. Therefore, I do use pseudonyms and conceal identity indicators for protecting the identity of these organizers.

Participant observation activities also included conducting informal interviews on videotape over the course of a growing season for insights into what it meant to participate in a garden or local food initiative and to belong to a “community.” I visually documented participants’ creation of place and filmed many of OKT’s public activities. Videotaping included the entire process of planting one community garden in a vacant lot. I was also able to capture the process of gentrification with images of blighted areas juxtaposed with new development and sites that were about to undergo development.

I recorded a portion of this footage for a project, Re-Media West, designed by OKT and other activist groups: Eastern Michigan Environmental Action Council, based out of Detroit; the Building Movement Project, based out of Detroit; and Grand Rapids Institute for Information Democracy (GRIID). We used film as a popular education tactic in which residents and participants were invited to discuss the issues impacting the
community. GRIID trained participants on how to film. Chapter 5 details OKT’s activities and extensively describes this project.

Not only did I film for my research and Re-Media West, I documented the narratives and values inherent to why OKT and activists chose film as a method for countering inequality. Indigenous and minority people often use video to begin dialogue within a community, followed by the use of self-determination for resistance against outside cultural domination (Ginsburg 1995). These types of discourses create local meaning and expose the hegemonic thought that must be challenged for structural change (Levin and Greenwood 2007). OKT and activists use of critical media reflected their worldview. It was designed to raise the awareness of others so that they could recognize the structural inequality underlining the food insecurity and environmental injustice harming SE residents. My observations of the relevance of film to activism further developed my appreciation of how it is a powerful tool and medium for creating deeper understandings of social reality.

Anthropology that utilizes ethnographic methods does so on its basic premise, which is learning about how people think about the world by paying attention to how they talk about it (Agar 1996). In addition to listening to the worldview of all participants, I aimed to experience it by participating in several different groups’ activities. When I gardened with others, I understood what gardeners meant when they said they gardened to feel the soil in their hands or to watch things grow. I learned patience in realizing growing life was not an instantaneous affair but something that took attention and care. Collaborating with different activists and food growers provided me with the opportunity to see how people purposefully lived out their values. Sitting on
different committees, with members of particular social networks, positioned me to
observe the planning phases of food security projects and how tactics were formulated,
values expressed, decisions made, or resources allocated.

This dissertation is my analytical description of the data I collected and coded
from my field notes of observations, interview transcripts, and film indexing. It serves as
a comprehensive documentation of participants’ many different reasons and approaches
for building food security, which resulted in outcomes either beneficial to communities
and individuals’ lives or exclusionary in terms of power dynamics that prevented equal
access to resources.
Chapter 2

“All that is born is born of anna [food]. Whatever exists on earth is born off anna, lives on anna, and in the end merges into anna. Anna indeed is the first born amongst all beings.”

Ancient Indian Upanishad quoted by Vandana Shiva

“We live infinitely in a world of finite resources.”

Derek Jensen

Evident on a global and local scale, masses of people face hunger and dispossession from the land when it is treated as a privatized commodity for resource extraction, development, or industrial agriculture. Summarizing the literature of food activist scholars from a variety of disciplines, this chapter explores the historical and recent global policies surrounding food. These policies nurture the greed of agribusinesses, which have given rise to a destructive global food system and worldwide opposition to it. The popularity of the local food movement in Grand Rapids can be attributed to our society’s growing consciousness of these practices that are poisoning the environment and the food we eat. The history of planting gardens in urban cores in order to address these issues and ameliorate food insecurity in the United States dates back to the late 19th century. I outline literature describing the varied reasons for planting these gardens and the related values and policies. I then explain how the land use policies in
Grand Rapids, concerning urban agriculture and development, tend to favor privatized land use and reinforce the gentrification and food insecurity occurring in the Southeast.

Individuals take advantage of the local food movement for health, environmental, and economic reasons. Every person included in my study cited at least one of these reasons for justifying their role in the local food movement and/or building food security. The following overview of a global food system and gardening in the United States explains why citizens embrace the local food movement and are increasingly aware that food is integral to social organization, cultural practices, and interdependent communities.

**A Global Food System**

Economic issues stem from the neoliberal policies and reforms responsible for our current global food crisis. People are unable to afford the rise in food prices and are starving. These unfair policies result from corporations that participate in the agricultural industry, act as lobbyists, and have former or current members holding positions in government. Particular activists in Grand Rapids were more likely than the average person participating in the local food movement to cite this government corruption and global politics as reasons for their concern about how food is produced and the current food crisis. Globally, activists organize social movements against the neoliberal policies—the governmentally sanctified public expenditure of dollars for private enterprise—responsible for world hunger. As described in chapter 5, Our Kitchen Table (OKT) models itself after some of these social movements and educates participants about neoliberal policies, the overall destructive nature of industrial agriculture, and the
importance of biodiversity for protecting the environment. Dating back to the Green Revolution, I detail the major policies responsible for issues related to our current global food crisis in order to highlight how the work of OKT and local food advocates is in response to an extremely ineffective global food system.

Contrary to popular belief, the food crisis has nothing to do with a shortage of food due to population growth. According to the United Nation’s Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), in 2007, there was at least 1.5 times the food of current demand. At that point, food production had been increasing 2 percent a year for the last 20 years while the rate of population growth dropped to 1.14 percent a year. This organization reports that nearly 3 billion people are poor or near poor with 1.4 billion earning less than $2 per day. As of 2010, the FAO estimates that there were approximately 925 million starving people in the world. Their hunger is a derivative of neoliberal policies preventing them, many who are hungry farmers, from competing in a fixed global market system.

Today’s hunger and environmentally destructive food system has resulted, in part, from the Green Revolution, subsidies and policies that support the overproduction of food, and the Structural Adjustments Plans (SAPs) put forth by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund during the 1980s. Holt-Gimenez et al. (2009) provide a historical summary of how the Green Revolution ultimately produced as many hungry people as it saved. The Green Revolution occurred during the period of 1960 through 1990 and began after WWII, when the United States modernized agriculture with the industrialization of farm inputs in order to send surplus to war torn, non-communist Europe. Financed by the Rockefeller and Ford Foundations, the Green Revolution was
supported by Western governments through a well-financed campaign that established massive global research and extension systems. Scientists in Mexico and the Philippines developed high yielding varieties (HYVs) of grain, in particular, corn and rice. Rural banks provided credit with government financing. The HYVs were dependent on these “packages” of credit as well as fertilizers, timely irrigation, and the use of modern agricultural machinery. In Mexico, Asia and India, the Green Revolution raised agricultural productivity on the medium-to-large mechanized farms that had access to agricultural extensions, irrigation, and the production credit needed to buy the technological packages. Food production rose in these places. Nonetheless, people went hungry despite grain surpluses. Peasant farmers had been forced off the land for larger more capital efficient farms and joined those who also could not afford the food being produced.

Similar to the fate of farmers from the global South, farmers living in the United States began to steadily lose their farms with the onset of the Green Revolution and inability to compete with larger farms. Holt-Gimenez et al. (2009) report that 75 percent of agricultural production in the United States is currently controlled by large-scale corporate and non-family farms. Many grow corn that is not for human consumption but is used for animal feed, plastics, and ethanol. Meanwhile, there are 50 million food insecure people in the United States. The grain it takes to fill one 25-gallon tank with ethanol is enough to feed one person for an entire year.

Hunger persists due to government-backed policies that favor exporting and wasting food. There is an overabundance of food in the world, although people in the United States and abroad are hungry and/or are not accessing affordable and nutritious
food. Clapp (2008) explains how and why the United States overproduces food. With the spread of new technologies like fertilizer, pesticides and mechanization, Europe and the United States began to and continue to produce more food than those regions consume each year. Instead of cutting back on production, Northern governments use combinations of subsidies, tariffs, price supports, and quotas to ensure a continuous oversupply. The passage of United States Public Law 480 in 1954 was designed for dispensing food aid, which created a market for surplus and raised United States domestic prices for grain, as well as opened up the possibility of future markets for commercially traded United States grain. Poppendieck (2008) argues that public and private food assistance efforts in this country are designed to find outlets for the corporate overproduction of food. For instance, programs such as former Vice President Al Gore’s and Agriculture Secretary Dan Glickman’s 1997 National Summit on Food Recovery and Gleaning were charity based, associating uneaten food with hunger abroad and channeling food through social service agencies, food pantries, and federal food assistance programs.

Holt-Gimenez et al. (2009) explicate the relationship between subsidies and overproduction. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) began subsidizing corn in the 1970s and sends the most subsidy payments to farmers of corn. Subsidies lower the price of grains for the Northern agribusiness complex and traders. Cheap surpluses can be sold below the cost of production and are funneled into food aid and “dumped” on countries that are prohibited, by international organizations and laws, from placing tariffs on or rejecting imported grain. Small farmers are unable to compete in this market or, along with the already dispossessed and poor, afford the food flooding
their country. Overproduction in the global North forces open markets in the global South for the benefit of those same agro-industries supplying the technological packages that force farmers from the land.

Clapp (2008), Desmarais (2007), Holt-Gimenez et al. (2009), Marks (2010), Robins (2009) and Wittman et al. (2010) describe the historical and current neoliberal policies responsible for our food crisis as they relate to the United States and Europe dominating the global market economy. Economic crisis set in within the South when oil prices skyrocketed in the 1970s and the global North suffered an economic recession. Northern banks asked the South to pay up debts at a time when the South’s products had lost value and market share. The economic crisis worsened and these nations were unable to pay their debt and entered a hunger crisis. The World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) then imposed Structural Adjustment Plans (SAPs) under the guise of debt relief and foreign aid. The SAPs are an example of the neoliberal economics that arose during the 1980s and embraced the neoclassical idea of a pure market system with minimal state intervention otherwise known as deregulation. The SAPs further broke down tariffs, dismantled national marketing boards, eliminated price guarantees, privatized state held industries and services, deregulated labor, and destroyed research and extension systems in the global South. By deregulating agricultural markets, the SAPs cleared the way for the “dumping” of subsidized grain into local markets and tied the South’s food security to global markets dominated by the United States’ and Europe’s multinational agribusinesses.

The aforementioned authors describe how the rules of Fair Trade Agreements (FTAs) and the World Trade Organization (WTO) permitted the SAPs to act as
international treaties. The WTO was established to enforce global trade rules and reduce trade barriers, especially national labor and environmental laws. The WTO came about in 1995 out of the Uruguay Round Table General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) that was developed in 1948 to facilitate international trade among non-socialist countries. Still today, sold under the banner of “free trade,” the WTO enforces the aforementioned neoliberal policies. For instance, the United States and European Union are allowed to heavily subsidize their agribusinesses while other countries are prohibited from doing the same. Small farmers in the United States also suffer from these policies due to the fact that they do not receive large enough subsidies to stay in operation or obtain sizeable profits when they are competing with large and heavily subsidized farms.

Holt-Gimenez et al. (2009) and Robins (2009) indicate that the WTO favors the North’s corporations rather than the economies of the global South. For example, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the first FTA formed in 1994 to be enforced by the WTO, came out of United States’ attempts to reduce immigration, based on reports claiming it was caused by economic need. Outside of the United States, NAFTA permits this country’s factories and other transnational companies to move into Mexico where they can legally abuse the labor laws. As with other FTAs, corporations can sue a government if its laws or policies limit their profits under NAFTA’s investor protection provisions. Government implementations of public health, labor, and environmental protections are considered hindrances. Free trade, in actuality, forced Mexican farmers, mainly corn farmers, to compete with the cheap prices of subsidized commodities being dumped into Mexico from the United States. After eighteen months, 2.2 million of Mexico’s people lost their jobs and 40 million fell into extreme poverty.
(Shiva 2000). This has created larger waves of immigration to the United States along with a source of cheap labor for the food industry located here, offering highly hazardous packaging and agricultural jobs.  

Desmarais (2007), Shiva (2000, 2005), and Wittman et al. (2010) extensively critique the destruction caused by the agribusiness complex and neoliberal policies on the global South. They contend that worldwide food security is best achieved by encouraging developing countries to increase self-sufficiency through local (small-scale organic) farm production. Overall, these authors summarize destruction as the monopolization of seed and chemical inputs by the North’s companies; the loss of 90 percent the world’s agricultural biodiversity; the global shift to an oil-based agricultural economy; increasing pest problems; massive farmer worker poisonings; depleted and contaminated aquifers; the erosion of tropical and non tropical soils; a concentration in land and resources; inequality in rural incomes; and the displacement of millions of peasants to urban slums and infertile, water deficient land. These authors further specify how the patenting of seeds has led to cultural loss with the erasure of biodiversity and local knowledge. Shiva refers to this as ‘biopiracy.’

Shiva (2000, 2005) argues that the use of genetically engineered (GE) seeds is a growing corporate practice that results in a loss of biodiversity. The genetic material of one species is injected into the seed’s DNA. The injected genes are derived from bacteria and virus species. One goal of corporations is to make crops resistant to pests and to

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15 The overseers of farms and owners of factories take advantage of the fact that many workers are illegally living in the United States. Since workers fear deportation and are often faced with a language barrier, their employers pay less than fair wages, deny benefits, and expose them to dangerous conditions such as heavy pesticide exposure on farms (see Moses 1993) and hazardous conditions in the meat packing industry (see Schlosser 2008).
particular brands of herbicides. Therefore, the farmer is dependent on those brands. Roundup Ready is one of the world’s most widely used herbicides. It is owned by Monsanto and designed for varieties of GE seeds that they have patented. Monsanto is one of six biotech, pharmaceutical, and chemical corporations (Monsanto, Dow, Dupont, Syngenta, BASF and Bayer) controlling and patenting the world’s seed market (Howard 2009). Governmental organizations or corporations have not publicly recognized the long-term effects of GE crops (Roberts 2008). Nonetheless, animal studies have detected the following serious health risks associated with GE crops: immune problems, infertility, accelerated aging, changes in the gastrointestinal system, shrinking of major organs such as the brain, etc. (Smith 2007). The film The Future of Food (2004) highlights how governmental organizations that we assume are protecting us—the Environmental Protection Agency and the Food and Drug Administration—often employ former board members from biotech corporations such as Monsanto.

Biopiracy is the patenting of seeds already cultivated from other groups. Shiva (2000) provides the example of when the United States Patent and Trademark Office granted RiceTec a patent on Basmati rice. RiceTec crossbred Basmati with dwarf rice strands and claimed it was novel and superior to existing Basmati rice. Those who grow Basmati are now forced to pay royalties to RiceTec. For millennia, farmers, across the world, have been crossbreeding different seeds such as Basmanti. Nonetheless, seeds are treated as corporate inventions.

Patents commonly protect corporations who manufacture GE seeds. Unfortunately, as in the case of Percy Schmeiser depicted in The Future of Food (2007), GE seeds have the potential to blow into other fields and cross pollinate with the seeds
they come into contact with. Therefore, the corporation can sue the person whose seed is contaminated. Backed by the United States Patent and Trademark Office and the WTO’s Trade Related Intellectual Property Rights Agreement, the corporation claims the seed is their property and that is was stolen. Moreover, saving these seeds is illegal and they must be purchased every year. Schmeiser and his family lost their life savings trying to fight Monsanto, whose GE Roundup Ready canola cross-contaminated Percy’s canola crop. This corporation sued them for patent infringement. It took multiple generations for his family to cultivate their canola. He was forced to destroy it since it was contaminated. The planting of GE crops actively runs the risk of contaminating and destroying existing varieties of crops.

Historically, the loss of cultural knowledge and traditions correlates with the world’s decrease in biodiversity. Especially since the 16th century onset of Western European colonization, diverse varieties of plants are disappearing with the planting of monocultures and even more so through the advent of industrial agriculture, agribusiness, and the massive clear cutting of forests to plant fields or raise livestock. According to Shiva (2000), free exchange of seed among farmers has been the basis of maintaining biodiversity and food security. Such exchanges lead to the sharing of ideas and knowledge of cultural traditions. For instance, it took centuries for India’s farmers to cultivate the 200,000 rapidly disappearing varieties of rice that fit thousands of ecological niches all over the country. Cultural groups in India are decreasingly maintaining the

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16 Slavery and the forced relocation of people were common occurrences during the colonial period and directly corresponded with the production of cash crops for global consumption and trade (see Mintz 1985 and Wolf 1982). Being forced to grow cash crops or rely on the colonizers’ form of agricultural sustenance, dominated groups stopped cultivating their unique varieties of plants associated with their cuisines, religious beliefs and rituals, and healing practices. (Klindienst 2006). Modern day colonization of land and resources has this same effect (see Lappe and Collins 1977).
cultural practices attached to rice, which has religious significance. Fields are first worshipped and then the rice is harvested and used as an essential component of religious festivals. Besides Shiva’s example of rice in Indian, it is a documented phenomenon around the world that the cultural heritages—associated with seeds that have been selected over thousands of years for their traits of taste, cooking qualities, aroma, and medicinal properties—are being lost to biopiracy and mono-cropping. The existence of biodiversity and cultural traditions depends on small-scale organic farming.

As opposed to small-scale organic methods of farming, industrial agriculture promotes monocultures in order to gain centralized control over the production and distribution of food. Economic concentration and the patenting of life in the form of genes and genetic engineering are intensifying this corporate monopoly. The high prices of genetically engineered seeds—bought each year—along with other production costs have led to increases in food costs and, therefore, hunger. Small-scale farmers are some of the world’s hungriest people and vulnerable to policies that favor large biotech and seed companies along with corporate farmers in the United States. By 1997, for instance, the corporate seed industry took control of small farmers’ ability to successfully produce food in India (Shiva 2000). Since then, an estimated quarter of a million farmers have committed suicide following their financial ruin (National Crime Records Bureau 2010).

We live in a world of what Goodall (2005) refers to as ‘Franken-foods’ as evident by the growth of GE plants that are further endangering our health and the environment. Holt-Gimenez et al. (2009) extensively critique the spread of GE crops, and the environmental impacts and inefficiency associated with their growth, distribution, and consumption. Corn, soy, canola, and wheat are the most commonly grown GE crops
Mass produced GE corn is an example that clearly illustrates the defectiveness of our food system. Holt-Gimenez and colleagues report that in 2008, 80 percent of the corn grown in the United States was GE corn. GE corn is an example of a highly profitable crop grown for animal feed, ethanol, and plastics. Farmers profit more from growing food for these purposes rather than for human consumption.

The growth of corn for ethanol is what is referred to as an agrofuel, fuel produced from a food source. Holt-Gimenez et al. (2009) deconstruct the corporate created myth that agrofuels are energy efficient. A quarter of all United States corn is used for ethanol production, accounting for 40 percent of all global agrofuel production. Agrofuels waste far more energy than they save. Production depends on the clear cutting of land, oil for their growth and transportation, displacement of people from their land (sometimes by armed force, see Frank 2011), soil erosion, and large amounts of water. Grain companies (e.g., Cargill and ADM), biotech companies (e.g., Monsanto, Syngenta, Mendel Biotechnology, and Dupont), investment bankers (e.g., Goldman Sachs) as well as oil and automobile companies (e.g., Conoco-Phillips, Royal Dutch Shell, BP, and Toyota) are amassing great wealth and forming various corporate partnerships based on the sale of agrofuels, internationally produced from corn, soybean, sugarcane, jatropha and oil palm plantations. In the meantime, people are dying from having no access to food.

Many local food advocates attribute the distance food travels to destructive environmental practices and the finite supply of oil. The film Blind Spot (2008) describes how this relationship began when agrarian society in the North was largely replaced by the Industrial Revolution about two hundred years ago, leading to the population growth that began during the mid 19th century when 1.5 billion people lived in the world. It has
since increased to 7 billion people (United States Census Bureau 2012). For almost 10,000 years prior to the Industrial Revolution, food was a basic source for energy. Fire, agriculture done by hand tools, and the harnessing of animals to work fields were the sources of energy for growing food. Humans then developed the technology to exploit fossil fuels: oil, coal, and natural gas. Fossil fuels were the cause behind the Industrial Revolution, leading to population growth and the need for more food, and eventually enabled food to become mass-produced in centralized locations and travel long distances. The technological improvements around the time of WWI led to a boom in industry and the mass production of goods. By WWII, agriculture and food production followed a similar track and took on a Fordist model of production, displacing many small farmers, breaking apart small communities, and increasing migration into cities (Roberts 2008).

What once seemed like an infinite supply of oil will become finite by the end of the 21st century. Industrial food production is reliant on disappearing oil, although this stark reality is not changing the habits of corporations or consumers. Richard Manning (2004) refers to this contradictory relationship as the “the oil we eat.” The food system depends on oil, used for excessive food travel and packaging. Plastic is made from oil and is what constitutes the packaging waste of food that ends up in the ocean. In an interview, Derek Jensen states that every square mile of the ocean hosts 46,000 floating pieces of plastic (Smith 2011). The food system depends on oil, used for excessive travel. Retailers stock their shelves with cheaply mass produced food that has traveled long distances. Food to a North American household travels an average of 1,500 to 2,500 miles (Goodall 2005). Most of the broccoli in the United States, for example, is grown in Guatemala (Fischer and Benson 2006). Gassing produce with noxious chemicals helps
preserve it for the long haul and to appear ripe (Estabrook 2011). Unlike the organic production of food, monocultures use 30 percent more in fossil fuels (Goodall 2005).

Shiva (2000) explains that when you consider labor costs, energy, natural resources and external outputs, industrial agriculture is less productive than small-scale organic farming. First of all, in terms of energy, it takes 300 units to produce 100 units of food versus small-scale organic farming in which it takes 5 units to produce 100 units of food. Industrial agriculture, Shiva further details, does not have larger yields and leads to super weeds and super pests, requiring more herbicides and pesticides, therefore, raising costs for farmers. Only 1 percent of pesticides actually reach the targeted pest. The one-gene resistance of GE crops gives pests or disease an easy target. Moreover, the chemical fertilizers required of industrial agriculture are also damaging and wasteful. Chemical farming requires more water and reduces the water conservation capacity of soils by lessening the organic matter and causing soil erosion. Monocultures have increased exposure of soils to wind and rain and this leads to further erosion. Water-intensive agricultural crops require 5-10 times the amount of water than those bred for ecological farming, and irrigation is draining the water table. Finally, chemical intensive and fossil fuel inputs are responsible for large contributions of greenhouse gases: 25 percent of the world’s carbon emissions (fuels from transport), 60 percent of methane emissions (manure), and 80 percent of nitrous oxide emissions (fertilizers).

Besides protecting cultural traditions, as witnessed by small-scale farmers, genetic diversity provides security against pests, disease, and unexpected climatic conditions. Otherwise, planting and preserving one or a few varieties renders crops vulnerable to extinction if unfortunate circumstances arise. For this reason, small-scale farmers tend to
favor the use of intercropping (polycultures). Unlike industrial farming, the method yields greater numbers of crops, which have been cultivated for traditionally highly variable environments. In general, small-scale organic farming preserves resources and is a viable alternative to our global food system. Chapter 6 illustrates the ways in which gardeners in SE Grand Rapids seek to maintain their cultural heritage through preserving biodiversity and protecting the land. OKT hosts workshops to contextualize local systemic solutions to health disparities by framing them in these larger discussions of legacy issues and environmental stewardship.

Health issues are an inevitable result of our environmentally destructive food system. Participants in my study cited health as one of the number one reasons they are involved in the local food movement. The alternative to local and organically produced food, at the expense of everyone’s health, is mass produced food, a profitable enterprise. Goodall (2005) explains the causes of the negative health outcomes reported by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), which estimates that 5,000 deaths and 76 million cases of food-born illnesses occur annually in the United States. Government policies are lax around the slaughterhouse procedures responsible for these statistics. For instance, animals are raised in cramped conditions and live in their own fecal matter, the repeated cause of Salmonella and Escherichia coli bacterial public health outbreaks.

Economic gain is behind this lack of enforcement; powerful lobbyists support the food industry. The pharmaceutical industry is one lobbyist and supplies the growth hormones and antibiotics used in industrial meat production. These drugs help animals to grow faster and reduce bacteria outbreaks. As described by Goodall (2005), the Bovine Growth Hormone named Posilac, manufactured by Monsanto, is widely used to fatten
cows. This hormone ends up in the water through animal waste and is associated with the buildup in estrogen in humans and the decrease in the sperm count of men. Many industrial nations do not permit the use of this hormone. The use of antibiotics is banned from the European Union since bacterial resistance in humans is quickly building.

Other typical health issues are the diet related illnesses, which arose from a historical shift in food sustenance strategies. Roberts (2008) explains how humans have become overweight and obese in today’s sedentary society of intensive agriculture that drastically differs from when people hunted and foraged food for most of human history. Approximately 9,000 years ago, with the rudimentary onset of intensive agriculture in parts of the world, diets became less diverse due to mono cropping. Corn is a contemporary prime example. Cheap industrial corn means cheaper and higher caloric food. According to Goodall (2005), one of the most common bi-products of corn is high fructose corn syrup. In the last century, people began to consume products made with synthetic chemicals, high fructose corn syrup being one of those. It accounts for 20 percent of children’s diets and is contained in one forth of all of the food carried in grocery stores.

The human body, explains Roberts (2008), is adapted to the times of scarcity faced by our hunting and foraging ancestors. The body’s biochemistry of hormones and neurotransmitters balanced our caloric intake with our output of energy. The body encouraged over-consumption; weight gain was not a risk. Yet, in recent human history, food is always available (for those with access) and this increases the likelihood of over-consumption. Leptin is a hormone in the body regulating metabolism and signifying satiation to the hypothalamus that controls hunger. When fat levels fall in the body,
leptin levels decrease and less leptin equals hunger. However, people are eating before the brain has signified satiety. Roberts concludes changes in food intake are one reason we have an obese nation composed of all socioeconomic groups, spending more than 100 billion dollars in diet related medical bills each year in the United States. Highly processed, rich in fructose corn syrup, and pathogenic foods made out of difficult to pronounce synthetic chemicals are transforming our bodies into vessels primed for diabetes, obesity, hypertension, heart problems, and cancer.

Living in a food desert is one major cause of obesity and diet related illnesses that disproportionately impact poor African Americans and Hispanics (Julier 2008). Junk food and cheap fast food rather than fresh produce and meats are easily accessible in urban low-income communities. The entire United States food industry invests 33 billion dollars a year in marketing junk food (Roberts 2008). Fast food is a highly advertised and cheap source of high caloric intake. The fast food industry targets Hispanic and African American communities by marketing fast food as cheap, and there has been a parallel between the increase of fast food restaurants in urban cores and growing food deserts (Gottlieb and Joshi 2010). Moreover, marketing justifies targeting obese people living in disadvantaged neighborhoods with research claiming that poor people prefer Doritos to organic lettuce (Julier 2008). The film *Fresh* (2009) illustrates a Hispanic family’s struggle with eating healthy. For them, an item from the “dollar menu” at a fast food restaurant is less costly than buying the ingredients for one home cooked meal.

Grand Rapid’s families living in food deserts often lack transportation and have to travel to more affluent areas in order to access affordable and healthy food. If there is a relatively close grocery store, the prices are marked up. Food, on the other hand, travels
far distances to reach the shelves of liquor stores and fast food restaurants that are centrally located in food deserts. OKT wants to help families find sources of affordable, healthy, nutritious, and fresh food. OKT encourages residents to garden as an affordable tactic for securing healthy food as opposed to placing complete reliance upon the mass produced, cheap, and non-nutritious food flooding food deserts. Junk food, as acknowledged by OKT, is only one problematic aspect of an ineffective, globally operated agribusiness system.

In reaction to industrial agriculture as a whole, supporters of local food are changing their eating habits due to environmental damage and the depletion of resources; health issues; the economic ruin of farmers and unfair economic practices; and the loss of cultural traditions attached to traditional sustenance practices. Advocates of local food are engaging in what is referred to as food sovereignty, which is “broadly defined as the right of nations and peoples to control their own food systems, including their own markets, production modes, food cultures and environments.” Food sovereignty “has emerged as a critical alternative to the dominant neoliberal model for agriculture and trade” (Wittman et al. 2010: 3). Worldwide social movements (e.g., La Via Campesina) are bringing together masses of people in order to challenge large corporations and the neoliberal policies that support them. Typical responses to our current food crisis within the United States include a surge in the amount of cooperatively owned grocery stores (co-ops), farmers markets, small organic farms, community supported agriculture, and gardens that are grown in public or private spaces such as parks, roofs, balconies and in yards.
The History of Urban Food Gardens as an Alternative Food System in the United States

In SE Grand Rapids, gardens are the most common local food security approach. Food gardening, since the late 19th century and across the United States, has been a popular response to social, political, environmental, and especially poor economic conditions. The recent economic depression caused a steep increase in the number of gardens, reminiscent of the popularity of gardens during the 1970s economic crisis. Gardens are increasingly popular as evidenced by the numerous food gardening projects in many American cities. Gardens today are considered a feasible option for food sustenance around the world (Koc et al. 1999). Gardens also represent a form of resistance to the corporate control of sustenance by large agribusiness and peoples’ dispossession of land in the city and country. Economic reforms disenfranchise people from control over their food production and ability to relate to each other. Gardens serve as a solution to these two forms of alienation (Tracey 2007).

A summary of the history of gardens in the United States provides necessary insight as to why the food security method of planting gardens was and still is a popular response to food crisis. Approaches have typically been patronizing, top down and agenda based, and influenced by utilitarian values concerning individualism and “morally” correct behavior. On the other hand, they have also been self-determinative by nature. Self-determination was characteristic of activists’ grassroots based food security initiatives during the Civil Rights Era, and this trend continues today.

Influenced by economic determinism, a general civic improvement movement began to utilize gardens at the turn of the 20th century to improve citizenry (Lyson 2004).
Social reformers believed the beauty of the gardens inspired citizens towards higher moral and ethical standards in the face of national rural depopulation, immigration, and urban congestion. Gardens as a democratic space and gardening as an activity to improve citizenship were some of the perceived highlights.

Dating back to the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century through WWII, the following historical overview of gardens is mainly based on the landscape architectural studies of Lawson (2005). She describes the government funded gardening projects that were intended to address poverty during the period of 1890 through the Great Depression of the 1930s, followed by the Victory Gardens of WWII. Vacant-lot cultivation gardens, children’s school gardens, subsistence gardens, and work relief gardens were promoted as interventions to address poverty. These gardens were a tactic for implementing philanthropic agendas that combined the utilitarian values of self-improvement and property ownership, education, and the influence of nature to culturally assimilate and modify the behavior of individuals.

In response to the economic depression of 1893-97, Detroit established the vacant-lot garden program. The sale of food produced out of these gardens provided emergency relief for unemployed laborers during the depression. The program’s success in the improvement of urban nutrition inspired other cities. By 1898, there were projects in 19 U.S. cities (Woelfe-Erskine 2002). Cities allotted gardening spaces for citizens to achieve self-improvement rather than dependence on charity. Organizers believed that the time spent gardening reduced alcohol consumption. Agricultural training was used to induce the poor into relocating to the country and to become self-reliant with the use of farming.
The school garden movement, during the first half of the 20th century, provided agricultural education in order to culturally assimilate Native American children and encourage them, as well as “delinquent” urban children, to practice the cultural tradition of agrarian country living. Public schools incorporated these gardens into their curriculum. Plots were designed to promote the sense of ownership and personal responsibility inherent to the value of individualism.

During the Great Depression of the 1930s, one third of the population was out of work. The federal government subsidized work relief and subsistence gardens in order to occupy the unemployed and increase their access to healthy food while maintaining “self-respect.” Common ideology purported that self-respect was achievable through the individualistic endeavor of using labor to “pull one’s self up by the boots straps.” Work relief gardens were collectives for wages. An agency redistributed the wages as food relief to the gardeners. More common than the work relief gardens were the subsistence gardens in which the government provided seeds and technical assistance to homes, communities, municipals, or factories and businesses. Financial support for this type of long-term relief ended with the New Deal implementation of the food stamp program, which distributed farm surplus.

Finally, Lawson (2005) details the uses of gardens during both world wars. During WWI and WWII, political agendas guided the Department of Agriculture’s gardening programs that were intended to boost patriotism among American citizens. The majority of these gardens belonged to individual households. Unlike the civic improvement focus of other gardens, the War Garden Campaign of WWI targeted all income groups and social groups. The government solicited citizens’ voluntary support
and patriotism during this time of national crisis. The War Garden Campaign was intended to promote domestic food production, enabling more farm-raised food to be sent abroad. Schools, businesses, clubs, and organizations all joined in this effort. The campaign encouraged people to grow locally and this campaign raised their awareness of the dangers of relying on imported food.

During WWII, former presidents Roosevelt and Truman realized Congress and the American people would not support multi-million dollar programs to mitigate poor health outcomes caused by hunger. Therefore, they dressed up new social programs under the guise of agricultural and national defense circles (Winne 2008). The National War Garden Commission used propaganda (e.g., the “soldiers of the soil” campaign) to instill citizens with patriotism in order to promote gardens during WWII, which were also used to increase food production for the war effort in Europe (Lawson 2005). Successful propaganda resulted in these gardens becoming nationally referred to as the “Victory Gardens.” In the economic upswing subsequent to WWII, with the onset of the Cold War, the United States turned its attention to finding new markets and solving hunger in the war devastated and non-communist countries of Europe. This eventually progressed into the Green Revolution.

Van Hassell (2002) suggests that the popularity of domestic gardens waned following WWII; then, it resurfaced in the 1960s as individuals sought to live out their values concerning the environment and to resist the government and growing consumerism. The horrors of the industrial food system had also become evident during this period. Rachael Carson (1962) wrote *Silent Spring*, a book exposing the ill effects of DDT sprayed as an insecticide over crops. Organic food developments further spiked
with the 1970s energy crisis, decline in industry, urban blight, rising food prices, and the emerging environmental ethic. The organic food movement grew in popularity; gardens, community supported agriculture, and farmers markets proliferated.

Community gardens of the 1970s were part of a grassroots’ effort to rebuild communities, expand resources, and open up green spaces in neighborhoods. Similar to then, today’s middle-class white gardeners, inspired by the romantic notions of Wendell Barry and Henry David Thoreau, plant community gardens to assist inner city residents besieged by the conditions of poverty (Winne 2008). However, what is of significance for middle-class activists may be of no consequence to those who are poor (Power 1999). Outsiders’ attempts are often paternalistic in that they target individuals whom they see as socially disadvantaged to make changes, for example, by eating healthy to prevent diabetes. The sustainable agriculture and organic food movements “do not confront the problems of racism and classism inherent in the industrial food system;” instead, they end up “reproducing the same political and economic disenfranchisement inherent to the industrial system” (Holt-Gimenez et al. 2009: 161).

Then and today, the gardens of “white do-gooders” differ in their approach to poverty than activists who participated in the War on Poverty during the Civil Rights Era. Winne (2008) indicates these activists are often low-income African American and Hispanic residents inspired by Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, and Cesar Chavez. Therefore, their gardens are self-determinative in that activists concern themselves mostly with challenging the structural determinants of poverty rather than passively accepting them. This is the approach taken by OKT. How OKT’s approach differs from other approaches targeting the SE communities was the basis for my research questions
and design. This approach made it possible for me to both identify and understand the policies reinforcing the inequitable distribution of resources, including land use policies that are outdated and non-supportive of collective food production or even urban agriculture in itself.

**Urban Agriculture and Land Use Policies in Grand Rapids, Michigan**

Participants of food security projects in Grand Rapids recognize the need for policy that is supportive of local food production. The 2010 failed chicken ordinance was a citizen led movement to institute policy change at the city level. City Commissioners’ reasoning behind denying the proposed ordinance raised an important question among local food advocates: what does “sustainability” and “green” mean to a city claiming to be these things? In the city, policy favors the use of land for development purposes rather than for growing food. Privatized enterprise and individual land ownership takes precedence over collectively owned and managed public space. Opposing this precedent, the committee for the Green Grand Rapids Master Plan charter drafted policy to preserve green space in the city for “healthy and walk-able communities.” The draft charter made provisions for community gardens. Thus far, the relationship between land use policy and food security in Grand Rapids overwhelmingly demonstrates an inequitable distribution of resources (e.g., the land, money, city support), resulting in gentrification.

One of the topics at a Food Policy Advocates (FPA) meeting focused on historical reasons for why city policy does not support urban agriculture.\(^1\) This discussion was

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\(^1\) The FPA was a non-profit group that focused primarily on addressing food insecurity in Grand Rapids. Major activities included the Neighborhood Farmers Market and a produce-brokering program for food
based on a member’s forthcoming white paper in which one of his interns was reviewing zoning ordinances. The white paper’s central question asked, “Why does local government view appealing these ordinances as a nuisance rather than as a way to use the land?” One member pointed out that the community is changing faster than these ordinances that are not up to date with how people want to use the land. Another member added, “We want to move toward sustenance as a way to live rather than as a regulated activity.”

A few FPA members discussed the fact that agriculture is viewed “as something we used to do.” For example, pigs still cleaned the city dump in 1920, a time when agriculture was a part of city life. People began to view agriculture as less of a necessity with the post WWII development of the suburbs (Lyson 2004). Nationwide, citizens ceased living in integrated communities centered on agriculture in the countryside when they and city residents began moving toward the suburbs. In the suburbs, people had only to depend on corporate entities for their food. Members of the FPA observed that growing food on a personal level became viewed as disruptive to the hegemonic notion that agriculture is a nuisance open to regulation. For instance, as evident in the architecture of cities, land is used for parking and development versus agriculture and green space (Register 2006).

During my research, public support was shifting toward restoring agrarianism to the city. Detailed in chapter 3, public support in the Southeast was evident in different entrepreneurial approaches for creating economic gain that ranged from restaurants growing their own food to visions of urban farms. In the Southeast, residents supported
the farmers market and there were hundreds of gardeners. Moreover, 60 people signed up to garden and participate in OKT’s 2010 Food Diversity Project. There was also a surge in young, white, and college aged gardeners present in the Southeast. Active young people included the members of Tilling to Table, a group of former Grand Rapids Community College culinary students who grew food for Blandford Nature Center and nearby restaurants. Tilling to Table also assisted community groups in starting gardens. The founder formed this group when she became disheartened over the fact that one of her fellow culinary students did not know carrots grew out of the ground. She decided to form this group to spread awareness and assist people in learning how to grow local food. At the time, Tilling to Table was awaiting their 501(c)(3) status to become a non-profit group in order to grow and sell local food to restaurants. Other active young people included Calvin College students living in community houses in the Southeast. One of the houses, the Penial House, started a yard garden open to the Baxter neighborhood. Finally, the Barefoot Victory Garden’s (BFVG) community gardeners were another group of youth that participated in the chicken ordinance, guerilla gardening, and in collaborative activities with OKT.

Guerilla gardening is an international method that environmental stewards apply to public land. Guerilla gardeners plant and cultivate public spaces, knowing that where they plant will not be permanent. Examples include scattering sunflower seeds in the city or covertly planting a garden. I witnessed guerilla gardening one night as I was out walking my dog. I encountered a group of 12 college-aged youth, many of whom were BFVG gardeners, clearing a corner space in an abandoned SE parking lot site. They planted a garden in about one hour.
Citizens in Grand Rapids are seeking a self-determinative lifestyle in which they can raise their own food, independent of agri-business. This is why local food advocates devoted much of their energy to the chicken ordinance. A group of about 50 residents in Grand Rapids created a chicken ordinance draft that Commissioner Roslyn Bliss presented to the city. This ordinance stipulated for the allowance of up to five hens per house for food production. Members of the FPA and OKT participated in these meetings. At City Hall on August 10th of 2010, the ordinance failed.

City Commissioner Jim White made a public statement regarding why he did not support the ordinance. In summation, as outlined by Smith (2010), he said: (1) The policy had to be applicable to everyone and it would have been a problem if everyone raised chickens; (2) the policy stipulations must be relevant to all farm animals; (3) chickens lessen the city’s identity as an urban center; (4) his ward (ward 3) did not support the ordinance; and (5) the Fulton Street Farmers Market offers organic food and the upcoming Downtown Market may sell year-round organic food. Smith (2010) criticized White’s comments in the order they were written: (1) not everyone is going to raise chickens; (2) the ordinance was not addressing other farm animals; (3) Grand Rapids is not a sustainable urban center friendly to organic growing practices; rather, it relies heavily upon public transportation and provides no safe paths for bicyclists; (4) it was unclear if White consulted with people from his ward and, if so, with how many; and (5) the Fulton Street Farmers Market and forthcoming Downtown Market are not accessible to everyone in terms of transportation and prices. Local produce and goods are more expensive than regularly priced items at grocer retail stores.
Citizens opposed to the ordinance cited odor and noise concerns as their reasons for opposition. Advocates were quick to point out that hens do not make much noise and five hens would not produce a detectable odor, especially with the provision that chickens have to be maintained at a required distance from the street and adjacent homes. A former farmers’ market manager who helped write the ordinance stated that five hens are not likely to produce a lot of waste. I spoke with him and others that also discounted the threat of avian flu—a concern raised by the city’s Commissioners and other citizens—saying it was much more likely to occur in the close quarters of large poultry facilities.

Darcy, a recognized and actively involved local food advocate, sent out an email to encourage others to appeal this decision. She called on people to share their expertise with the city and demonstrate that the ordinance would empower people to take control of their food, wellness, and to build sustainability. In light of large-scale factory farms influencing the Commission, she encouraged local food advocates and local organic farmers to share their perspectives. Farms included Groundswell, Lubbers, Crane Dance, and Trillium Haven. The other groups Darcy called on were active voices in the local food movement: OKT, FPA, Tilling to Table, Blandford Nature Center, and Friends of Grand Rapids Parks. She called on the Grand Rapids Humanities Council that produced a documentary titled *Eating in Place* (2010), which was about the local food movement in and near Grand Rapids. In her email, she also addressed the 4th Street Oasis Garden and Barefoot Victory Garden. The organizers of these community gardens were ardent participants in the local food community. She also called on charity-based food security groups even though they were more focused on pantry donations rather than locally grown food. These groups included Second Harvest Gleaners, ACCESS Food Pantries of
West Michigan, and the Emergency Needs Task Force. Darcy encouraged them to connect their inner city work to policy in order to, as she put it, “Teach people how to fish.”

Commissioner White’s line of reasoning speaks to the fact that the city’s definition of “sustainable” is not that of local food advocates and definitely not that of environmental activists. People asked the Commissioners to reconsider and were denied a revote. They were told it was not the direction that the city was heading. One member of OKT remarked that it seemed like the city would support the ordinance because chickens could reduce waste for trash service. Her reflection is one interpretation of sustainability in which nothing should go to waste. The banning of chickens is one example of early to mid-20th century policies regarding the “best use” for empty space and that separate the city from an agrarian lifestyle. These policies obstruct the practices of those that subsist on growing their own food as a result of being impacted by economic collapse or that choose to live out their ideals concerning their health and the environment.

Green Grand Rapids began in 2007. It is one of the city’s master plans and was a move toward writing policy supportive of urban agriculture. In an interview, an employee of the City Planning Department described reasons for the master plan and city policies concerning urban agriculture. The first plan was from 1923 to 1963, the City Beautiful Movement Master Plan. There was the Urban Renewal Master Plan in 1963, followed by the 2002 Grand Rapids Master Plan that highlighted green space and parks, based on the smart growth principles of mixed plan uses and compact development.
patterns. Beginning in 2003, state law required cities to update their master plans every 5 years. The draft committee believed that they would have the new master plan completed by 2011 after the city’s planning commission approved it and the City Planning Department adopted it. The new plan was a vision for the next 20 years and built upon 2002’s seven themes of strong neighborhoods, vital business districts, balanced transportation, and strong economy. This time, the committee was revisiting and amending the other three themes of balancing the city with nature, recycling storm water, and planning a city that enriches citizens’ lives. Discussions focused on parks and green spaces, the urban tree canopy, the Grand River, and how to revitalize these.

The committee began writing the draft in 2007. Parks became a central theme as a reaction to Mayor George Hartwell’s desire to sell Indian Trails Golf Course to a developer in 2007. At the time of this research in spring of 2010, Green Grand Rapids was working on the master plan’s section titled Parks and Recreation. The planning director of land use from Grand Valley Metropolitan Council, the director of Friends of Grand Rapids Parks, and a representative from Blandford Nature Center were jointly taking the lead on these discussions and searching for someone to specifically deal with the topic of food.

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18 Smart growth is an urban planning, land use, and transportation theory that concentrates growth to avoid sprawl. It advocates for compact communities that are walkable and bicycle-friendly. Design goals are intended to create a sense of place and community, enhance natural and cultural resources, promote public health, distribute the costs and benefits of development, and expand the range of transportation, employment and housing choices through what is referred to as mixed-use development.

19 Grand Valley Metropolitan Council, an alliance of governmental units in Kent County and the surrounding counties, brings together public and private sectors to advocate, plan for, and coordinate the provision of services and investments, that have environmental, economic and social impact to metropolitan areas.
The draft was in place to address several policies and problems that were making it difficult to sustain a community garden in the city. In order of discussion, obstacles include access to water, nuisance codes, and the “best use” policy that favors private development of vacant lots. Much of the following discussion is devoted to the “best use” policy, which relates to Green Grand Rapids Master Plan’s biggest concern of preserving green space in the face of developers. The local food piece started to come into play as an integral aspect of green space and something that community members expressed that they wanted to see as an amenity in the master plan. In the new code, the committee listed community gardens as permissible in all residential zone districts. The idea of changing parks into local food locations was becoming more prevalent.

Nonetheless, there was no champion for the food piece and to manage and coordinate these efforts. Participants expressed their hope for a volunteer group to manage community gardens in public parks. Coordinating efforts would have to be conducted by a non-profit group rather than the already overburdened city staff. The lead draftee informed me that public parks and church properties were the best long-term locations for placing community gardens throughout the city and providing access to adequate land and water.

Access to water was one challenge that the draft committee did not know how to overcome. The city was accountable to the surrounding and interdependent jurisdictions paying into the same water system. Therefore, the current funding structure did not allow for paying separately for community garden plots. It was a significant challenge to obtain and determine how to provide water. Even so, as recognized by food growers, water is a necessity, as is healthy soil, to a garden.
The ban on food-waste composting and restriction on plant length were nuisance codes standing in the way of productive community gardens and/or yard gardens. Nutrient rich soil requires composting, which is essential for the two to three years it takes to establish a healthy garden. Food-waste composting fell under the nuisance code of city policy. The rationale was that it had the potential to smell and attract pests like rats. The other nuisance code stipulated that plants could not be taller than 30 inches. Therefore, it was illegal, for example, to grow corn or sunflowers. This law was intended to prevent weeds and overgrown gardens. Land use policies pertaining to urban agriculture were not current to gardeners’ needs. According to activists and a few city officials, outdated policies contradicted the city’s claim of being a “sustainable” and “green” city.

It was nearly impossible to keep a community garden in a vacant lot due to zoning policy that gave priority use to developers. This policy slowed down the progress of a few local food initiatives, signifying the idea of contested space. In Garfield Park, the city did not allow an OKT member to start a community garden in a vacant lot. The justification for this decision was that the lot would someday be purchased; therefore, it was deemed pointless to start a garden. As observed by Schmelzkopf (1995), gardens, in general, confronted land tenancy issues related to social control. The documentary titled *The Garden* (2009) tells the story of a garden demolished in South Central Los Angeles after the city sold the lot to a corporation. As with the following examples of the Southgate Garden and African Refugee Center garden, this film addresses the question of whether or not those that have been cultivating and occupying the land should have the right to the land.
The Southgate Garden in the Southeast Community Association (SECA) area was soon to meet its demise during this research.\(^{20}\) The city gifted the Inner City Christian Federation (ICCF) the property and surrounding lots for building housing and adding to the revitalization plans at Wealthy and Jefferson Streets, near the up-and-coming Downtown Market.\(^{21}\) ICCF was allowing the gardeners to use the land until they needed it “for better use.”

Donald’s Place Street was a dead-end street located behind my house and the location of another dispossessed garden. The African Refugee Center planted a garden on one of the abandoned lots. The center stopped gardening in 2010 when the city made plans to bulldoze this area in order to connect all of the dead end streets to “reduce crime.” The Wealthy Street Business District successfully aided development of the area near Donald’s Place Street by attracting new businesses such as trendy boutiques, home furnishing stores, and restaurants offering local food. This was the Wealthy Heights project and the city owned the lots at the end of Donald’s Place Street. Habitat for Humanity and Dwelling Place, both non-profit affordable housing developers and community development corporations, subsidized the housing portion of this project. The city financed the road addition. The on-going project consisted of connecting the streets between 20 properties undergoing rehab and new construction. For many years, this was a high crime area for nightly subversive drug deals. The city intended to merge a few of the streets in order to reduce crime and allocate space for traffic flow. An interviewee informed me, “From an urban planning perspective, cul-de-sacs are never a good thing or dead ends.”

\(^{20}\) The Southgate Garden, organized by Deidre who brought veterans and those who are homeless to garden there, had its last season in 2011.
\(^{21}\) This transaction between the city and ICCF is further detailed in chapter 4.
Land use policies were also making it difficult for a community garden to secure a permanent location. Established in 2000, the Urban Produce Project was a community garden planned for kids in the Baxter neighborhood. The founder of the project described why the city’s “best use” policy led to its failure. The organizers hired kids to perform organic gardening in 3 lots. Every year, they leased the land for $1 from the city, proving that they owned the required insurance. The gardeners could not put a structure on the land due to the city’s policy that housing developers have priority over vacant land. Every year, the garden was forced to move to a new site because someone else would purchase the property. Therefore, the gardeners were unable to even perform illegal composting, which takes more than a year to build the ideal level of nutrients. Water was stored in tanks, making it challenging to irrigate. The founder complained that the investment in the land was not rewarding without any structures in place or a particular design: “Maybe it's vegetables, maybe it's flowers, whatever, but at least there's raised beds, there's irrigation, there's a potting shed, whatever that gives it a little more sense of permanency and people feel like if they invest their time and resources, it's not gonna be taken away or it might not be there next year.” Lacking a sense of permanency, it was onerous to encourage the kids to start their own gardens.

Although never raised as policy issues, growers all encountered irritants endemic to an urban gardening experience. Pests, animals, fungal diseases, not enough or too much sun, gaining access to water and clean soil, theft, contaminants in the soil and time constraints were obstacles many gardeners grappled within their daily life. Lack of time, theft, and broken glass in the soil were also complaints.
One young woman spoke of how she was exhausted after working third shift every night. She loved her garden but was struggling to find the time to maintain it. The only reason that she kept her garden was because her mom who lived across the street planted it for her. In speaking about her concerns she said:

I did some green peppers and chile peppers...like if I'm sitting here I'll pick out some weeds, but I don't know, I just wasn't in the gardening mood this year. And I've worked a lot of extra hours so I haven't had time. I work 3rd shift so when I get off I'm tired. And I'll pick up something on the weekends, so I don't really have time.

People usually did not start a garden if they felt restricted by time constraints. Single parents with limited budgets and time often expressed that these things deterred them from planting a garden even though they would like to have one.

Some people were agitated by theft. Others figured a person is in need if they picked food without permission. The Barefoot Victory Garden, Southeast Community Association (SECA) Garden, and Southgate garden all shared the motto that everyone is welcome to the harvest. Then again, these gardens were intentionally designed to be open to the community regardless of the amount of work invested by individuals.

However, the organizers usually expected people to automatically contribute a small amount of time to maintaining the garden if they were picking food. Theft was often only an issue to any type of garden if it went beyond picking from a plentiful bounty to stealing an entire plant or from plants that do not prolifically reproduce, like melons.

One of the Neighborhood Farmers Market (NFM) vendors grew food in a community garden in the adjacent city of Kentwood. He was forced to hide his watermelons under other growth to prevent theft. He said that if you do not pick everything right away, it gets stolen. The Hillcrest community gardeners were hyper alert to theft and many
posted no stealing signs on their sites. On two occasions, when I walked through the garden, I was questioned by one of the gardeners as to what I was doing there. Others complained of this type of vigilance and tense atmosphere.

Glass was a gardening hazard. I especially found a lot of glass and refuse in the soil when I gardened at the K-House and at the Southgate gardens. Both of these sites were located in SECA, which has multiple brownfield sites and vacant properties. Other parts of the city faced this same issue as explained by a Midtown Community Garden gardener when she spoke of difficulties particular to urban gardening:

But yeah, being an urban space we're constantly digging up, like we just rototilled and there's garbage coming up out of the ground, and broken glass, I don't know what it is about this city. There's just broken glass everywhere. Of course we get to the garden, the first thing my kids do is rip off their shoes and run around barefoot, so I'm anticipating an injury at some point. So that's frustrating. And the next-door neighbors have a very, very large pit bull in their backyard on a chain, but even with the large chain it still makes me nervous. The dog doesn't like us, especially when we get close to the property line. And there's a definite odor of dog poop. So there are definitely challenges. It's sometimes frustrating, but I think to create a space in the city that's kind of a bright spot creates a lot of hope for us and our neighbors, so we'll work around those issues.

In regard to the issue of retaining land occupancy and permanent structures for community gardens, neighborhood associations were successful. Eastown Neighborhood Association organized a community garden. The association charged for individualized plots in an area behind a building that is fenced off from the general public. Outside of SE Grand Rapids, Hillcrest Neighborhood Association operated the largest and longest running (30 years old) withstanding community garden in the city, having an up to 2-year waiting list. A few of the NMF vendors, in years past and during my fieldwork, rented plots from this garden and sold their produce harvest to the market. The Perkins Garden
did not belong to a neighborhood association, although it was another example of a long withstanding garden. It was located in Northeast Grand Rapid’s Ball-Perkins Park, which was farmland bought by the city in 2002. The Wege, Frey, and Sebastian Foundations donated the money. The FPA helped start this garden, which, for its duration, had been maintained and organized by one of the gardeners. These spaces at Eastown, Hillcrest, and Perkins were available to those that could afford to rent the individualized plots or had transportation.

Opposed to charging rent for an individualized plot in a community garden, activists who make up organizations such as OKT contend that natural resources should be held in common by and publicly entrusted to citizens. On the other hand, many in our society, in general, believe that individuals have an inalienable right to private property and this ideology is derived, for example, from the Constitution of the United States and a capitalistic system based on the neoclassical economic theory of Adam Smith (1776). Collective land ownership or cultivation is not a pervasive idea in mainstream American society.

The SECA Garden, Barefoot Victory Garden, and the Southgate Garden had the biggest presence in the Southeast and welcomed anyone to eat the harvest and collectively grow free of charge. Only the SECA Garden had the most secure land occupancy and a permanent structure since it was on the neighborhood association property. In general, nearby residents usually assumed that the harvest from these gardens was not for public consumption.

Which agricultural resources should be considered public or private property was a question raised by an individual at a Grand Rapids Food Coalition (GRFC) health
subcommittee meeting. At this subcommittee meeting, attendees were focused on the concept of a “walkable community,” which they defined as a geographical location that accommodates all forms of transportation, residential housing, businesses, and urban agriculture. One attendee, Jim, envisioned edible parks and sidewalks with oranges hanging from trees. Jim asked, “If someone raises chickens on public land, are they for everyone?” “Who has the right to the egg?” He then asked if the edible parks and orange trees would be funded with private or public funds and if a private owner supplied the trees for public use, could the city ban the use of pesticides? The city gives preference to private developers for leased lots and the city views this as “best use.” Jim said that, instead, public community gardens should be established as “best use.”

In an interview, Jim said that the city planned on providing space for the first officially sanctioned public garden at Joe Taylor Park in the Baxter neighborhood. Jim expected there to be questions over “How does it come together? Who is responsible? Do they want to divide it into individual plots or use it to supplement the food pantry in Baxter?” However, the city refused to plant produce or invest in the upkeep of the garden. This garden was unique in that the city was allowing for the first official community garden in a city park. The city was going to put the infrastructure in place by building raised beds and putting in irrigation. The city was not going to invest in this infrastructure until someone clearly agreed to coordinate it. As of the summer of 2010, no one had agreed to this.

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22 A “walkable community” is an expression common to the “mixed use” development projects of Neighborhood Ventures and community development corporations (CDC’s), especially Lighthouse Communities, Dwelling Place, and the Inner City Christian Federation. “Mixed use” refers to urban development plans that allocate space for retail, living, and office space within a neighborhood area.
Jim explained how Friends of Grand Rapids Parks is a resource for facilitating the use of public space for gardens. The Friends of Grand Rapids Parks is an independent, non-profit group with a memorandum of understanding that defines the lines between their responsibilities and those of the city. This non-profit organization took over the city’s public infrastructure duties and manages its parks, including public school land. The few employees find volunteers to assist the city in its duties, obtain financial resources to improve parks, offer expertise, and counsel the community in determining what to do with their public spaces.

According to Jim, new models are needed for finding additional green spaces that can function as public parks, even if they are, in part, privately funded. He believes developers will invest in green space if they see a return investment from funding a park. Hank, a spokesperson for Lighthouse Communities CDC, believes that a good incentive is charging 10 percent more on a property. In our interview, Hank quoted research reporting that green space raises the surrounding property value by 15 percent.\footnote{Lighthouse Communities is a community development corporation (CDC) significantly involved with food insecurity projects and economic development initiatives in the Southeast. This CDC is located in the Southeast Community Neighborhood Association (SECA), and manages its funds.} He pointed out that the city has the power to vacate a road and turn it into green space or determine the best use for vacant land. However, the city earns more in property taxes from having a house on the land. Hank argues that raising the surrounding property values by providing green space earns the city more in property taxes versus holding all of the land for housing.

Due to both global and local circumstances, Grand Rapids advocates address local food issues for health, environmental, and economic reasons. They believe updated policies are necessary for dealing with the land use issues in Grand Rapids that obstruct
the progress of urban agricultural initiatives. Urban land use policies currently support economic development rather than community-owned local food activities, which reinforces the displacement of people through gentrification. These policies are inevitably tied into the racism, exclusion, and power dynamics common to the initiatives and social networks detailed in chapters 3 and 4.
Chapter 3

This chapter illustrates the power dynamics within the social network of food security initiatives that implement top down agendas in Southeast (SE) Grand Rapids. In previous chapters, I define power as the circulation of resources that reinforce the interests of business stakeholders and result in the exclusionary practices of gentrification and omitting community input, ultimately reinforcing food insecurity by not directly addressing its causes. The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate how food security groups share resources (e.g., money, social capital, knowledge) and their organizational methods limit community members’ involvement. Using Grand Rapids Food Coalition (GRFC) as a major case example, I describe its organizational methods and the local food initiatives that its members represented in 2010. These initiatives supported the gentrification that is taking place in the Southeast or, at the least, were patronizing in that residents did not have active roles as participants or stakeholders. The Neighborhood Farmers Market (NFM) is another case example that concludes this chapter and highlights residents’ lack of agency as active participants in the local food security movement.

I argue that a lack of agency, in part, is due to West Michigan’s deeply ingrained ideology regarding the Christian ethic of charity. Charity is something for the deserving poor, meaning those that the benefactors believe are not purposefully subsisting from government benefits, engaging in criminal activity, or have substance abuse issues (Goode and Maskovsky 2001). Food security initiatives in Grand Rapids are designed as charitable efforts to target changes at an individual level and do not include community-
driven solutions. Health, education, and economic development are characteristic food security interventions that target individual change and are associated with the efforts of GRFC members. These interventions drastically differ from Our Kitchen Table’s social justice approach, which is focused on changing the structural causes of inequality and is described in chapter 5.

Projects are done on SE residents’ behalf while they have no voice in the formation and implementation of these projects. This sort of group dynamic reinforces the interests of the powerful (Cook and Kothari 2001). SE residents do not possess the extent of resources that are available to the social network of individuals implementing various food security initiatives. Resources include social capital in the form of research data used for funding and to inequitably justify decisions impacting residents’ lives.

Bourdieu (1985), Glover (2005), and Putnam (1993) examine the role of social capital in reproducing this type of power and inequality. In Bourdieu’s (1985) view, how much social capital exists depends on social ties, the size of social networks for sharing cultural or informational capital, the volume of resources held by other members in those networks, and the durability and persistence of networks. Social capital can be deliberately created through social ties and social inequalities may be embedded in social capital (Glover 2005). Norms and networks that serve some groups may obstruct others, particularly if the norms are discriminatory or the networks are socially segregated (Putnam 1993). These insights apply to Grand Rapids. Here, resources are circulated among social networks that further disenfranchise SE residents from a right in determining the future of their neighborhoods and their quality of life. Particular
institutional and business networks possess the most social capital, and do not include members of the so-called SE community.

Grand Rapid Food Coalition (GRFC), a coalition of representatives from local food and/or food security initiatives, came together to create a vision and project around food. Most members were personally invited to attend the meetings and drawn from an already existing social network of food security advocates. During the development stages, subcommittees formed around the issues of health, education, food security/social justice, and economic development as they relate to local food. These issues constituted the most commonly articulated and inclusive categories of interests concerning food insecurity in SE Grand Rapids. Most members from each subcommittee had ties to various economic development projects claiming to build food security.

After providing an overview of GRFC as a whole, I describe how members belonging to projects outside of the coalition—usually organized around health, education or economic development—used food security as opportunity for economic growth. A few of the GRFC members directly communicated with or belonged to the tightly knit social network of wealthy and powerful men (not women) in the city who were organizing large scale entrepreneurial and economic development efforts around food such as the Downtown Market. The relationships between GRFC members and large-scale development projects, especially the Downtown Market, are described in chapter 4.

Using GRFC, I provide an overview of the different food security initiatives—whose members served as representatives on the coalition—targeting the Southeast, their objectives, difficulties with organizational infrastructure, and internal and external power
dynamics. Differences in overarching values and reasons for local food security, the competitive nature of non-profit groups, and the communication problems resulting from a lack of transparency and non-democratic participation were typical problems experienced by food security initiatives. These problems were apparent within the organization of GRFC itself, which completely dissolved by the winter of 2011. The Food Policy Advocate’s (FPA) organization of the Neighborhood Farmers Market (NFM) serves as another case example. This market made positive contributions to the neighborhood, though it experienced organizational difficulties and was prone to exclusionary policies. Two of the NFM’s organizers participated in GRFC and were actively involved in the local food security community.

**Grand Rapids Food Coalition**

Grand Rapids Food Coalition (GRFC) was created in response to local food security advocates in Grand Rapids who recognized there was little solidarity around food and that they needed a unified front. As advocated by Armstrong (2000), Dahlberg (1999), Davis et al. (1999), Hamm and Baron (1999), Lyson (2004) and Mouget (2006), they understood that community agriculture requires an articulation of services to build sustainable systems for food security. The community concept for food security and gardening emerged in the urban food systems’ mission for acquiring culturally appropriate food through local non-emergency sources while linking the concerns of urban planners, farmers, food banks, community development corporations, social service agencies, and environmentalists (Lawson 2005). Participants in GRFC anticipated this type of collaboration.
In developing solidarity around local food, participants repeatedly expressed a desperate need for a leader in the city regarding food, and not to “reinvent the spokes of the wheel.” One participant stressed this point. He was a key player in developing policy for the Green Grand Rapids Master Plan, the set of policies designed to institute green space and environmentally friendly practices in Grand Rapids. There was no active representative for the local food component of Green Grand Rapids Master Plan, which was needed to move forward. He wanted someone to champion/carry forward something about food. Different advocates throughout my research mentioned the need for leadership around food in the city. At one of GRFC’s subcommittee meetings, someone remarked, “Everyone is worried about stepping on each others’ toes.” One woman pointed out that people “trip up on initiatives” when there is no leadership and no clearly defined roles and tasks. During a later interview, a committee member and representative of Lighthouse Communities stated:

> We've got to stop doing that as far as overlapping, competing efforts. Some of it too is not using people's time and energy wisely, but it also confuses people on the street when you've got people coming out doing the surveys, ‘we're here to fix the neighborhood’...then somebody else comes out and ‘like you were here last week, no, that wasn't us’...

GRFC first met in November of 2009 and then for six months beginning the following January. Bill—a prominent public figure who serves on multiple major organizations in Grand Rapids—arranged this effort. When I attended January’s meeting, Bill, the convener, spoke of how he did not know anything about food and was simply bringing people together. He emphasized, as echoed by many other attendees, two points. First, agriculture is the number one industry in Michigan. Second, some sort of approach to food needed to be unified in order to prevent continually “reinventing the
spokes of the wheel.” He said that there was not a good connection between diverse groups to create a community. Therefore, the purpose of this food coalition was “to produce a better product and a community” by marshaling resources for a “win/win” between organizations, and to protect resources. He did not explicitly define what he meant by “better,” “community,” “product,” “organizations,” or “resources.” His statements were indicative of an economic development agenda, which unfolded over the next few meetings.

From the onset, organizational issues were apparent within GRFC. These arose from communication problems, differences in overarching values and reasons for local food security, and the competitive nature of non-profit groups. The defining purpose of GRFC was vague, and participants immediately expressed frustration over this. Interest eventually waned by several people who stopped attending, many of whom expressed angst over not knowing the exact purpose of the meetings. Bill consistently used the term “food” not “local food” or “food security,” leaving many to ask why they were there. A few people thought they were being used for a “think tank” experiment. Frustration was evident at the subcommittee meetings that occurred in February 2010. In addition to the monthly committee meetings, I attended two subcommittee meetings. One focused on health and the other one on food security/social justice. These meetings were in addition to the six general monthly meetings that I also attended. Conversation during the subcommittee meetings was consumed with debate over the process of how to go about forming a plan around food and if it should proceed or follow defining a vision. People were unsure about what was expected of them and for what reason Bill and other attendees had invited them to the meetings. However, several individuals remained and
became the most active in the overall group. By April of 2010, it was decided that the
goal of the coalition was to plan a conference about local food in the spring of 2011.
May’s meeting centered on choosing members to organize the conference and June’s
meeting focused on discussion topics for the conference. After June, there were no
longer invitations to group meetings. A select few took over the work.

The lack of transparency and people not having the capacity to make decisions
became apparent after I attended several meetings. The participants became concerned
about the organizational power dynamics of GRFC and some people felt that they were
being denied access to knowledge and decision-making. Bill and the leadership chairs of
the subcommittees held exclusive meetings to talk about the goals of the group and set
GRFC’s meeting agendas with no input from the other attendees. At the beginning of
meetings, Bill would present a scope of work for the group that was not discussed in
previous meetings. One of the agenda setters explained the process underlining how
participants’ support of pre-set agendas is elicited. As one of the subcommittee
coordinators, she said she applied skills learned at the National Institute of Health to
make it appear as though an agenda had not already been set when leading a group, and
to not let the group stray from the predetermined topic. Asking questions to the group in
a way that appears to give them choices and guiding them while being careful not to tell
them the answers keeps the group invested so they will not wander away.

A long time food advocate in Grand Rapids mentioned that she was frustrated
because the meeting notes were not capturing all views and contributions to this project.
I observed this happening on one occasion when Bill directed the entire group to quickly
brainstorm words to capture their thoughts on food. People began digressing about how
Kent County is the leader in agriculture. After two minutes, Bill told his secretary to note that he heard the words “employment,” “investment,” and “entrepreneurship.” I did not make these same observations when I listened to the dialogue. Later meetings shifted towards an economic development focus, one that utilized this terminology.

It became apparent that Bill set a predetermined agenda. Bill announced at one meeting that as a group, everyone should find a way to work with the Downtown Market. One of the GRFC attendees happened to sit on the board of Right Place, which was an economic development consulting group aiding with the development of the Downtown Market. The coalition’s themes of education, health, and food security mirrored one of the Downtown Market’s announced objectives. I never verified whether Bill intentionally formed GRFC in order to eventually align itself with the market’s objectives or if this was coincidental. Nonetheless, these themes were requirements for the W.K. Kellogg Foundation funding that was partially financing the Downtown Market. GRFC members speculated that the coalition was started in order to secure this funding.

Discussion of the coalition’s organizational body and the naming of subcommittees at January’s meetings highlighted different values that people attach to local food. As mentioned, the four subcommittees formed around economic development, health, education, and food security/social justice. The term sustainability sparked fiery conversation when participants debated whether or not a subcommittee should be named for it. In my research, I observed how people consciously chose discourse to define and place parameters: community, sustainability, local, and social justice. Someone stated sustainability is too packed a term and people have different definitions of it. One person said, “Combining green with sustainability turns people
off.” A representative from Local First suggested the title *Healthy People Healthy Places* in order to take sustainability out of the picture. This then became the name of the health subcommittee.

February’s health subcommittee meeting followed this same precedent in that people decided to avoid the use of the word sustainable in summarizing their work. Participants were concerned that sustainability was “played out and losing its pizazz” and that it was only viewed as a catchall term. Instead, they preferred the phrase “healthy, clean environment.” The general agreement was that this phrase would have the one particular commonly understood definition of sustainability, which is the triple bottom line of environment, social wellbeing, and economics. The triple bottom line consists of making a profit based on attending to societal needs while reducing harmful impacts to the environment with the production of goods. Dialogue at the GRFC meetings illustrated that efforts around health or food security are not divorced from neoliberal ideas of economic development and market solutions. Identifiable as a construct of neoliberalism, the idea of desiring something better while “also limiting the range of expression to the selective idioms of development, progress and reform” feeds capitalistic growth (Fisher and Benson 2006).

The health subcommittee was drawing upon the concept of community as articulated by urban food security efforts and community development projects in Grand Rapids. Community, for their purposes, referred to a geographical region as a targeted area for intervention and not actual SE residents or local food advocates. Participants in my research spoke of neighborhood blocks or regions of the city when discussing community. During an interview, one member of GRFC told me:
I think in the case of a neighborhood, I think of a community as blocks of residences, like residence on a block or several blocks, and that's kind of the immediate community that will you know, when I think of community gardens, how you would service...I think tiny little micro communities, that it's not regional, it's not city wide, it's much smaller units. And they don't travel. I mean the whole world is within a 1/4 mile, 1/2 mile for the most part. And to expect somebody to go all the way out to 28th Street or Alpine to go grocery shopping seems kind of crazy when there's money in the neighborhood.

Naming the subgroups at one of the first meetings in January with one-sentence descriptors turned into a conversation about how certain terms carry different meanings. When the subcommittees were being named, social justice generated extensive conversation. A representative of the Food Policy Advocates (FPA) was the first to speak and said that everybody should have access to food and this should be the focus of the overall group. There was a big sigh in the room due to the fact that her statement represents a divide in perspectives concerning food security. Somebody then asked if food security should be combined with social justice. Bill concluded that the subgroup should be called food security/social justice and they should raise 4-6 issues around this.

Many of the social justice/food security subcommittee members shared an ideological view regarding charity. Just as their meeting began, it was announced that they would have to wrap it up early since several people were attending the planning of a charity event, the Hunger Walk. The meeting was held in the boardroom of ACCESS of West Michigan, a food pantry group, located within the Goodwill Hartley Center. Attendees represented Lighthouse Communities, Gods Kitchen, Catholic Charities, the City Health Initiative (CHI), Food Policy Advocates, ACCESS, and Emergency Needs Task Force (ENTF).
The emphasis on charity received the most attention due to two very vocal members of the ENTF. When someone commented, “This is starting to seem like an ENTF meeting,” they meant that the discussion was largely charity-based; the topic had turned towards addressing the overall picture of poverty by combining the efforts of filling stomachs with any quality of food, providing shelter, and transportation to jobs.

At a later interview, someone closely associated with ENTF, frustrated with charity approaches to food security, directly addressed the need to shift focus towards securing local food:

In Grand Rapids, good quality local food is for the elites and is not something for everyone. I think the inner city families need it just as much. (…) I think that it (charity) is a huge issue. I think as much as we want to in Grand Rapids, we tout the fact that we are philanthropic. Philanthropy comes with a lot of strings and it is also very back roomish. It is not justice; there is a difference between charity and justice, or philanthropy and justice. One of our frustrations with the food pantry system is it remains in the charity mind set.

Churches and food pantries reflect the Christian ethic of charity, a tenet of the conservative ideology present in the greater Grand Rapids area. Grand Rapids is located in Kent County in which the Association of Religious Data Archives (2010) reports that out of a population of 329,532, within the evangelical protestant religious tradition, there are 43,152 members who belong to the Christian Reformed Church and 56,337 members who belong to non-denominational churches. These data also show that 114,437 of this population are Catholic. The remaining numbers belong to various religious bodies. I have spoken to both progressive and conservative residents who refer to West Michigan as very conservative in terms of religion and political affiliation with the Republican

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Party. Having grown up here, I have witnessed this deep seeded belief system. Politics and the belief that social welfare benefits should be eradicated because they enable those who are simply not working hard enough are reflected in this conservative ideology that is typical of the evangelical protestant religious tradition. This dogma is similar to Weber’s (1905) critique of the Protestant ethic.25

Charity approaches are not so much concerned with fresh, nutritious, and local food but with “any food as long as it fills stomachs” (a statement commonly spoken by food pantry advocates). Charitable ideology is often taken from the Bible about teaching a man how to fish. It is the idea that something in the individual must change rather than the structural conditions that do not provide equal access to the “fish.” At the GRFC food security/social justice subcommittee meeting, the spokesperson for ACCESS of West Michigan, stated, “We are all trying to work ourselves out of a job and teach people to fish, to get them productive.” A short unresolved debate ensued over defining food security and social justice, whether or not these terms are synonymous and if not, which one should be defined as “filling empty stomachs” versus “teaching a man how to fish.” Often heard was the saying “teach a man how to fish” when people discussed food security or referred to “social justice.” Over the next couple of months, with the exception of ENTF, individuals from the charity-based groups stopped attending the GRFC meetings in protest over the emphasis on securing local food while concurrently

25 Weber argued that the Protestant ethic was the major reason capitalism became the dominant economic model. People looked to the accumulation of wealth as a sign of salvation. It was believed that charity begets laziness and begging, which causes the recipients to fail from the glory of God. I argue that today’s Protestants view charity as a sign of salvation, as what the Bible refers to as tithing 10 percent of your wealth. Many Republicans of this religious tradition support tithing as long as it is not in the form of tax dollars spent on social welfare benefits for the undeserving poor.
addressing economic development, education, and health rather than simply filling stomachs.

In Grand Rapids activist community, social justice is defined as changing structural conditions rather than changing individual behavior. For example, those working in the healthcare community try to get people to change dietary practices. Activists believe changing eating habits is irrelevant if there are no available resources for eating healthy. OKT and the Bloom Collective, an anarchist organization working with OKT, organized a potluck as an attempt to collaborate their efforts and to discuss food justice. Invitations were intended to extend beyond the activist community and were sent through email list serves and by word of mouth. Flyers were posted throughout neighborhoods near Wealthy Street. The organizers hoped to generate conversation on solutions to food insecurity: sharing food, growing food, or mobilizing as a community to live as sustainably as possible by not supporting agribusiness or its growing methods. To the contrary, several of the attendees viewed food justice as a hunger issue and social services as a solution for providing food. To the organizers dismay, changing the causes of food insecurity and providing fresh, healthy, and affordable food was not part of the overall discussion. One woman focused on the idea of how to determine who were the deserving and undeserving poor for state and charitable assistance in securing food.

A local activist had recently been deemed the “undeserving poor.” He lived in the Well House, two adjoined homes in which the owner provides semi-permanent housing for those who were once homeless. The residents grew their own food and received donations from Second Harvest Gleaners Food Bank. Second Harvest Gleaners banned the Well House from receiving their food after this activist wrote an article criticizing
Feeding America, the overseeing organization that is a network of food banks, for giving people empty calories rather than nutritious food. He was critical of the fact that supporters of Feeding America include ConAgra, Kraft, Walmart and Nestle, which are all major corporate players in the ineffective global food system outlined in chapter 2.

Besides disagreements over issues and values attached to the correct methods in securing food, competition over funding and leadership in the local food movement are major deterrents to achieving any solidarity. Several of the individuals and groups participating in the local food movement around food security are territorial and competitive. I observed members of GRFC complaining about not being invited to join food security initiatives taking place separately from the coalition. In Grand Rapids, the competition intensified when the W.K. Kellogg Foundation began searching for a food security project to fund in Grand Rapids that had an economic development approach for reducing children’s health disparities related to food insecurity. Thus, members of GRFC and local food advocates suspected each other of trying to secure this funding. Up to half a million dollars was rumored to be available. Again, many of these participants believed that this was why Bill started the coalition, in order to develop a compelling and fundable project.

The competitive nature of non-profit organizations and food security work became apparent after the founder of OKT invited me to a meeting with a former member of Delta Strategy, a non-profit consulting group that dissolved about a year before my study. This former member, Joan, was hoping to collaborate with OKT on a project and was disappointed that she had not been invited to any of the GRFC meetings, unlike, one of her past co-workers. When I later interviewed Joan’s former colleague, he provided an
example of competition, the fallout that occurred between the Food Policy Advocates (FPA) and Western Michigan Environmental Action Council (WEMEAC). In the past, Delta Strategy consulted with WEMEAC, which experienced a division among members involved in the food movement. This group of WEMEAC members broke away from the FPA complaining that they were not effective. Tension still existed between the two FPA members and a former WEMEAC employee who later joined GRFC.

The W.K. Kellogg Foundation met with OKT on two occasions. It was rumored that the W.K. Kellogg Foundation was interested in OKT because of its direct positioning in the Southeast and unique approach to food security. OKT believed this might have been a reason for others’ sudden interest in the Food Diversity Project (FDP). OKT was increasingly becoming a publicly recognized entity subsequent to their beginning the FDP in the summer of 2008. To various capacities, several individuals sought to partner with OKT and included professors and students associated with universities throughout Michigan, neighborhood associations, foundations, non-profit groups, and politicians. Meanwhile, members of GRFC were looking for minority representatives; on a couple of occasions when health disparities among low-income communities of color became newsworthy, they expressed that they needed OKT for gaining access to minority populations located in food deserts. OKT refused to be involved with GRFC, believing that this coalition had no clear vision of sustainability that was separate from green capitalist development work. Community members had no input in this project, which OKT believed was designed for economic gain rather than benefitting SE residents.
Food Security As Opportunity

The following examples of food initiatives translate into ways in which their emphasis on healthy communities, education, and economic development mask “real world” power dynamics that can further marginalize groups and lead to a higher concentration of power among dominant groups. Organizers are motivated by their own forms of knowledge and what they value, which they assume community members also value (Tsing 2005). These groups control the means for knowledge production. An infrastructure of various service sectors does not constitute a community or the democratization of knowledge for the actual community members. Multiple agendas back urban agricultural and food security tactics along with leadership that often occurs outside of the community. Funding is allocated for particular problems that are not defined by the community as issues they find important (Minkler and Hancock 2003). Thus, urban agriculture is often situated in community development techniques/participatory research that emphasize the rhetoric of “community,” which fails to address issues of power such as who gets to act and represent in these agendas (Power 1999). Food security projects are more often a source of opportunity to meet the criteria of organizers’ agendas rather than the expressed needs of the community.

Several individuals, who were part of the GRFC, represented projects that were trying to integrate urban agriculture into economic development schemes, which were funded by the city, local colleges, the health department, public subsidies and tax credits, and foundations. Projects were supporting the interests of different businesses and organizations and further marginalizing those who are food insecure. The following examples of food security initiatives occurred separately from the work of GRFC though
the people that coordinated these efforts were members of the coalition and influenced its scope of work. I first provide examples of economic development interventions followed by examples of health and education interventions designed to address food insecurity or related issues. Different types of approaches were not mutually exclusive. For example, Fit for Life was a health and education initiative that tied into economic development efforts. The Neighborhood Farmers Market (NFM) consisted of health, education, and economic development interventions for addressing food insecurity.

Throughout my research, one informant, Barry, presented economic development examples of food security models to me. He was retired from the board of a prosperous foundation based in Grand Rapids that granted money to the Downtown Market and oversaw the ENTF. Barry was a member of ENTF and instrumental in facilitating a study titled: Kent County Essential Needs Food Study: Gleaning, Transportation, and Distribution (2009) by Stephen Borders, Ph.D., MSHP and Katie Lindt from Grand Valley State University’s School of Public and Nonprofit Administration.26 The study noted how millions of pounds of food from Kent County’s apple and cherry orchards falls to the ground and rots every year. Barry believed that he and a partner, a professor at Grand Valley State University, could establish a business from the fallen fruit. According to Barry, an unnamed business made $750,000 from gleaning food in an unnamed city.

Another suggestion by Barry was to strategically place Aldi Stores, a German owned grocery store that provides cheap food, throughout the Southeast to fill food deserts with affordable food and produce. Such stores, being small enough, would fit

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26 Besides private contributions, Cascade Engineering and Grand Valley State University’s Community Research Institute—which has collected demographic data for several initiatives concerning food security—supported this study.
into available spaces unlike larger grocers that require lots of space for parking. If these stores were placed throughout the neighborhoods, then a lack of transportation would not be a reason that residents would be prevented access to nutritious food.

Barry was an entrepreneur and very passionate about ending food insecurity. Knowing of my dissertation research, he asked me if I was familiar with the Food Policy Advocate’s (FPA) budget. He was trying to figure out if the FPA was capable of partnering with him on his newest idea. This potential business idea was on vertical hydroponic garden systems, which he learned about and wanted to introduce into Grand Rapids Public Schools in some sort of undefined capacity. Vertical hydroponics use less space and water than other types of urban growing systems.27

Besides Barry’s entrepreneurial endeavors, there were several projects with an economic development focus whose members belonged to GRFC. For instance, a few of the coalition’s members participated in the Urban Farming Pilot Project, which was an economic development opportunity at the beginning stages initiated by the Grand Rapids Community College’s Future Center. It was not based in the Southeast, although a few of its participants were part of food initiatives targeting the Southeast. In the planning stages of the project, people were interested in promoting a “knowledge economy” with a triple bottom line of “profit, people and planet” as the framework. The business plan centered on trend analysis, asset mapping, and talent retention. The project recruited students from Grand Rapids Community College and Grand Valley State University to

27 Barry reported that he and a partner were in the process of conceptualizing a sustainable agriculture system for a small business model, possibly with hoop houses. They were speaking with Right Place, an economic development consultant group that was encouraging them to develop this business. Barry and his partner were inspired by Mud Lake Farm’s growing methods and business model. Mud Lake Farm has three biomass hydroponic greenhouses that specialize in growing pesticide-free year-round lettuce. Barry said they have 40 varieties of lettuce grown with geothermal heat and 72 degree water. They are a CSA and supply several restaurants in Grand Rapids that intentionally buy their produce from small local farms.
brainstorm techniques for connecting local farms to businesses in Grand Rapids. A focus on methods of implementing their plan was paramount over finding more concrete ways to use urban space for growing food, promoting local food, and finding ways for those within food deserts to have access to local food. The project’s emphasis was entirely entrepreneurial and coordinated through the private sector by connecting businesses with customers and positioning community partners with the West Michigan Strategic Alliance, the Right Place, Grand Rapids Chamber of Commerce, Grand Valley State University’s Center for Entrepreneurship, a consulting firm, and several local design firms.

A spokesperson, Ned, for Inner City Christian Federation (ICCF), a community development corporation, described an innovative project. He identified a possible key person, Annette, in the food movement. After completing training at Growing Power, Annette approached ICCF to start an aquatic farm with fish, a year-round greenhouse, and small farm animals. She viewed local inner-city youth as a target population for growing the food to sell to local restaurants and found restaurants that were willing to purchase the food. Ned agreed with her that ICCF’s Wealthy and Jefferson space would have been the most accommodating. However, ICCF future plans involved building a grocery store in Annette’s proposed location. Ned explained, “But for the investment we didn't want to find the right fit of a grocery store and have her move in a year or two.”

Job-skills training and entrepreneurial programs for those who are poor, to educate urban children, assist urban youth in staying away from drugs, farm to market

28 Growing Power’s headquarters are in Milwaukee, the site of their first farm. It has spread nationwide and consists of training inner city youth to sustainably grow organic food in order to address food insecurity. Farming practices include keeping bees, aquaponics (symbiotic cultivation of plants with aquatic animals in a recirculating system to raise fish), raising livestock, composting, and the use of vermin-compost (using worms to break down refuse).
programs, and business-skills education are typical uses of city gardens (Ferris et al. 2001). A recommendation by one city planner put forward the Blandford Nature Center as a place for training and educating city residents on how to garden and for lending gardening tools to churches and park locations. One of the center’s former programs, Mixed Greens, bussed in inner city and low-income kids from Grand Rapids Public Schools and taught them how to grow food. At the time of this research, the nature center was in the process of creating a program in which the kids would sell the food they grew to Spartan Stores (a grocery store franchise).29 A representative of Blandford Nature Center informed me that they always maintain a farmer-training program for any related opportunities in starting agricultural based businesses. The Wege Foundation supports the nature center’s efforts and donated money for a new greenhouse in order for the center to extend the growing season.

Despite altruistic intentions, no project was divorced from the larger economic projects causing gentrification. Members of these projects belonged to overlapping social networks sharing resources (funding and research data) and reinforcing poverty. Projects were forms of ‘governmentality’ that gathered knowledge through the management of bodies in institutionalized spaces. Fit for Life, the City Health Institute’s (CHI) community garden, Urban Garden Food Suppliers (UGFS), and the Neighborhood Farmers Market (NFA) were examples of food security initiatives organized with a focus on health and education that generated data on nutritional practices. The coordinators were members of GRFC. These intervention programs were designed to address food insecurity and were what Hyatt (2001) refers to as a form of social control to encourage citizens to commensurate with the interests of regulated society.

29 For unknown reasons, this plan never came to fruition.
Fit for Life was an example of the insidious nature of power in the local food security movement. It began as university-based research concerning food insecurity in the Southeast. The knowledge generated from this project was shared among a social network of people looking to invest in these neighborhoods. Samantha, the primary research facilitator, was affiliated with the social network of people using the resources of knowledge and funding for economic development purposes. Her regular correspondents included Bill and people in non-profit groups such as the community development corporations (CDCs) connected to the Downtown Market. As the main facilitator for GRFC’s health subcommittee, Samantha also happened to be assigned to the task of identifying any data related to food insecurity in Grand Rapids.

Fit for Life used privately funded data from Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC), a national corporation based out of Chicago that owns MetroEdge. MetroEdge is a company that “combines innovative market research, quantitative analysis, and grassroots community engagement to correct misperceptions of urban markets, identify hidden assets and help communities exercise more control over their economic futures.”

Fit for Life used LISC data that measures the leakage in food sale dollars from the Southeast that has not been retained by businesses in the community. The LISC report was used by CDCs in Grand Rapids to design projects to capture this money and was what the Downtown Market used to justify their project to the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. Samantha was employed by a nearby university to work on public policy and community based projects. Through this university, she was assigned to Fit for Life, funded for 1

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million dollars by Blue Cross Blue Shield, in order to address and find the causes of childhood obesity. She worked closely with one of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation members deciding which group to fund in Grand Rapids. This same individual was a professor specializing in sustainable agriculture, an instrumental member in putting together the Michigan Good Food Charter, and an international expert on food systems.  

Fit for Life focused on Cesar Chavez, Dickinson, Buchanan, and Campus elementary schools, located in and near SE Grand Rapids. Ninety percent of students at these schools received free and/or reduced lunch meals, indicating that they were low-income students. Two of the schools were predominantly African American (located in the Southeast) and two were Hispanic (located in the Southwest) serving. Each school was defined as a community based on the fact that their respective neighborhoods shared similar demographics. Fit for Life’s objectives included being actively involved in the school curriculum, outreach to the community, and social marketing for healthy food. Researchers measured children’s ability, knowledge, and skills around healthy food, exercise, the healthy food they were exposed to, and the messages that they received around food. In the schools, Fit for Life staff conducted training with teachers and tried to have them do 30 minutes of structured physical activity a day, because these schools could only afford one physical education class a week. Fit for Life used national research that suggests 50 hours of nutritional education a year. Fit for Life’s coordinators tried not to over burden teachers by helping them incorporate structured activity and nutritional

31 Both the FPA and OKT were involved in developing agricultural policy for the Michigan Good Food Charter. The goal of this coalition was to draft new policy supportive of small farms and local agriculture by May 2010 in order to present it to the new candidates running for the 38-vacating House of Representative seats. The charter was based on the work of workgroups. According to the conference’s convener, its point was to create equity, sustainability, and to increase the food economy for Michigan. Plans also supported addressing food deserts and the related childhood health issues by getting local farm food directly into public schools. Michigan State University’s C.S. Mott Group, directed by Michael Hamm, put the charter together.
training into their lesson plans. All four schools were only doing a total of 5 hours of activity and training a year. Fit for Life’s goal was to get teachers up to 25 hours coupled with a social marketing piece to get healthy messages into the community. Samantha was overseeing the project, but her focus was on the community piece while two other people were each responsible for the education/training and social marketing messages.

For identifying interventions to access healthy food and exercise, Samantha designed a community assessment that involved store surveys, mapping stores and green spaces, and looking at demographics and other community resources such as churches or pantries. Grand Valley State University nursing students conducted surveys that measured nutrition. The purpose was to formulate a number for each store on the levels of acceptability concerning food items for sale. The nurses counted what was on the shelves: vegetables, fruit, canned foods, and etc. They looked at the quality (damaged, nutritious) and price. Samantha consulted with Friends of Grand Rapids Parks to try to increase the green space by borrowing data for mapping small park spaces located in these communities. Focus groups were held to find out where people shopped and why or why not. After collecting the data, an advisory board of Fit for Life team members was going to examine the data in order to identify interventions and establish subcommittees to manage each intervention. Since Samantha was not from Grand Rapids, she chose an individual from Lighthouse Communities CDC to help her find a representative from each school area to assign to the subcommittees. The representatives were to be from the neighborhoods, possibly a mother or someone from a neighborhood association office or a church. Although Fit for Life claimed to want community involvement in the research process, the only direct input from residents appeared to
derive from a survey question asking what types of food they wanted sold in nearby stores.

As in the case of Fit for Life, health was often the number one reason that groups were concerned with food insecurity. Therefore, public food events were often planned as a type of health intervention. In general, urban agriculture initiatives tend to be a part of the efforts of people staffed by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and governmental agencies, which host social, cultural and educational events (Saldivartanaka and Krasny 2004). The Food Policy Advocates (FPA) and the City Health Initiative (CHI) were two such groups that hosted public food events, including tasting demonstrations at the Neighborhood Farmers Market (NFM). The CHI had an obesity initiative and utilized the NFM as a forum for addressing health issues caused by food insecurity. The FPA hosted seed exchanges, plant giveaways, and, in the past, they built and promoted community gardens.

Carole was an active participant on the GRFC health subcommittee. She sat on several boards addressing food security as it relates to health. Through the CHI, she received grant funding for community-based programs designed for underserved neighborhoods. Programs included assessments and interventions such as community gardens to promote healthy eating and access to healthy food. Her description of reasons for her involvement in food security work is a nice synopsis of what others shared in and outside of the GRFC meetings, a desire to see “healthy communities.”

Hanna and Oh (2001) report that gardens are a source of building social capital for the poor and are especially valued as a source for ‘satisfying labor’ and a return to nature in postindustrial cities. In other words, gardens are a way organizations can target
behavior through ‘labor’ and use nature to beautify the city, what organizers refer to as building “healthy communities.” “Healthy” in this sense refers to both human physical wellbeing and urban planning.

The year before the onset of this dissertation research, Carole planned a garden at a small park in the Baxter neighborhood through a small grant administered by the CHI. Carole took an unused empty vacant and unsightly lot—“a by-product of unhealthy habits” (drugs were dealt here)—and created a community place where “neighbors could see growth,” and children were educated about how to grow food. She called this “beautification” and said it was a very fulfilling project.

The garden was successful in that it benefitted from several resources besides the grant and the unanticipated outcome of kids becoming interested in the garden. The youth learned how to till the soil, plant, and care for something meaningful. Many youth had never eaten food fresh from a garden or realized food is grown in the ground, and they took home vegetables as a reward for their work. City support was one of several resources. The city allowed them to use space in the park and watered the garden along with the rest of the grounds. Kent County Parks provided a backhoe and brought free compost. A member of OKT, assisting with the garden, stored the tools and did most of the labor. Another resource included the free seeds and plants that the garden coordinator obtained from the FPA’s Seed Exchange and Free Plant Day.

The garden was ultimately unsuccessful in terms of duration and community involvement. The garden was organized with a top down agenda. Top down models of organization are often ineffective due to a privileging of “expert” knowledge while neglecting the true needs and values of a community (Cook and Kothari 2001).
According to one interviewee, the CHI did not invite residents to help plan the garden or give feedback over whether or not they wanted a garden. Several residents reported that they did not realize the garden was for their use or open to the neighborhood. The garden did not continue into the following year; the city took over the space for expanding the park and funding was cut.

The Food Policy Advocates (FPA) is a prime example of a group that implemented food security initiatives with the objectives of creating healthy local food security interventions, general education about nutrition, and economic development tactics. The FPA has the mission of establishing food security and policy for a sustainable urban agricultural system that provides access to healthy food for low-income owners. During fieldwork, the members of the FPA did not receive a salary, although they gained a 501(c)(3) status in order to begin acting as a fiduciary for other groups’ projects. The Neighborhood Farmers Market (NFM) and the Urban Garden Food Suppliers (UGFS) were the FPA’s only projects during my research, which focused on reducing food insecurity.

Several organizational problems led to a reduction in the amount of active members on the FPA’s board and difficulties with the coordination of the FPA’s projects. The FPA formed in 2000 when it had 20 members. Only four members from the FPA were active during this fieldwork. Three other members periodically came to meetings during this research, proposing potential projects that were never implemented. Attendees became infrequent as they were called to do other things in life and were frustrated on changes that occurred between meetings without their input. The FPA lacked enough people to expand efforts and members were overwhelmed with the
operational and organizational details of finding space for the FPA, a lack of funding, ineffective communication, and misallocation of budget expenditures. Tasks typically were not allocated or completed, grant writing being a task; one year, employees of the NFM were paid six months late due to miscommunication over available money in the treasury.

UGFS and the NFM were programs intended to circulate capital with a top-down organizational style and designed without the input of residents. Termination of UGFS occurred during my fieldwork; the NFM was in jeopardy and was almost terminated. UGFS was intended for low-income communities in Grand Rapids and was a program in which the FPA acted as a broker for buying excess food from low-income gardeners to sell to restaurants. The anticipated outcome was to generate money for low-income earners and to finance the activities of the FPA. The program was unsuccessful and only generated $200 in broker fees by mid-summer. An argument over UGFS and market economy principles was ongoing. According to one FPA member, buyers preferred to buy food at the last minute and UGFS did not follow the normal surplus principles of market economics and was not generating a profit. Two members argued this program should not follow any traditional market principles and should support low-income growers, whom will never have a large enough surplus of food. Assertions, by another member, over the FPA needing a business non-profit for profit model led to a stalemate. FPA members hoped the NFM would at least generate enough profit to keep itself operational that year.
Neighborhood Farmers Market: The Story From Within

The top down organization of the Neighborhood Farmers Market (NFM) and emphasis on targeting individual change resulted in the patronizing treatment of vendors and the market manager; they were excluded them from being significantly involved in having true ownership over its design and implementation. The Food Policy Advocates (FPA) organized this market, and the City Health Initiative (CHI) was a sponsor. The NFM formed a subcommittee. Four individuals from the CHI and FPA did the majority of the planning and the market manager attended these meetings. I attended these meetings and assisted the manager with the market. I also helped sell produce on behalf of the FPA. I observed that the paternalistic policies were often set by the overseeing organizations, illustrating racism and how low-income community members often lack decision-making authority and resources to create their own policies.

A woman named Ester, of OKT, was the market manager. Subcommittee members did not respect her and blocked many of her decisions. She was told not to permit hot food vendors or crafts people to sell at the market. She saw no problem with it and pointed out that the Fulton Street Farmers Market allowed such vendors and it was successful. The market organizers responded that they did not want it to look like a flea market. Another member of the planning committee insisted that no vehicles should be allowed in the vendors’ area and told Ester she could not have her R.V. at the market site. Ester, at first, objected and pointed out that this was how people knew how to find her and then disappointingly conceded. Having no power, she expressed on a few occasions that she was not in a position to make decisions contrary to her employers. Her family

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32 OKT took over management and sponsorship of the market beginning the 2011 season.
33 Established in 1922, Fulton Street Farmers Market is the oldest and largest in Grand Rapids. It caters to a white middle class clientele that includes many who travel into the city from the suburbs.
depended on her income. OKT members pointed out to her that she and her family were being taken advantage of because it was her family who set up and took down the market and were not paid for their service by the market organizers.

The theme of paternalism arose in a meeting in which it was suggested that research could be designed to assess what people are eating and if their vegetable consumption was increasing. The goal was to change individuals’ behavior in eating choices. Making different food choices does not change the fact that there is still no widespread access to fresh and affordable food. The NFM was a small farmers market located in the Garfield Park Neighborhood Association area and held on Thursdays for those who lived nearby or had transportation to the market. Among the kinds of paternalistic decisions made by the subcommittee was not allowing Tilling to Table—the group of culinary students who supported local food growing projects—to sell desserts, believing this contradicted their promotion of healthy eating. As such, customers were not being allowed to make their own choices, unlike whites and those attending higher income farmers markets that offer desserts, like the Fulton Street Farmers Market. The previous year, 2009, the CHI sponsored taste-testing demonstrations and gave away the recipes to encourage healthy eating. Limited time prevented demonstrations from occurring the year of my fieldwork. At this meeting, one FPA member acknowledged that people, at the very least, could be connected to organizations for resources needed for preparing and accessing healthy food, noting that many did not own the cooking equipment necessary to make the taste testing recipes.

The paternalistic treatment of vendors by market organizers was obvious, as evidenced by the rules which vendors had to follow and also by their exclusion from the
decision making process. This treatment repudiated the significance of their social norms and cultural preferences. As observed in the research of Sullivan et al. (2003), dealing with low-income earners or minorities led to inappropriate definitions and stereotypes opposing common social and cultural conventions. For instance, at the planning meetings for 2010, the organizers had several ideas concerning their vision for a farmers market: specific spatial arrangements, having someone “train” the vendors to make laminated price signs, making one of the vendor’s street signs more “professional,” and taking produce requests. Believing that these suggestions were intended to change cultural practices typical to the African American community, a couple of OKT members stated that it was racist that the market organizers wanted to train the vendors on how to do something in a certain way when other markets do not require a specific aesthetic of their vendors.

One example of failure to be sensitive to community norms and practices occurred during the summer of 2010. The vendors became disgruntled over the fact that the organizers required them to line up their tents into two rows. The vendors settled with forming one line against the trees versus setting up two rows of tents to walk between. This irritation was the result of vendors wanting a particular type of spatial setting for socialization purposes. Unlike other farmers markets outside of the Southeast, extended families would join them and congregate in a circle and the children would run and play.

Another example of racism pertained to food preferences. Produce preferred by the African American community in Grand Rapids consisted of mustard greens, collard greens, okra, and green tomatoes, as well as sweet fruits—cantaloupe, peaches,
watermelon, and apples. But the produce requests sought by the market organizers were intended for and concerned with how to make the market larger and to appeal to a broader audience, especially those shopping at other farmers markets, outside of the African American community. Ester repeatedly reminded organizers that they were organizing a market in an African American community.

Ester’s main concern was over diet related illnesses in her community, the Baxter neighborhood. She was familiar with this issue, because she voluntarily delivered food to homes in the neighborhoods where she also shared herbal remedies for improved health. The planning committee chose her as the manager because of her community ties. She recognized the needs of her community, food preferences, and the economic hardships. Thus, she recruited local gardeners to sell their food. This became a necessity because small farmers outside of the city refused to sell at the market, believing it was a waste of their time since they did not make enough money to support their travel into the city.

The NFM maintained three steady vendors. When the market began in mid-July, vendors were still being identified or located from the last year. A few of the previous year’s vendors did not return. Former vendors were unhappy about the location change and did not believe that they would make money at the new location, a lightly trafficked street that lacked visibility and was not central to the previous customer base that had been built up over the years. The vendors who stayed on agreed with the former vendors, but then requested the location be moved the following year, having never been asked their input in the location change. The remaining vendors committed to the market and believed it would again be successful. Nonetheless, the problem in increasing the
number of customers was not only location; it was also the need to have vendors to attract more vendors.

I helped identify seven SE gardeners that I met during my earlier research to sell a few times at the new location as their schedules allowed. However, the market time of 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. each Thursday, the only day of the week that the market was open, did not fit into many vendors’ or customers’ schedules. On the opening day, partially due to poor planning and advertising, there were only 16 customers. The market season ended in October by which time there were an average of 60 attendees every Thursday. The nearest market, Fulton Street Farmers Market, was closed on Thursdays. Attempts were made to recruit those vendors for Thursdays at the NFM. A few seemed sincerely interested about the prospect of a new market. However, these potential vendors never returned any phone calls. The majority of people approached reported that there were at least 15 other markets on Thursdays near Grand Rapids where they could make more money.

Money was an issue for both vendors and customers. Early in the season, a woman expressed anger over prices as she walked by the market with her three small dogs while Edward, a vendor, set up balloons alongside the road. She yelled out that all we cared about was making money by buying produce and marking it up. She went on to say that she could buy a tomato for cheaper at Meijer, a Midwest grocer retailer with its headquarters in Grand Rapids. Edward responded by telling her that they grew their own local tomatoes, not from an unknown country. Rocky, another vendor, sitting in his stand with his arms crossed, snorted, laughed and said, “She can afford all that dog food for those dogs so why can’t she buy a tomato here?” He and Edward vented to each other
about people not realizing the importance of eating local food. Edward exclaimed, “You don’t know what they’re putting on your food in another country!”

Affordability was an issue for people even though the market accepted the EBT/Bridge Card (formally known as food stamps). There were only five EBT/Bridge Card transactions for the entire season. It was poorly advertised as an available option. An OKT member explained that people with EBT benefits are still unable to afford locally grown food on their budgets. She gave the example of when she bought $9 worth of strawberries (3 pints) from the farmers market. When she returned home, her mom told her that Wal-Mart was selling them for $1 a pint. “It’s like people are expected to do one or the other,” eat healthy local food or save money.

The difficulty in recruiting vendors and building a customer base was partially due to limited resources and organizers’ available time, the lack of funding, poor location, and ineffective communication. The budget was not consistently balanced because no one balanced income with expenditures, nor were any receipts kept. Contracts were not written, and supplies were missing and not replaced from the shed at the former lot. There was also confusion over who should receive mail until a new office space was set up for the FPA. Members complained of others who did not follow through with their responsibilities. In addition, the market lacked necessary equipment such as tents and official signs. The city-zoning ordinance permitted signs to be placed at the nearby intersections but not outside the church that was located in a residential and not a business zone, where signs are allowed. The FPA did not purchase signs for the intersections until mid-August. Edward put up balloons along the road and made signs that he held out for the cars and pedestrians who walked by as he waved, danced, and
called out for customers. One tent was purchased in July, but not enough tents for everyone. Therefore, vendors brought their own tents. I shared a tent with Rocky. He did not have his own tent.

Fundraising for the market was originally assigned to Ester. She told OKT that she was not comfortable fundraising and did not know how to do it. She believed that this should have been the role of the FPA to ensure her wages. She raised $100 from organizing a craft show at the mall, charging the vendors $35 dollars with the understanding that $10 of it was a donation. She organized a “Biggest Loser” contest, an idea she had for raising money by having people each pay $10-$15 to lose weight. The winner would win part of this money and the rest would go towards the market. The committee backed this idea initially but never found the time to support it. General frustration was aimed at the FPA who essentially had no money for the anticipated $7,000 to cover costs, $5,000 of which was allocated for salaries. The FPA found sponsors and raised $3,500 from an annual charity event concerning hunger. The market did not generate profit for the FPA despite early expectations and promotional efforts. Instead, it barely broke even with the charity money, craft sales, sales from food donated by Tilling to Table, marked up food the FPA bought from a local farm, and a small grant that came through in the fall.

Organizational difficulties were due not only to ineffective fundraising but communication problems. Similar to the FPA meetings, members made decisions for the NFM outside of subcommittee meetings. Copying everyone on emails would have minimized the confusion that arose at general meetings. Not all members were kept up to date on changes and were upset at not having a final say in matters affecting the market.
This pattern most likely emerged due to the fact that two people made the majority of subcommittee decisions and did most of the work; they were employees of the CHI, which compensated them for their time at the market unlike those whose time was more constrained by the demands of their jobs. As with the FPA’s general meetings, members requested better communication and wanted tasks delegated. The status quo prevailed in the case of Ester, who did not have any authority in making final decisions.

Among the most controversial of plans was the change in location that delayed the market’s opening. The decision to move the market came when the Reverend from the former church site wanted the NFM to pay $1,000 up front, $500 for the previous year and $500 for that year in order to use the church’s parking lot as a site. The FPA never signed a contract with him and in years past donated $500, which he came to expect yearly. The Reverend told the FPA that the market could remain if they paid this money, did maintenance around the lot, and purchased a sign for the church listing the church as the sponsor of the market.

While Ester was visiting her sister in New York City, the FPA decided to move the market to a different church parking lot. Before her trip, Ester refused to manage the market at the new location, expressing that it was against her religious beliefs to sell on church property. She felt comfortable with the other location because a highly trafficked street separated the parking lot from the church. Ester later disclosed her religious beliefs as a Jehovah’s Witness. She illustrated with a Bible passage from John 2:13-25, 4:3, 4, where Jesus turned a table over and was angry with those selling in his Father’s temple.

I later discussed with a member of OKT that ignoring Ester’s input was a concern, because she had no rights or authority. Instead, she was told what to do and her opinions
were ignored. For example, at meetings, when Ester was outspoken and excited about the market, others would either roll their eyes or often change the topic while Ester was still talking.

At one subcommittee meeting, Ester defended herself when she resigned from the market. Before this event occurred, she removed herself as manager and agreed to give two hours of her time each week to assist with setting up the market every Thursday morning. In hindsight, I wonder if her choice to completely resign was a sign of confidence, having chosen to meet the subcommittee one block from her house at a small African food restaurant, the Red Sea Café. Meetings were usually held at Brick Road Pizza, a vegan restaurant located where Wealthy Street was gentrifying. At the Red Sea Café meeting, an organizer accused Ester of not recruiting vendors or promoting the market. For a few minutes, members of the committee chastised her for not fulfilling her responsibilities. Ester then expressed her agitation over the fact that she never agreed to do these tasks and was losing money by spending two hours at the market when she could be at another market for the entire day, selling her produce. She reiterated the fact that she wanted the market located on a site with no church affiliation. She believed that people belonging to other denominations would choose not to shop at the new market for this reason.

Ester raised the level of debate to include their religious differences and racism. For once, no one interrupted her, spoke over her, or changed the topic. What follows is a summary of her statements. She said that religion divides people and told everyone to look at the wars fought over religion and the things done in the name of religion. She spoke of how in South Alabama (where she is from), Baptists promoted racism. The
ways in which the organizing of the NFM had been paternalistic was revealed when she went on to say, “Look guys, this is how it is, you do not know the black experience. They do not want another white person coming in to tell them what to do, and most white people in America hate black people.” She said that she does not buy into the stereotypes about white people and she was brought up to hate white people. Later in life, she reflected on this and realized that God does not see people differently. Now she loves everyone and “you guys.” She asked everyone if they remembered when Martin Luther King led the March on Washington, pointing out that all races were represented. She then rhetorically asked if everyone knew who participated in all of the underground railroads, “It was the Quakers.” One member did interrupt one time to tell her, “Yes, it was all based on religion.” Ester continued on, “I’ve been fighting all my life to do the right thing and I wants to help the people in the community.” She pointed out that they ask where she is when they do not see her at the market.

The rest of her comments were not as directly related to the market though they still reflected her frustration over other aspects of racism. She brought up the show *Roots* (1977) and asked everyone if they remembered it portrayed how African Americans sold each other into slavery, “They sold their own people!” She went to say:

> I am not lazy, crazy or stupid but that’s what’s said and I know I am not. This is all bigger than me and I have to set a good example for my children. I can’t say one thing and do another. They [her children] won’t even come to the market. They are watching everything I does.

Ester’s dialogue about racism was not like her normal conversational topics. She avoided the topic of racism and told other members of OKT that she did not want to address issues of injustice. Instead, she cared about targeting health on an individual basis. Several times, she told me that she never gets into discussions of politics or race. “I does
not do politics. I am about helping the people and their health.” It appears that her upbringing in the South made it difficult at times for her to deny the relevance of racism to her life. She once recalled being a youth in Alabama and further realizing the existence of racism when former President Kennedy sent in the National Guard to forcibly desegregate the University of Alabama in 1963.

In 2007, a member of OKT introduced Ester to a member of the FPA, Ted. They ran into him by happenstance at a film premier showing at the Wealthy Street Theatre. Learning about Ester’s food interests, Ted recruited her to assist him that summer with the NFM. The FPA paid for her to become a master gardener through the Michigan State Extension. She already knew how to grow food. However, the FPA required her to have credentials if she was going to be market manager. She became the official manager in 2009 and ended her affiliation in 2011.

Initially, Ted and Ester were passionate about the market and providing local food to the SE area. However, devoting time to the market decreased their opportunity, on an individual basis, to make more money elsewhere. Up until his last year as the market manager, Ted took food orders on the behalf of his community supported agriculture (CSA) group, the West Michigan Co-Op. He delivered the orders to the market and sold food from him and his wife’s small farm. His energy became consumed with the tasks of the farm and he was no longer able to supply food to the market. He described how they could barely cover their costs at the farm and lived on $15,000 per year. Ester’s efforts became more entrepreneurial when she left the NFM. She organized markets at a couple of the places that she had suggested for the NFM: the Rapid bus stop; a flea market; outside of the Red Sea Café; and at a farmers market hosted by Metro Health. She
became a recognized food advocate in the community, was featured in the local film Fresh (2010), and was regularly interviewed for local journals. As often as she could, she attended conferences with OKT to share her views about health. When grieving about the loss of the NFM, she shared that everything happens for a reason, beginning with when she was first introduced to OKT and later met Ted.

As in the case of Ester and her eventual departure from the NFM, church affiliation mattered to people in the community. A vendor told me that Jehovah’s Witness is not a religion and, “They don’t know what they talking about. They put their own twist on the Bible just like the Amish.” Throughout the season, he brought up his thoughts about Ester and her religion, “She just doesn’t want people to come here because of her religion.” He was also familiar with the organizational, financial, and social happenings of the church at the new market location. The vendors never complained about being in a church parking lot and never voiced concern over a rumored financial scandal at the previous church location. I did observe that people in the community who attended the market, upon striking up a conversation with a new person, would first ask about which church they belonged to and then list people the other may know, even if they belonged to a different church, until they identified someone that they each knew. This is how Rocky interacted with people at the market. He would later explain to everyone how he knew a person.

A lot of people knew Rocky as the “Watkins Man.” He was 82-years-old. He had been selling Watkins products for 30 years and used the farmers market as a venue to sell them. To draw people towards his stand, he would buy cheap bushels of corn or peaches from a local farm, whatever was popular and in season. Before becoming the
“Watkins Man,” he played professional baseball. He played for the Grand Rapids Black Sox under Ted Raspberry. One Thursday afternoon, Rocky went over to greet a young man exiting a bus. He came back to our vendor table and explained that this was the son of a friend who was from the same town as him in Kentucky and they had both traveled the country playing baseball.

Rocky was one of three regular vendors who attended every week. He lived in Northwest Grand Rapids. Edward and Stephanie were a married couple and regular weekly vendors who lived in the Southeast. They grew food in their yard and at the Hillcrest Community Garden in the Northeast part of town. Maria was the third regular vendor and lived in Southwest Grand Rapids.

Juan from Spectrum Health’s Healthier Communities program introduced me to Maria in order to facilitate her selling at the market as a resource for making money. I met Maria the following week in which Juan stopped by the market with one of his coworkers. Juan was responding to my email request about whether or not he knew of any gardeners who would like to sell at the market. Through Spectrum Health, he facilitated a women’s garden, where Maria grew food, as well as Yo Puedo garden, where he gardened with children from the Hispanic Center. These gardens were in the Southwest part of town, where Maria resided. Juan and I rode our bikes to visit Maria and discuss her participation in the market. She brought me outside to see her garden. She asked me if her friend could sell paintings at the market. I said that I needed to check with the sponsors because they preferred food sales. She already told her friends about the market and they wanted to sell non-food items there. Juan interrupted her and told
me that I better check first. When we left, he explained that she goes overboard and wanted to invite a lot of people because of the poor economy.

Juan helped her set up on her first day and provided her with a tent. She made the lowest sales. Her varieties of heirloom tomatoes—one variety from Oaxaca that appeared like miniature squashes—and hot peppers were not selling. To compensate for her lack of sales, she began purchasing and reselling produce that she thought would appeal to the shoppers. The African American shoppers tended to walk past her area and towards Edward and Stephanie, whom they often knew on a personal basis. Their vendor area attracted people with its elaborate display and many greens piled on the table.

Several times, Maria requested promotional flyers in Spanish. After a few weeks, the market organizers printed flyers for her to hand out. The market organizers did not do this kind of outreach though it made sense; this neighborhood association area was 45 percent Hispanic. Nonetheless, nearly no one from this community ever attended the market. The market provided an opportunity to build a relationship with the Hispanic community, living in the Southeast, though this never came to fruition. The language barrier, according to a few people, was the reason for this group’s isolation/exclusion from food initiatives. A member of OKT reported that this was why in the past she had difficulty coordinating her Hispanic neighbors in trying to organize a community garden. She lived in this neighborhood and was once the crime prevention organizer for the neighborhood association. Based on her experiences, she observed the Hispanic and African American communities were segregated within this association and did not frequent any businesses that they believed were intended for the “other.” This was true for the Hispanic grocery store markets mentioned in chapter 1.
Maria asked of other markets where she could sell her produce. Ester provided her with a copy of the West Michigan Farmers’ Market guide that listed farmers markets. Other farmers markets usually have vendors’ fees, as high as $80 per week, which Maria could not afford. The NFM charged a $5 weekly fee, probably the cheapest fee around town. A planning subcommittee member once stated, “It’s like a business, if the price is too low, it won’t have a worth.” This member believed vendors would be more invested in the market if they were required to pay a fee, even if it was only $5. When I sold produce, it was my task to collect the $5. I refused to complete my assigned task of collecting it, explaining to the subcommittee that sometimes vendors such as Maria only made $10 to $20 for the day. In fact, there was a first and one time only vendor who spent more on gas and childcare than what she made at the market. In regards to Maria’s financial difficulties, she was almost forbidden the economic opportunity of selling her salsa by a subcommittee member who said it made her “nervous.” She changed her mind after I told her about the recent Michigan law stipulating vendors did not need the Department of Health’s approval to sell prepared food if they made less than $15,000 in sales a year. The law was intended to boost the economy by supporting small businesses.

Ester and a member from OKT encouraged me to be an advocate for the NFM vendors. The sponsors were beginning to give the vendors agency in making decisions rather than expecting them to replicate paternalistic organizational demands. For other food security initiatives, community members’ voices were far from the forefront as seen in the case of the Downtown Market, which is explored in the next chapter that further addresses power dynamics and the politics of exclusion.
Chapter 4

“Food is a catalyst for urban revitalization” (an employee of a Southeast CDC).

Recent economic crisis have led to citizens embracing the local food movement, shaped by the discourse of green capitalism. In this chapter, I detail the urban development projects that are attached to local food schemes and the values of local, sustainability, community, and social justice. I establish the relationship between economic development agendas and the gentrification occurring in the area. A social network of developers and non-profit groups designs these plans and are further gentrifying regions of the Southeast in the name of food security. The Downtown Market is a prime example of power relations, which are evident in overlapping urban revitalization schemes. I highlight the politics of exclusion as they relate to this economic development initiative. I first discuss gentrification and how it manifested in the Southeast during this research, followed by a detailed description of the Downtown Market as an illustrative case example.

Gentrification

Capitalist enterprise is seen as a solution to poverty and is not recognized as the cause. It obscures the visibility of poor. Neoliberalism is evident in Grand Rapids economic and entrepreneurial development schemes that are done in the name of securing local food. Harvey (2005) recognizes that the liberalist policies of the 1950s through the

34 During my fieldwork, the Downtown Market was referred to as the Urban Market. It was given the new and official name in 2012.
1970s, followed by the rise of neoliberal policies during the 1980s, resulted in the segregation of urban spaces within cities that include enclaves of poverty. Today, the enclaves are further gentrifying. The privatization of urban spaces has been central to a neoliberal development model (Ruben 2001). Urban revitalization is an example of a neoliberal model used by developers, claiming they are addressing poverty.

Harvey (1973) examines how the redevelopment of inner cities is a capitalistic forte for new profit opportunities. By studying the power dynamics behind urban revitalization, I discovered the ways in which the local food movement provides more opportunity for profit rather than for addressing food insecurity. In Grand Rapids, profiteering is accomplished by both the economic development efforts around local food production and the green movement. Investors have pioneered overlapping business ventures such as the “sustainable living communities” that have the proposed amenities of urban farms, restaurants offering local food, or grocers offering food picked by inner-city children at the nature center; the latter is an example of a project deceptively presented as social justice. Local food security efforts are increasing in popularity and are part of a larger enterprise shared by organizations claiming to build sustainable communities through the combining of business interests with “green” building initiatives. Environmentally friendly building practices, if only in name, are a profitable resource, and these green edifices are springing up in areas where the Southeast is gentrifying. Despite good intentions, “in the name of care” and “urban revitalization,” non-profit groups that apply green and local food initiatives to the Southeast are reinforcing the conditions of poverty. One local food advocate, who worked for a non-
profit organization that manages public parks on the behalf of the city, explained that
gentrification is unavoidable when addressing food insecurity:

Wealthy Street has always had the potential to be sort of the picture of Grand Rapids that I think we all want to live in. It's how do you… I mean gentrification; there's a term gentrification with justice. Gentrification on its own isn't bad; you need two thirds of your neighborhood population to be middle to upper income in order to support any kind of real economic development. I mean if you want a coffee shop, if you want a grocery store, if you want a butcher, if you want a restaurant, like for the most part unless you are McDonald's, you need to have a certain amount of wealth in your community. And the challenge is how do you get two thirds and not just tip all the way over. That's where I think groups and non-profits that are focused on affordability and access and those sorts of things are really important. How does it create its own identity as a multi-cultural urban corridor that everybody feels like is their corridor? And we're losing some of that over there. So it's kind of like how do you foster entrepreneurship in the neighborhood and keep the money local and circulating in the local economy to build vibrancy. But they have some really cool data (LISC) so looking at the Southeast side it would be kind of interesting to figure out whether you can pull out produce from the numbers. And then what impact it would have if you could locally grow fruits and vegetables in the neighborhood and sell it within the neighborhood.

To “revitalize” a neighborhood, developers and local food advocates utilize public dollars and view “mixed-use” development as key to “healthy communities;” diverse neighborhoods with various types of professions, as well as educational and income levels. To address poverty, community development corporations (CDCs) advocate for “mixed use” development and claim they are not relocating people. CDCs, developers, and local food advocates often identify downtown Grand Rapids, specifically the Heartside District, as “healthy” now that residents with high and middle incomes live there, as opposed to a majority homeless population. However, “lower” income residents are not directly benefiting from these “healthy” communities. No significant shift in unemployment rates has occurred or a raise in incomes for this population who do not all
qualify for “mixed-use” homes, condos, or apartments. Meanwhile, new housing raises the cost of living and the local population is unable to afford the long-term small businesses that are permanently closing as they are replaced by new ones that attract outside and more affluent customers; this is what is known as gentrification. Thus, the original inhabitants are not benefiting from “mixed-use” development.

Neoliberalism is evident in the gentrification of the Southeast in that development groups rely on government funding or tax credits. One way that the government intervenes in community-based programs is through the privatization of the public sector. There are governmental programs that support the business community through non-governmental organizations that were originally formed as grassroots voluntary organizations with ties to environmentalism, feminism, or some other social movement (Holland 2008).

Beginning as a volunteer organization for the Eastern Avenue Christian Reform Church, the Inner City Christian Federation (ICCF), now a non-profit 501(c)(3) corporation, originally focused on rehabbing existing homes. ICCF’s initial intent was to link suburban churches with core city neighborhoods and churches, bringing in resources as an effort to assist families and people in the core city. This volunteer work was a reaction to the racial unrest of the late 1960s in Grand Rapids. ICCF was founded in 1977. Today, it now operates 96 units of affordable rental property; provides an emergency homeless shelter for families; and educates homeowners about credit remediation, selling houses through lease purchases, what a mortgage is, and home repairs. ICCF also builds mixed-use housing. From the outside, homes are designed to appear indistinguishable in their market rates. The more “affordable” places are smaller
on the inside and built with cheaper materials. If a doctor, reported one of the upper-level employees, owns granite countertops, this does not make the lower income housing children feel inferior when they go to the school bus, because the outside of their home blends in with the surrounding area.

The majority of ICCF’s housing has been built and rehabbed in the SECA neighborhood with the use of low income housing tax credit deals. SECA has a sizeable portion of vacant and inexpensive land. ICCF utilizes “creative financing” to acquire this property with public subsidies that they access for building affordable housing. ICCF is an example of a group that profits in relationship to others suffering from economic decline. The 2008 Housing and Economic Recovery Act is an example of “creative financing” and expanded the work of housing development groups. This was a special initiative, the federal government’s response to the sub-prime mortgage crisis and the economic meltdown. The Neighborhood Stabilization Program is one component of this act. It was designed to address the issue of vacant, abandoned, and foreclosed houses. Grand Rapids, Kent County and Michigan State Development Authority offices all have pools of money that can be used to purchase, rehab and re-market abandoned, foreclosed houses. The ICCF taps into this money and takes advantage of federal dollars that exist to finance the development of affordable housing.

ICCF, Lighthouse Communities, Dwelling Place, Habitat for Humanity, and a few non-profit builders benefit from these types of public dollars. Their development efforts compliment and increase the profitability of other nearby development projects. ICCF mainly collaborates with Rockford Construction, Habitat for Humanity, Lighthouse Communities, and Dwelling Place. ICCF, Dwelling Place, and Lighthouse Communities
are three of the largest CDCs in the state of Michigan. Dwelling Place purchases and rehabs commercial spaces and did the majority of the development in the Heartside District, the home of Avenue of the Arts, where the homeless population used to congregate or sit in front of these once empty storefronts. The Downtown Market will be located in this neighborhood.

Lighthouse Communities is oriented towards multi-unit rental developments. Lighthouse Communities is the most active in Southtown’s SECA neighborhood and the adjacent Madison Square Neighborhood Association’s (MANA) neighborhood at Madison Avenue and Hall Street intersection. Lighthouse Communities revitalizes housing with an economic focus through mixed-use development to combine sustainable living, education, and workforce training. An employee in a leadership position at Lighthouse Communities foresees, in the future, incorporating an urban farm into this type of mixed-use development. He believes “food is a catalyst for urban revitalization.” He also anticipates land banks and “downsizing” will become opportunities to use land for food and for opening up green spaces.

ICCF initially focused mostly on single-family homes but is now implementing a neighborhood revitalization project that incorporates mixed-used development. The Wealthy/Jefferson neighborhood is one of ICCF’s larger efforts, a multi-million dollar and collaborative initiative that began in 1999. ICCF commenced acquiring Southeast property between Wealthy Street and Franklin Avenue and also between Division Avenue and Lafayette Avenue. In 2000, ICCF first met with people from the neighborhood, other non-profit groups, and the city. The Michigan State Housing Development Authority; city, low income, new market, and development tax credits;
private equity investments; and a variety of sources are funding the initiative. Rather than building single-family homes, ICCF is holding the land for a future neighborhood plan. Some of the land is set aside for higher density housing, row housing, and three story apartment buildings that will fit into a neighborhood development arrangement that preserves the historical appeal to this area.

The Jefferson and Wealthy site consists of two cross roads where ICCF bought the surrounding property at the 400 and 500 blocks of Logan Street, Sheldon Street, and Division Avenue. Since the time I interviewed key upper-level employees of ICCF in 2010, ICCF bought and demolished rather than rehabbed most of this housing. Smith (2012) reports that the previous residents were mostly African American and Latino working class families who supported development and new retail—especially a nearby grocer—when they attended 2000 and 2002 community meetings with ICCF. Residents did not expect to be forced out of their homes. As of 2012, the newly built housing is part of what is now named the Tapestry Square Project, which includes upscale one and two bedroom apartments that begin at $895 per month. One advertisement shows a photo of art décor, chic furniture, and a flat-screen T.V. in one of the apartments (Smith 2012). Whether it is a housing development or a garden, the urban poor simply become subjects of planners, not actual participants.

The Tapestry Square project is only one component of ICCF’s grand vision. One of the project’s key planners showed me photographs of this neighborhood from the 1920s and 1930s, when it was still a “hustling, bustling, and flourishing” largely commercial area. The ICCF’s interest in the area began when they observed it was “an incredibly disinvested neighborhood” that experienced white flight during the 1950s and
1960s, becoming “a forgotten neighborhood.” A picture from 1912 shows how densely packed this area was in terms of a mixture in buildings: commercial, residential, and institutional. The initiative is designed to build a neighborhood reminiscent of this “classic, traditional, urban neighborhood” that had a two-lane street and median, wide sidewalks, and a mature tree canopy. Today, there are more empty spaces than buildings.

The activity happening downtown—Avenue of the Arts, the Downtown Market, and new restaurants and bars—is gradually moving south towards this intersection and ICCF anticipates this neighborhood is going to rapidly grow. The Wealthy/Jefferson intersection is a significant juncture in the city for expanding revitalization efforts. “New urbanism” is the building model that architectural designers apply to the city’s landscape. It incorporates urbanist principles: walkable neighborhoods, economic diversity, mixed-use planning, pedestrian friendly areas, and so on. In fact, the city’s draft of the Green Grand Rapids Master Plan has incorporated these principles. To date, ICCF has widened Wealthy Street, near Jefferson, to build two traffic roundabouts. The city compensated ICCF by gifting 75 lots in that area to later develop into affordable and market rate housing.

To model the new neighborhood layout after these photographs, ICCF plans on mixing rental and sellable units or homes. Contemporary neighborhoods typically have one or the other. Ultimately, in conjunction with other stakeholders’ development plans, the Wealthy/Jefferson intersection is beginning to transform into a mixed-use neighborhood that includes retail, office space, residential, and mixed income housing. Different Grand Rapids supporters of these urban planning principles report that mixed-use neighborhoods create a 24-hour city in which people live and sleep at night, or sleep
in the day and live at night. Grocery and flower shops, for example, operate at all times and residents’ offices are located in the neighborhood, allowing for shared parking.

Currently ICCF is working with an architect and Rockford Construction. This company is helping ICCF design their vision for the neighborhood in which they are ideally looking for a grocery store at the corner of Wealthy Street and Division Avenue, at an unknown future time. An employee at ICCF disclosed their belief that the nearby Downtown Market would not be sufficient for families buying a lot of groceries. As of now, “You have to go out of the city to get basic groceries.”

The CDCs revitalize neighborhoods by rehabbing or building homes while still leaving open the need for business district redevelopment. Neighborhood Ventures is a 501(c)(3) not for profit organization, an economic development organization, working exclusively in the 20 neighborhood business districts within Grand Rapids. This organization first recruits and then retains new businesses to the districts by filling in vacant spaces and storefronts in a way that they believe compliments the neighborhood and is also beneficial to the residents. Neighborhood Ventures aids business districts by facilitating the mix of both local and chain businesses or franchises as long as the owners live locally. Next, Neighborhood Ventures does business corridor organizing by gathering groups of business owners and merchants together to market, brand, and create banners for corridor improvement districts. For example, this organization worked closely with an undisclosed group who wanted to promote business districts in the SE side of town. These business districts are located in the SECA, MANA, and Baxter neighborhood associations. The group came up with the moniker seen on the banners
attached to the ornamental light posts, which are a typical feature of these districts’ streetscaping. It reads, “Shop, Live, and Work.”

A project list for revamping a business corridor often consists of brick pavers, ornamental lighting, and streetscape features. Neighborhood Ventures secures funding for these changes and depends on the corridor improvement district tool of capturing a portion of the property taxes; as a district grows financially and with more businesses, the district retains that money. A board is assigned from the neighborhood to decide where that money goes. Neighborhood Ventures is the administrative body that aids them through this process, operating primarily out of grants. The city provides funding for business districts, though this has been reduced in the last seven years. Foundations and banks are the primary funders. Banks provide the money to develop these areas as required by the Community Reinvestment Act: Banks donate money back to the neighborhoods and city, where people have deposited or have borrowed money from them. Finally, tax incentives are another finance tool.

To aid in the success of new businesses, Neighborhood Ventures uses a study put together for all of Grand Rapids business districts, with the exception of downtown. The study was designed to look at economic impact within the city and if people are able to buy what they need in their neighborhoods or if there is retail leaking, meaning they have to go elsewhere for their purchasing needs. Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC), the national corporation based out of Chicago that owns Metro Edge, a collection of data, put the study together. The study determined that in 2008, 1.3 million dollars on average circulated per square mile in Grand Rapids. Dollars were measured by the worth of homes, what people earn per household, and different retail categories. This study
measured what residents are buying and if it is from within their neighborhood. There was a leakage of 134 million dollars for the retail category of food and beverage, and out of this there was a leakage of 125 million dollars in grocery stores dollars that were not spent in the city.

Data also provides a picture of economic potential in the city and breaks the dollar amount down into square footage as far as potential sales in the city. One of the poorest neighborhood areas, area F—SECA, Baxter and Eastown neighborhoods—has 38,000 people living there with an average household size of 2.85 compared to Grand Rapids overall population of 190,000 people and average household size of 2.5. Area F has a concentrated buying power of 15 million dollars per square mile compared to Grand Rapids total buying power of 1.3 million dollars per square mile. The concentrated buying power is high because residents live closer together. For the retail category of food and beverage, the leakage in area F is approximately 74 million dollars. Therefore, developers predict much opportunity for profit from food sales in the Southeast.

For retaining the circulation of dollars in a neighborhood area, Neighborhood Ventures forms focus groups to uncover what residents lack in close proximity to their homes. If fruits and vegetables are not available, for example, Neighborhood Ventures recruits or retains a business to help them to increase sales by informing them that people would buy these products if they sold them. Selling these goods may require better branding and marketing. If a store, usually a liquor or convenience store, has an unmet need for selling produce such as a cooler, Neighborhood Ventures helps them find a business improvement grant to cover the cost. Most often, the stores do not sell produce
because it is perishable and does not sell fast enough due to the high prices. Some convenience stores buy produce from a grocer then mark it up and sell it in their store.

Every business association in the Southeast reported to Neighborhood Ventures that they needed a grocery store. A representative for this group, Ted, attempted to point out small markets to the different associations throughout the city, though they did not recognize them as grocery stores. Ted claims there is disconnect in perception of what is available and really there, in regards to stores offering food items. Therefore, he concludes that food deserts do not exist in Grand Rapids and data that claims otherwise is inaccurate and subjective. Fit for Life that also used the LISC data recognized food was available in the SE neighborhoods. However, it was not fresh, nutritious and affordable food, which by definition is a food desert. Nonetheless, since the close of my research, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation—that was funding groups to reduce food insecurity and the rates of childhood dietary diseases—granted money to Neighborhood Ventures to take on the next phase of Fit for Life.

What is significant about the LISC report is that developers and groups such as Neighborhood Ventures are using this data, along with other sets of data, to secure funding dollars in order to aid in their economic development projects in these neighborhoods. As these modish districts are assembled, long-established inhabitants are being pushed out of these neighborhoods. An exodus into increased marginality is unfolding as local businesses fail and the cost of living is exponentially increasing due to the new and expensive housing. Traditional businesses fail as new occupants of this pricy housing shop in the newly erected salons, restaurants supplying local food, and art galleries.
With economic collapse, there are opportunities to profit. People lost and continue to lose their homes and businesses due to the onset of the 2008 mortgage crisis. Cheap housing, business spaces, and vacant buildings were and continue to be bought up by groups involved in developing the Southeast. The gentrification of the Southeast is on par with other cases of economic strife in which neoliberal strategies enable the private sector to profit by taking ownership of spaces and public amenities. Klein (2008) details this type of neoliberal encroachment as it relates to regions impacted by war, economic collapse, and/or environmental disaster. She refers to this phenomenon as ‘disaster capitalism.’ She notes the example of Hurricane Katrina hitting New Orleans in 2005. The poor and African American populace was displaced and could not afford to return due to the gentrification that occurred when more expensive and white occupied housing replaced their destroyed homes.

In Grand Rapids, city government is supporting gentrification and aiding developers by forcing out businesses. The original African American owned businesses in SE Grand Rapids are often cited for violating city code or the city finds places that owe back taxes, forcing the owners to eventually close their doors, as they are unable to pay the fines or compete in their new surroundings. OKT members occasionally discussed the impacts of this on Wealthy Street. Both an herbalist and a Grand Valley State University professor—whom started the 4th Street Garden Oasis—met with members of OKT to formulate a plan for helping a family who was going to lose their convenience store, located below their apartment on Wealthy Street. OKT members were also concerned that the Wealthy Street Business District was trying to force out the Wealthy Street Market, the only remaining African American owned business that dated
as far back as the 1940s. Bazzani Associates was a green builder located across the street from the Wealthy Street Market. One block away from this intersection, the founding architect built Sandman’s, an African American owned barbeque restaurant with large outdoor grills that heavily pollute the air. Activists living or organizing activities in the area believed, as a result, he came to be seen as “race friendly” and that this has opened up the door for gentrification in the area.

Late one afternoon, I met an elderly African American couple who lost one of their businesses on Wealthy Street, because they could not afford the fines for multiple city code violations. I was shooting b-roll film to capture images of new businesses and restaurants that I would later juxtapose with the images of the original businesses that remained closed down and cited by the city. I observed a store that had gone out of business named Mama’s, next to the Party Store that was still in business. I was filming the neighborhood from across the street and stopped the camera when I heard someone yell, “Hey! What are you doing out here?” I introduced myself to an elderly African American man who was the owner of the Party Store and the former owner of Mama’s. I described my project. He told me to go ahead and film. He spoke about when, four years ago, the city shut down Mama’s, citing them for code violations. His wife, whom I spoke with across the street in the Party Store, said the fines were for “chipping paint and such.” They unsuccessfully tried to pay the fines in addition to the new ones and now anticipated losing the Party Store. He hoped I could, “help us with the city and our struggle and put this on the news or something.”

35 At one point, an email from the business association was accidently leaked to a local organization’s email in-box. The email was a call to action to encourage business by clearing flyers from posts and pit bulls from sidewalks that belonged to “those” people. Pit bull owners tended to be African American men, “those” people.
A Case Example of Gentrification and Power Dynamics: The Downtown Market

A neoliberal appropriation of the local food movement is underway by the stakeholders connected to the Downtown Market and by those who are simultaneously developing sections of the Southeast into business and housing zones: “sustainable living communities.” The establishment of the Downtown Market is conjoined with the current and proposed “revitalization” (gentrification) blueprints for the adjacent neighborhoods and beyond.

The involved parties formed a social network that, during the time of this research, included:

- City officials
- Grand Action-a non-profit group started by one of Grand Rapids wealthiest men
- The W.K. Kellogg Foundation-a renowned foundation whose director is a close acquaintance of other stakeholders, the founder and CEO of Cascade Engineering, and the founder of Grand Rapids Community College’s Future Center’s Urban Farming Pilot Project
- Right Place-a privately and publicly funded regional non-profit development group whose mission is to expand economic wealth and whose board members include the heads of local and non-local corporations, banks, and universities: Consumers Energy, Rockford Construction, Grand Rapids Community College, Grand Valley State University, DTE Energy, the Devos and VanAndel family members, Bank of America, and etc.
• The Catholic Diocese
• The Inner City Christian Federation
• Dwelling Place
• Neighborhood Ventures
• The Urban Institute for Contemporary Arts
• Heartside Business District Group
• Rockford Construction
• Other unidentified groups

Many of these participants sit on the same boards or have direct correspondence.

The Downtown Market is an exemplar of neoliberalism in action. Grand Action, the non-profit group pioneering this project, is using public dollars that will finance the private interests of associates that own businesses in or nearby the market. City dollars and tax credits have been used for the Downtown Market. Forty to fifty percent of the money was anticipated to come from housing, brown field, new market and historic tax credits, and foundation grants. Because Grand Action has a non-profit status, they are able to use tax credits and grant money. Grand Action’s constituents with non-profit statuses are doing the same to develop adjacent areas to the market.

The private consultant for the Downtown Market told the Downtown Development Authority (DDA) that $650,000 to $900,000 was needed for predevelopment: getting a site, hiring someone for design and engineering, finding a strategy for fundraising, finding developing partners, and doing public outreach and marketing. To finance the predevelopment, the city’s DDA gifted $100,000 of Grand Rapid’s residents’ unapproved tax dollars to Grand Action, spearheading the market. The
DDA bought the Sonneveldt property at Ionia and Wealthy in 2007 for 2 million dollars and sold this vacant building and surrounding property for $1 to Grand Action.

Two individuals from the DDA were working closely with Grand Action to aid them in adhering to rules and policies in order for them to operate as if they are a public program transitioning from a private to a public company. The nine members of the DDA included a city commissioner on the board of Grand Action, Grand Action’s co-chair, another member from Grand Action and former associate of West Michigan Environmental Action Council, a member from Right Place, and the city’s Mayor who appoints members. A separate program from the city council funds the DDA. They capture taxes from businesses downtown and then reinvest those into the community for infrastructure improvements. Even though they use a different pool of money from that of the city, they are closely associated and share offices.

Stakeholders reported that the Downtown Market is an investment tool designed to boost nearby business sales by attracting tourists into the city. To do so, there is space set aside for a restaurant, bar, brewery or winery tasting room, and artist studios. There will be space to manufacture and wholesale products on site. For example, Heffron Farms, a potential future vendor, will be able to butcher one of their grass fed cows on site. Conceptual plans show a commercial kitchen that could be used as an incubator for entrepreneurs needing a space to produce items sold at the market and to other businesses; a rooftop thermal heated greenhouse; cooking demonstration area; and meeting rooms that could be used for special events, classes, and other functions. There will be a year-round farmers market offering items like artisan breads and cheeses.
Portions of a four-story building that is part of the complex may be redeveloped as offices or apartments.  

The Downtown Market is a revitalization effort to expand the downtown area southward into an urban frontier. The market is on an industrial site, which they are “revitalizing.” Architects told Grand Action that they want to reuse old buildings and make them LEED certified. Stakeholders in this area mentioned that Dwelling Place owned nearby vacant buildings and there was the possibility of redeveloping them. One criteria of gentrification is attracting suburbanites into the city for the experience of “urban” life. In Grand Rapids, purposefully crafted “historical” and “cultural” appeal is homogenizing space as the new residents and visitors consume local food or brewed beer from one of the many new bars and restaurants fashioned out of vacant furniture warehouses or other historical structures. The co-founder of Grand Action who is organizing the Downtown Market explained at a meeting with OKT that they were purposefully constructing this atmosphere, a sense of place, in order to entice shoppers’ desire for history and “diversity.”

The process of homogenization to attract suburban consumers is what Ferrell (2001) refers to as the “disneyfication” of urban space. To attract shoppers, they must first feel safe for experiencing the inner city as they frequent places like the Downtown Market. Surveillance cameras at the market site will stream life images into the police station. Low (2011) refers to surveillance technology as one aspect of a “systems of exclusion” in which she argues theories of space and place—such as that of Foucault (1977)—can uncover hidden aspects of power. Inherent to these exclusionary practices are the underlying structural racism and classism that “permeate contemporary neoliberal

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36 Since my research, the original building was demolished and replaced with a three-story structure.
society” (Low 2011). In the case of the Downtown Market, this is a made place
disneyfied) of exclusion and a contested space: there are those who voice that they are left out of the engineering plans due to their race; advocate on the behalf of the homeless who are being pushed out; oppose the spending of public dollars for private enterprise, especially without any citizen input; are concerned about the environmental toxins that will result from an increase in traffic causing the already disparate asthma rates in children to rise; and support the nearby Fulton Street Farmers Market, which is going to lose vendors to this new business.

The above concerns were raised when a group of mostly local activists associated with OKT met with one of Kent County’s Commissioners, also a member of Grand Action and the DDA. Grand Action sent the Commissioner to address citizens’ concerns and public opposition to the market that was expressed in emails to the Commissioners assigned to the ward and district of the future Downtown Market. These concerns were due to the fact that community members near this site were not included in Grand Action’s research team’s interviews that were created to capture feedback for the design of the Downtown Market. I attended this meeting. One month later, I went along with the main organizer of OKT to meet with two representatives of Grand Action. Grand Action requested to meet with OKT in response to the meeting with the Commissioner.

The initial meeting with the Commissioner took place in the location he picked, a church located in the SECA neighborhood. In attendance were OKT members and their community partners. One of the city’s Commissioners and a self-identified activist were also there. The meeting consisted of the county Commissioner presenting a power point of the market, which was normally used for sale pitches and advertisement purposes.
Attendees were patient and observed the first few slides. Their questions then halted the presentation and took up the remaining portion of the meeting. The first question was about the stakeholders and financing. The Commissioner claimed that Grand Action would not allow him to reveal the list of constituents or give him the financial analysis to make it public.

A large part of this meeting was about the role of the DDA in this project and the history of when Grand Action built the Van Andel Arena in the Heartside Neighborhood. Grand Action is an outgrowth of the Grand Vision Committee. In April 1991, Dick DeVos, one of the co-founders of Grand Action, assembled more than 50 West Michigan community leaders and volunteers from the business, labor, civic, academic, and sports sectors to explore the possibility of building an arena and expanding and renovating local convention facilities. In April 1993, Grand Vision officially changed its name to Grand Action and set-up offices. Van Andel, the Civic Theatre, Devos Place (convention center), Seccia Center, the Michigan State University College of Human Medicine Building, and the forthcoming Downtown Market are their projects. Grand Action is a non-profit sector development group and creates key anchors in the urban core for economic development.\(^{37}\) The Van Andel Arena is one example. The Commissioner boasted that it now stands in place of a once abandoned, dilapidated area of old buildings that became the “new frontier.” Grand Action acts as consultants for measuring the financial impact on the community by finding assets and the dollars paid out. Van Andel Arena, their first project, reported the Commissioner, brought in approximately 200

\(^{37}\) This above information about Grand Action is from their website, grandaction.org/.
million dollars for the community. The Van Andel has annual revenue of approximately $120,000 and two thirds of this is public money, offset by the hotel and motel tax.

To build the arena, private money came from the Van Andel family; the arena is not named directly after them but because of their contribution. The same is true for the DeVos Convention Center, which was privately funded in part by Dick DeVos. Keith, in attendance at this meeting with the Commissioner, directly experienced the effects of the arena’s development. He is a local activist for the homeless, started a garden in the Heartside neighborhood for the homeless, has been periodically homeless, and is a policy analyst and independent journalist. He told the Commissioner that he was a Heartside resident when the Van Andel Arena was built and people were forced out. His friend, a homeless veteran, once rented an apartment that cost $225 a month in the Heartside. When the arena was built, his friend’s rent went up to $600, and he was forced to move out due to not being able to afford it.

Keith explained to everyone that the DDA was started in 1979. In the Heartside, he and a group of peers were rejected from the DDA when they wanted to form an advisory committee. They felt ignored and believed the DDA was about the bigger investment. The Commissioner interrupted him to state that the DDA “only” provided $100,000 for the Downtown Market, and that the rest would come from private money. Earlier, the Commissioner stated that he did not know where the money was coming from. He was also unsure if Dwelling Place owned the nearby buildings and contradicted himself when he later acknowledged that they did. Keith stood up and yelled, “That is still $100,000!” He announced that he had a prior commitment and, pointing his finger at
the Commissioner, said loudly, “You know that they will be coming back for more public involvement, you know that.”

Gentrification first began in the Heartside when the Van Andel arena was built. Those who were homeless were pushed further south of Fulton Street and down Division Avenue, where the Heartside Business District is located. One of the attendees at this meeting with the Commissioner, on a different occasion, spoke of one individual’s considerable role in the gentrification of this neighborhood. This particular individual owns real estate throughout Grand Rapids and a construction company. Before the Van Andel Arena existed, it was a parking lot standing where 80 houses were demolished. Before Grand Action built the arena, this individual purchased the 80 houses to demolish for his own development plans. He gave renters 20-inch television sets as incentives to move out, and for those who did not move, their landlords did no repairs. After about six months, people began to move out.

After Keith left the meeting, the Commissioner explained that the DDA money is not for something like schools but for infrastructure, streets, and handicapped accessible buildings with elevators. One of OKT’s members said, “From my understanding, Neighborhood Ventures operates the same way.” He agreed and said that they do function like CDC’s, meaning how they obtain funding from private and public dollars. The OKT member went on to say, “This seems more like a Disneyland for tourists, and if it is not inclusive, it leads to things like gentrification.”

A nearby associate professor of history at Calvin College heard about this meeting and sent an email to two of the city Commissioners, which was copied to the meeting’s attendees. The community of activists connected with OKT concurred with the
professor’s opinion on the misappropriation of public dollars. Everyone was concerned with the fact that Grand Action orchestrated a study that did not include minority consumers and small business owners in the Heartside neighborhood or from the Southeast. Individuals further agreed with the professor’s concern about a lack of minority stakeholders in this project as expressed in his email:

Inevitably, if this gentrification project should take place, it will require GR residents to subsidize its tax abatements, street alterations, and long-term maintenance. It concerns me that as a taxpayer that if this project should come to fruition, my investment as taxpayer will have no say so in the direction of the project. More importantly, as an African American taxpayer, I will be supporting a project from its inception that has excluded an entire segment of Grand Rapids' population. To date I do not know too many minority members on the Grand Action committee advocating for the voices of African Americans to be heard.

Despite everyone agreeing on the lack of minority stakeholders, the responses to this email resulted in a debate over exclusivity. The professor accused people of “high jacking the conversation” when the fate of the homeless was questioned. He said that his primary concern was about African Americans’ lack of input and exclusion from the design of this project. Keith responded to this by expressing his concerns with the homeless population historically being pushed out of this neighborhood and encouraged everyone to remain inclusive of each other’s primary concerns. He believed this group of people included in the email, in solidarity, had the potential to influence how the DDA responded to the Downtown Market proposal and how it operated in general. Keith also highlighted the fact that the DDA recently approved $700,000 toward a small section of road construction for Seward Avenue, next to the market. Overall, this email correspondence highlighted how easily advocacy efforts become fragmented in relationship to the topic of food. Moreover, additional tax dollars were approved without
community input, clearly illustrating the neoliberal expenditure of these public dollars for the private economic gain of the Downtown Market and nearby stakeholders. They are appropriating the local food movement and concerns about food insecurity.

I learned more about the Downtown Market’s development plans when I joined OKT to meet with two representatives of Grand Action, Phil and Frank. At this meeting, the themes of classism and racism became apparent in their description of the market’s objectives and manufactured “sense of place,” resulting in exclusionary practices, one, of course, being gentrification. OKT instigated the initial meeting with the Commissioner because community residents were not being consulted about the project. Between that meeting and the meeting with Phil and Frank, different neighborhood associations reported to OKT that Grand Action met or scheduled to meet with them. Therefore, before meeting with OKT, Phil and Frank were able to report that they “consulted” with community members. At the beginning of the meeting, OKT stated a disclaimer that they were not endorsing the Downtown Market because they agreed to meet with Grand Action. The first questions for Grand Action were about community support. Phil reported that they sought the support of possible constituents in Grand Rapids and local food advocates when they conducted 200 interviews and 4 focus groups to find out people’s thoughts and needs.

OKT asked if Grand Action interviewed farmers’ markets. Grand Action did not know the Neighborhood Farmers Market (NFM) existed. However, they interviewed representatives from a farmers market hosted by Spectrum Health and the Fulton Street Farmers Market (FSFM) to ensure them that the Downtown Market would not be in competition with their markets. The FSFM reported to Grand Action that the Downtown
Market would compliment them since the FSFM was already congested and lacked adequate parking space. Phil indicated that the FSFM is more of a “neighborhood-based” market, not fitting for the suburban population that Grand Action hoped to attract to the Downtown Market. He said that they consulted with Midtown Neighborhood Association, which is fiscally responsible for the FSFM. A representative of the neighborhood association told Grand Action that there would be no financial loss in losing some of their most well known vendors to the Downtown Market. In a Grand Rapids Press article, this representative was quoted as supporting the Downtown Market. I later spoke to someone closely affiliated with the FSFM who did not support the Downtown Market, feeling as if Grand Action bought them off when they publicly gifted them with a check for 2 million dollars to expand and make improvements to the FSFM. This affiliate did not support Grand Action’s taking of vendors or their business practices.

Frank went on to state that they consulted with various constituents ranging from political leaders to community groups such as Local First, the Slow Food Movement, and the Food Policy Advocates. He believed that they exhaustively contacted everyone since they spoke with each company constituency in the area. Phil disclosed a few of the Downtown Market’s constituents: Heartside Business District Group, Dwelling Place, Rockford Construction, the Catholic Diocese, and local housing authorities. All of these constituents were already developing the Heartside and SE neighborhoods near and where the Downtown Market site is located. Phil believed, for example, the market will complement the work of the Catholic Diocese’s Cathedral Building and Dwelling Place’s mixed-use development. Finally, the Urban Institute for Contemporary Arts (UICA) was another constituent. Dick Devos donated a new building for UICA’s space. Phil
believed that the Heartside District’s artisans would add to the appeal of this project. He said that they were not at liberty to disclose all of their constituents. Grand Action did not name the Inner City Christian Federation (ICCF) as a constituent though others said they were. Regardless, ICCF is partnering with the same constituents as Grand Action for the Wealthy and Jefferson Project. Grand Action refused to reveal the names of private philanthropists who donated money to this 27 million dollar project.

After OKT and Grand Action discussed community support, they addressed the topic of food insecurity, health, education, and kids. The LISC report, which estimates how many dollars leave low-income and food desert areas and what could be recaptured with the development of businesses, was the reason why Grand Action contacted a private consultant, known for his urban planning work in Portland and Detroit. Phil reported that the LISC study revealed that the Downtown Market site “is a very viable and strong void area for a vast food desert such as this, where there is not much attention to local food.” Phil and Frank described partnering with St. Mary’s and Spectrum Health. These institutions will assist the Downtown Market in addressing health issues and the “training” of low-income people for finding access to a healthy diet that affects people’s overall health.

In addition to targeting individual’s choices concerning food, OKT pressed them on how exactly the Downtown Market would address food insecurity. Frank’s response was that the Downtown Market would provide “obese” children with the opportunity “to touch and taste food.” It also happens to be that the W.K. Kellogg Foundation was looking to fund an economic approach for reducing the health disparities of diabetes and obesity suffered by children living in food deserts. For this reason, OKT asked Phil and
Frank if the W.K. Kellogg Foundation funded any portion of the market. The W.K. Kellogg Foundation granted money, though they did not disclose the amount. OKT again asked how they were going to address food insecurity and whether or not it would be with a community kitchen.

At the last meeting, the Commissioner claimed there would be a community kitchen for training low-income students from Grand Rapids Public Schools in order to address food insecurity. An individual connected with Blandford Nature Center later told OKT that Grand Action stole this idea from the center when they conducted interviews for their study. Phil said that they were still in the development stages, though the kitchen would most likely be a commercial kitchen and not a community kitchen. Grand Action was looking to partner with the Health Care Institute, the Grand Rapids Community College culinary program, and Grand Valley State University for using the commercial kitchen to create an incubator for entrepreneurs. College students were not allowed to develop products on these college campuses and did not have access to a commercial kitchen. For creating ways to engage children in the overall Downtown Market project, Grand Action was looking to partner with Michigan State University for their land base agriculture work, Grand Rapids Public Schools, and the Children’s Museum for a demonstration kitchen.

OKT members, amongst themselves, later discussed the fact that even if there were a community kitchen and an EBT/Bridge Card system, this market would still not make a significant impact on the surrounding food desert. EBT benefits do not provide enough money for recipients to purchase local food. The Downtown Market will not offer items found at a grocer and most likely will not have a customer base of the
surrounding low-income and minority residents. As of July 2012, I learned that Grand Action had no specific plans for their commercial kitchen in regards to inner city youth.

At this meeting with Phil and Frank, transparency became very questionable. Phil started the meeting with a power point presentation and stated that the Downtown Market will provide local food for food deserts. As mentioned earlier, Phil and Frank asserted that the project was started based on LISC data indicating that this was a food desert in which little attention was paid to local food. Later in the meeting, frustrated with OKT’s questions, Frank said, “This is not focused on local food.” When Frank made it explicitly clear that this project was not focused on local food, these remarks were in response to a question on how they planned on getting local food in the winter. His response was, “Of course there is not local food grown in the winter. It is not a year-round farmers market.” He went on to say “local” food is not the focus or the reason for this project and they do not have “a local emphasis,” though they are moving towards efforts around this, projecting the farmers would then buy into this. The contradictory statements were confusing since it is called the “Downtown Market” and they emphasized the fact that they will only have 40 vendors so as not to draw business away from the FSFM. Earlier in the meeting, Frank told OKT that, unlike other farmers markets, the Downtown Market is year-round. Thus, based on statements that the market was year-round unlike other farmers markets and would supply local food to the surrounding food desert, it stood to reason that Phil and Frank were implying there would be a year-round farmers market providing local food.

At the meeting, OKT finally was able to ascertain that the farmers market is actually only one component of this project whose overall focus is not providing local
and fresh food, despite the fact that the vendors are local.\textsuperscript{38} There is a year-round in-door market; however, it is not a year-round farmers market that offers a variety of local fresh produce. It is more of a “market” versus a farmers market. It was transparent, however, and clearly articulated that this is “agro-tourism” for bringing business and people into the city to spend money. One strategy involves the Downtown Market having trendy bars and restaurants. Grand Action anticipates having themes such as a “blueberry festival” in which the restaurants will all serve a dish with blueberries.

After Frank made it clear that the market was not focused on “local” food, he continued on to describe how the market will extend downtown and “help revitalize this frontier.” It is located near the historical railroad and near the abandoned furniture warehouse owned by one of the constituents, Dwelling Place. Grand Action hopes to use these buildings for housing and retail. Frank described how Heartside Park is right next to the Downtown Market site, where they hope to host a venue of family activities. OKT pointed out that those who are homeless frequent this park, which provides them with a safe haven where the police do not force them out of this public space. With this project, homeless people will be pushed out of the park. Furthermore, there are African American and Hispanic families who already frequent this park. Frank replied in a shrill voice, “Do they own the park?” He wanted to know why OKT was assuming this. After several of OKT’s questions, he stated that this is “not meant to be a social service agency.”

Phil intervened to state that Grand Action met with Mel Trotter Ministries to complement their discussion of possibly incorporating the EBT/Bridge Card system. His point was extraneous since Mel Trotter is a homeless shelter located a couple of blocks

\textsuperscript{38} As of 2012, the Downtown Market’s design now includes a seasonal outdoor market.
away from the market site and not an organization dealing with instituting an EBT system. Phil tried to assure OKT that “this is not displacement but integration,” and Grand Action will be working with social service groups. An example of integration, he gave, is the new UICA that is located near Mel Trotter Ministries and Dwelling Place. His favorite restaurant, the Republic, is another example. There, he can watch the “fabric of life that walks by.” He likes the diversity there, which he said is not seen in his residential area of East Grand Rapids (the most affluent part of town).

When OKT members indicated that the Downtown Market’s surveillance and policing would displace the homeless, the response, again, was “this is not displacement, it is integration.” The Grand Rapids Police Department is going to set up security cameras on Downtown Market property that will tap right into the police station for monitoring the building and parking lot. Frank referred to this as “basic safety.” Essentially, I argue that the Grand Rapids Police Department is another constituent of Grand Action and is assisting in their gentrification efforts of overtaking the “new frontier.”

Grand Rapids residents differ in their views of the Downtown Market. Many local residents are looking forward to the market and view it as an up-and-coming attraction. With “local” food being such a trendy movement, this enterprise will surely quench people’s appetite for good food, entertainment, historical appeal, and viewing the “diversity” of the streets. However, the current residents who are low-income or no-income earners are disproportionately the “diverse” and, therefore, will soon be displaced. One local food advocate stated:
From Grand Action’s perspective, it could be a public market this week, a soccer field next week, an amphitheater the week after that, and the rapids of the river the week after that. It doesn't really matter if it's a good project. They are concerned with economic development, not local food.

The Downtown Market and other economic development initiatives are subsidizing their efforts by claiming to address food insecurity in which they have formulated neoliberal solutions. Despite their proclaimed intentions, poverty remains unaddressed. Instead, the landscape of these neighborhoods is accommodating an influx of suburbanites and the pocketbooks of stakeholders. OKT acknowledges this structural inequality. A description of their work in the next chapter provides an account of an alternative approach.
Chapter 5

“Food justice extends the argument that anti-hunger and food entitlement advocates need to talk about food as a fundamental human right” (Gottlieb and Joshi 2010: 229).

**Our Kitchen Table (OKT)**

OKT began in 2003 when the founding member recruited women frustrated with the disparate rates in health issues faced by other African American women and their children. These women recognized that common interventions tended to target individual behaviors and blame victims while health issues persisted in their communities. They decided to address the structural racism that causes and compounds these problems. However, as observed by OKT, marginalized groups often internalize the ideology that it is their responsibility to change unhealthy behaviors, and something is inherently wrong with them for living in impoverished conditions. OKT acknowledges citizens’ agentive ability in pursuing healthy practices, although members educate their fellow neighborhood residents that the structural causes behind these conditions must be addressed in order to achieve any sort of long term solutions to poverty related issues.

OKT members purposefully developed their organization and methods in order to not replicate common and paternalistic approaches to health issues. These women focus on policy change, as well as citizen-led and educational activities that strengthen their Southeast communities from the bottom up. The Food Diversity Project is their most recent project and a work in progress as members continuously adapt it to the needs of
their neighborhoods and formulate methods for dealing with the larger political economic structure.

**OKT and Food Justice**

OKT encourages community members to take action by growing food to live semi-independent of the larger political economic system. OKT mobilizes counter-hegemony—the raising of consciousness—against the internalization of neoliberal ideology, the belief in market-based solutions to poverty. Food insecurity is a growing problem within the U.S. and a symptom of poverty. Poverty is a product of inequality within society at-large. Whereas social service agencies have the tendency to provide token-solutions to food insecurity and are not taking direct action against its structural origins. Moreover, the food system allows for an oversupply of food to go to waste (Poppendieck 2008). OKT views food insecurity as not the problem of individuals but one of communities to restructure the food system. Thus, OKT created the Food Diversity Project (FDP) in which members facilitate activities to educate participants about structural inequality and the importance in growing food, as well as addressing environmental health disparities. This is a model whereby grassroots organizations can engage citizens in what Leykoe (2006) refers to as “learning democratic citizenship in food production” as opposed to acting as “passive consumers” of larger corporations that supply food.

The main objective of this chapter is to demonstrate how radically different OKT’s approach to food security is compared to the ideology and practices of other local food security initiatives, outlined in chapters 3 and 4. Local food security initiatives are
either supporting the gentrification of large development efforts claiming to address food insecurity and/or do not solicit the input of community residents in their initiatives. OKT, on the other hand, confronts the structural inequality of food insecurity and environmental injustice through a community led project that networks with other activists, utilizes popular education tactics to raise consciousness, addresses public policy, practices advocacy, and mobilizes citizens to network as backyard gardeners. In this chapter, I highlight core values and the organizational difficulties experienced by OKT and the Grand Rapids activist community in which OKT closely aligns itself.

OKT’s food security approach, the FDP, can be characterized as what OKT refers to as “food justice.” Food justice shares the same concept as food sovereignty, which is different than the concept of food security. Peck (2010) explains this difference. Food security is a term used by the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization and World Food Program, governments, food policy groups, and social service type agencies. It is often defined as access to fresh, affordable, and nutritious foods, evading the deeper global justice debate about why hunger exists. Food sovereignty, on the other hand, guarantees not only access but also democratic control over food from production to distribution, marketing, and consumption. La Via Campesina provides another definition of food sovereignty as the right to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through traditional knowledge, natural methods, as well as collective action and control over resources (Desmarais 2007). OKT views food as a right and is fighting for this right through the means of food justice.

39 “La Via Campesina is a global peasants' movement consisting of 150 member organizations in 70 countries and representing over 200 million peasants and rural workers. For more than a decade we have been fighting for the recognition of our basic rights within the framework of the UN convention on human
**Activism and Models of Food Justice: Practices and Values**

Worldwide and nationwide social movements have inspired OKT to adopt a justice lens for solving health disparities by adhering to the principle of the ‘commons.’ The commons entails the public maintenance of the fundamental resources of clean air, open space, water and food rather than through private entities that turn these resources into profitable commodities. Justice entails systemic change for maintaining the commons. OKT collaborates with activist groups that share the same value of justice as it relates to preserving the commons: Privatization leads to the exclusion of the disenfranchised from basic human necessities. Activists advocate for collective stewardship of the land versus accommodating the private enterprise encroaching upon the Southeast. The commons is a value and practice that contests the value of private property ownership. Policies give preference to private property ownership, which advances a capitalistic system that continues to colonize the commons and is responsible for the inequality evidenced in urban cores in the form of gentrification and health disparities.

For raising awareness about the commons, OKT incorporates popular education methods into their activism. The Student/Farmworker Alliance describes (2010) popular education as popular to social movements and rooted in Latin American notions of leadership development and critical consciousness. Paulo Freire (1970) developed these techniques that focus on critical questioning, group reflection, and action. OKT’s popular education activities consist of participants defining concepts prior to action steps. The central concept of sustainability is defined in terms of autonomous action for rights. These basic rights are detailed in *La Via Campesina’s Declaration of the Rights of Peasants - Women and Men* (http://viacampesina.org/en/).
collectively growing an equitable food system while practicing environmental stewardship. Environmental toxins, especially lead, are a primary topic for discussing what it means to have a clean environment, live sustainably in the city, and for discussing land use and the commons in an urban context.

OKT’s participants recognize the benefits and importance of growing local food in an environmentally sustainable manner. Sustainable, in this sense, is understood as preserving the Earth’s resources for future generations by planting heirloom seeds to maintain biodiversity, preserving cultural knowledge around growing food, and not using chemicals that poison the land, air, water, and living species. Food is integral to the environment and social life; humans have a biotic and precarious relationship to nature.

The 2009 Bolivian constitution, enacted by President Evo Morales, is representative of OKT’s beliefs around food production. Bolivia’s constitution embraces the principles of Bolivia’s indigenous groups and serves as a didactic for the human-nature relationship, which is viewed as inseparable and mutually interdependent. Cabitza (2011) reports that President Morales, an Aymara Indian, passed a law in 2010 in order to ensure food security and improve the livelihood of farmers and to protect the environment. The law represents Suma Qamaña, or living well in harmony with the Pachamama, Mother Earth. Bolivia intends to produce its own seeds, preserve bio-diversity, support small farmers to create food security and improve their livelihood, and avoid genetically modified seeds as well as accepting imports.

During this research, the founding member of OKT searched for replicable models or ones similar to the FDP that seek to improve food security with a justice lens. OKT has yet to discover a suitable model designed for urban cores in the United States.
However, OKT is constantly developing the FDP as a model, influenced by the principles and popular education techniques of environmental justice advocates, as well as workers’ and small farmers’ social movements. On the behalf of OKT, a member of both the Bloom Collective and Grand Rapids Institute for Information Democracy (GRIID) hosted classes and led capacity building events in which he educated attendees about social justice movements that are reclaiming the commons. These movements are in reaction to the environmental degradation and poverty caused by corporate agriculture.

One example of an influential social movement that relies upon popular education tactics is the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) National Campaign for Fair Food that was in solidarity with the National Student/Farmworker Alliance (SFA). The National Student/Farmworker Alliance (2010) summarizes their efforts: The CIW formed in response to the Florida tomato industry. The tomatoes are harvested under inhumane working conditions—including dusk to dawn work schedules and sub poverty wages—and are mostly sold to major food retailers and distributors. The CIW did community based organizing and education, hunger strikes and marches, and other actions directed towards local farm labor bosses and growers. The CIW aligned itself with consumer concerns over pesticides, fair trade, and the anti-sweatshop movement. The CIW began to look at the root causes of this injustice in the agricultural industry and began analyzing “the role of the high-volume, low cost tomato purchasing practices of large food retailers in funneling wealth away from communities like Immokalee” (The National Student/Farmworker Alliance 2010: 66). In April 2001, with SFA, they organized a boycott against Taco Bell. Their work was a success with Taco Bell, and they moved on to organizing against McDonalds, Burger King and others who ended up
making concessions to the farm workers that included wage increases, as well as enforceable labor and human rights standards. The CIW and SFA made their voices heard and became agents of change.

The National Students/Farmworker Alliance (2010) reports that the necessary components for the success of this movement were strong alliances, solidarity with other movements, being a worker-led movement, and facilitating a societal shift of consciousness through public pedagogy techniques such as brand busting, drawings and music, and building solidarity and public support through organizing events like marches. The CIW formed allies with groups within the city. When the CIW organized against McDonalds’ headquarters in Chicago, they mobilized the energy of youth through drawings and theatre. Being that many urban residents are unfamiliar with these issues around food, they educated around how food is actually produced. Education was through activities that tapped into popular consciousness that, in part, pertained to Chicago’s long history of social movements, especially those of labor and immigrant struggles. The CIW and partners planned a carnival to excite young people and to march to local McDonalds restaurants, but McDonalds agreed to demands before it took place. Instead, the CIW and partners hosted a celebratory concert. One of the performers was Rage Against the Machine, whose lead singer, Zack De La Rocha, alleges solidarity with several small farmer social movements.

The Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST), Landless Workers’ Movement, in Brazil is another example of a small farmer social movement that influences the basic tenets of OKT. Wittman et al. (2010) explains that the MST was founded in 1985 from a Marxist point of view, given the fact that 2 percent of Brazil’s
population owns half the land. In response, the MST is a mass movement with 1.5 million members occupying land throughout Brazil. The ultimate aim is agrarian reform. According to Meszaros (2000), the MST occupies land (the commons) that is unused or its legal status is in doubt and tries to negotiate with local authorities or to force them to legalize the settlements. The 1988 Brazilian constitution, Instituto Nacional de Colonização e Reforma Agrária (INCRA), contains the legal basis for state-led agrarian reform.

Wittman and et al. (2010) describe how the practice of agro-ecologica is central to the MST’s autonomy. The MST believes environmental stewardship is necessary for preserving the soils of the land. Supported by La Via Campesina, MST practices the concept of agro-ecologica, which is an organic and sustainable farming technique banning the use of chemicals that became common to farming with the onset of the Green Revolution. These practices, along with not exporting food, enhance food security and decrease dependency on agri-business and other countries. The MST reclaims control from the biotech corporations by producing their own organic seeds. This is food sovereignty, the preservation of the commons.

The MST uses the popular education approach created by Paolo Freire to raise awareness and educate about the root reasons for inequality in their lives. Moreover, they mobilize other peasant farmers to occupy the land and practice sustainable farming in response to inequality (Issa 2007). Models such as these provide an alternative to the mode of neoliberal socio-economic relationships and production. The MST is in reaction to the neoliberal politics of the World Bank, International Monetary Fund and World
Trade Organization, which are commonly implemented in many Latin American countries.

OKT’s popular education approach is similar to that of Bryant Terry, a publicly acclaimed chef, author and activist, based out of Oakland, California. Bryant’s activism is compatible with that of OKT. With OKT members, I met him when we attended Calvin College’s *Wake up Weekend: The Many Faces of Food Activism*. The student organizers for this event invited Bryant to do a workshop. Brick Road Pizza, the vegan pizzeria where Wealthy Street is heavily gentrifying, provided the use of their restaurant for this event. There were approximately 150 people, mostly white patrons of all ages, both male and female of different socio-economic statuses.

At the workshop, Bryant explained what led to him becoming an eco-vegan chef, food activist, and author. His family is from the South and gave him a legacy of an agrarian tradition in which African Americans living in the South grew organic foods and families came together to cook and eat wholesome meals. He wants to find solutions for instituting a just and sustainable food system in light of the harmful impact industrial agriculture has made on people’s diets.

Bryant pursued but did not complete his Ph.D. in History. He studied the Civil Rights Movement. He discontinued his studies to become an eco-chef after he studied the Black Panthers who inspired his work with their community programs that met people’s basic needs. He explained that during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, the Black Panthers realized that people are unable to fight injustice if their need for food is unmet. Thus, programs included giving away groceries and free breakfast to children.

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40 He co-authored *Grub: Ideas for Urban Organic Kitchen and Vegan Soul Food Kitchen* (2006) with Anna Lappe. Since my research, he and OKT have been in correspondence about potential collaborative efforts.
As described by Churchill and Vander Wall (2002), the Black Panthers did this with no institutional grants or any sort of government funding. Nonetheless, they were feeding over 10,000 people in Oakland and opened up chapters across the nation that fed children. OKT is also inspired by the work and principles of the Black Panthers and anticipates starting a community kitchen for those with no access to a fully functioning kitchen or healthy food.

In *The Inspired Vegan* (2012), Bryant writes about how he attended culinary school with the intent of gaining skills to start a project as one way to address food justice. He wanted to create a community-based solution to producing food in an affordable and ecologically friendly way while teaching food insecure families how to select ingredients and cook wholesome meals. To do this, he wanted to teach young people about healthy cooking and food politics and teach them to become food justice activists and peer educators. OKT’s FDP has these same objectives; activities are intended to raise consciousness, teach skills, and bring community together to address food insecurity through growing, sharing, and preparing food.

In light of racial, economic and geographical differences among eaters, Bryant (2012) writes, “My goal is to use the sensual pleasures of the table to shift people’s attitudes, habits, and politics and ‘eventually’ ensure that everyone in this country of abundance—regardless of income or place of residence—has access to healthful food. Because many people are detached from having pleasurable experiences with wholesome, fresh food, I see empowering them to cook at home and share meals with family and friends as revolutionary first step towards food justice” (xvi-xvii). He
believes that building community around the table and strengthening the food justice movement are inseparable activities.

OKT’s activism resembles the models of several groups and projects. A collaborator of OKT suggested Food Not Bombs, a national group with one chapter in Grand Rapids, and OKT have similar food justice approaches; both organizations educate about social issues when they gather to cook and publicly share food. Different chapters give away free “disposed” food to raise political awareness of anarchist concerns. Food Not Bombs educates about sustainability and corporate waste and practices their values through dumpster diving in order to reclaim food that has been discarded. Dumpster diving was popular among twenty something-year-olds who identified as punks and/or anarchists, including a few members of the Bloom Collective (an OKT partner and activist group) and other citizens who participated in OKT’s activities. Clark (2008) states that dumpster diving is a food collecting method of anarchist punks who are providing a powerful critique against the status quo and the corporatized food industry. Food not Bombs is one example of an anarchist group. Anarchism is best described “as a way of life in favor of egalitarianism and environmentalism and against sexism, racism, and corporate domination” (Clark 2008: 411). OKT also takes this position. However, OKT does not profess any allegiance to anarchism or any specific political party.

One particular labor movement event illustrates the activist community in which OKT aligns itself. May Day is internationally celebrated on May 1st. During my research, it was celebrated in the Baxter neighborhood at Martin Luther King Park. It was organized and sponsored by Grand Rapid’s local Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) chapter. OKT and the Bloom Collective were co-sponsors. Zinn (2003) provides
a historical summary of May Day and the labor movement, identifying socialists, anarchists and radical trade unionists, whom began the IWW (the Wobblies) in 1905. The formation of the IWW was a move to unite all workers in any industry into one big direct action union, undivided by sex, race or skills. The IWW celebrates May Day in memory of the Haymarket Square hangings that occurred as the labor movement strikes were escalating during the 1880s in response to the growing corporate monopolies and poor working conditions. On May 1st of 1886, the American Federation of Labor called for nationwide strikes for an eight-hour workday. In Chicago, the railroads stopped running and police fired into a crowd of strikers on May 3rd. A meeting was held on May 4th of 1886 in Chicago to discuss the violence against strikers. A bomb was set off amidst the police who showed up. Eight anarchists were arrested; four were hung, three sentenced to prison, and the one other committed suicide.

The relevance of this history corresponds with OKT’s efforts to network with the groups, represented at the May Day event, in which OKT shares ideology concerning topics of social justice that range from labor disputes to food injustice. The majority of the 200 attendees at the May Day event were African American residents from the Baxter neighborhood, one of OKT’s target areas. A significant portion of this population is food insecure, working class, and impacted by the fall of the auto-industry and outsourcing of manufacturing jobs. At this event, attendees observed live music and speakers from 10 a.m. until 8 p.m. The local IWW provided a table with free food and a tent for t-shirt sales. Grand Valley State University’s Student Socialist Group, the Bloom Collective and Stop Targeting Our Kids, an organization concerned with harmful advertisements that target children, handed out literature. Good Morning Revolution who coordinates
the Really Really Free Market was in attendance. Their Free Market encourages an antithesis to capitalism in which people spread blankets in a public space and bring their possessions to give away or trade with others. An independent media journalist whom many know from his call-in FM radio show was there to cover the event. He too was a Wobbly (an IWW member) in the 1970s, when he worked with Cesar Chavez for two years.

The 'Commons’ and Our Kitchen Table’s Community Activism

OKT partnered with activist groups in the community in order to encourage citizens to reclaim the commons. OKT devoted its late 2009 and early 2010 winter months to partnering with Grand Valley State University (GVSU) and participating in a small group of activists. OKT partnered with a woman who taught a course on sustainability for GVSU’s Liberal Arts Studies program. She provided students with a list of organizations that they paired up with for an internship. Students were assigned with the task of learning their organization’s definition of sustainability and methods for applying it, as well as formulating their own working definition. OKT and the Bloom Collective took on interns. At the end of the semester, one of the interns for the Bloom Collective decided to become a member. Based on her internship, she equated sustainability with social responsibility, something people have to accept and practice to prevent a passive life style of dependence on others for services. The majority of citizens in the United States, for example, are major consumers of goods and unable to produce their own food but able to produce an abundance of waste, resulting in the need for grocery stores and waste disposal services.
The semester ended with the students having a potluck and presenting what they learned to the different partners. With the exception of three students, one who partnered with OKT and the two with the Bloom Collective, the others learned the triple bottom line (environment, social well-being, and economic) definition of sustainability. Nonetheless, the topic of the commons—as it relates to sustainability, power, and green space—occupied a significant portion of the conversation, mostly between members of the Bloom Collective, OKT, and their interns. A large portion of the discussion revolved around the idea that parks are not simply “green spaces.” The human/nature relationship of conquering nature and designating green space is not necessarily an efficient way to reduce environmental impact. Setting aside areas of green space does not impact larger environmental issues of wasted water resources and energy. However, a need to preserve green space and activism around this could serve as a forum for educating about the commons and challenging people to discuss the true meaning of sustainability. Eating within our own bioregions versus importing oranges is an example of preserving the commons in the context of situating local land use it its broader global context.

The professor from GVSU, a Bloom Collective member, an OKT member, and another local activist were the core members of a group, which they named *The Commons*. This group was based on the principle of the commons. Members wanted to find a project for publicly engaging people in maintaining the commons and agreed to start community gardens. Two of the members’ children attended a Montessori school, where the school was trying to plant a garden until a disagreement arose among school board members. *The Commons* decided to take action without the school and began the 4th Street Garden Oasis. The 4th Street Garden Oasis shared the land space with the
Native American Family Services, which grows an annual Three Sisters garden and has an office at the Steepletown Building, a block away from the garden.\textsuperscript{41} OKT co-hosted events with the 4\textsuperscript{th} Street Garden Oasis, despite the fact it was located in Northwest and not in SE Grand Rapids. One Commons member who lived in a community house known as the K-House also planted a garden along with his housemates. Their garden was at LaGrave and Logan Streets, a block away from their home in SECA. The Inner City Christian Federation (ICCF) owned the property. Regardless, they planted the garden for the neighborhood in order to draw public attention to its importance, especially given the likelihood that the ICCF would develop the site.

The Commons group dissolved within four months due to everyone having complications with synchronizing their schedules. The women with children, in particular, had difficulty with finding sufficient time to devote to the group. All of the members continued to engage in activities designed to preserve the idea of the ‘commons’ though they never started a larger outreach effort dependent on community support. Criticism was raised about the time commitment required to develop support for activist work; this may explain why people concerned with social issues often pursue non-profit work. Non-profit work provides a living wage for those concerned with social issues. For people, in general, it is difficult to find additional time outside of work and maintaining a household in order to pursue social justice concerns.

\textsuperscript{41} The Bloom Collective could no longer afford the rent on the quickly gentrifying Wealthy Street and moved to the Steepletown Building near the end of my research. In 2011, OKT began to share their space and pay a portion of the rent.
The Cost of Exclusivity and Difficulties in Community Organizing

Projects, targeting inequality, are typically left to outside experts including non-profit groups as well as government agencies. The non-profit model, unlike the 19th and 20th century labor unions and the Black Panthers (who initially started community based education programs in the ghetto(s) and food cooperatives before they became known as ‘black militants’), does not challenge the status quo or capitalism as the cause of inequality. OKT, during this research, did not have a non-profit status. Therefore, OKT considered this to be one reason that they were a grassroots organization. OKT has the objective of effecting policy change and recognizes the fact that, as stated by Smith (2007), organizations with a 501(c)(3) status, receiving foundations grants, are usually prohibited from direct involvement in political advocacy.

Smith (2007) provides a historical analysis of the rise of the non-profit sector. Beginning in the early 1900s, the robber barons, the mega millionaires responsible for poor labor conditions and relations such as John D. Rockefeller and Andrew Carnegie, used charity as a method for protecting their earnings from taxation. To do so, the robber barons started foundations, which, in turn, developed research and disseminated information on social issues in a way that did not challenge capitalism. These foundations became highly lucrative given the fact that organizations could hide assets and receive tax write offs. The Tax Reform Act of 1969 prevented foundations from growing without serving their charitable purpose. This law imposed the regulation that foundations annually spend 6 percent (now 5 percent) of their net investment income. In response, foundations began forming 501(c)(3) non-profit organizations to make tax-deductible donations.
The development of non-profit groups co-opted the Black Power movement and the organizing of Native activists by allowing social protest without confronting the capitalistic status quo that these groups sought to change (Allen 2007). Activists were drawn to well-paying jobs, which were professionalized, requiring degrees. Therefore, mass based grassroots organizing was minimized. Rodriguez (2007) explains the benefits of foundations for conservative and wealthy individuals: ‘Compassionate conservatism’ is the fallacy that scarcity rather than inequality is the root of social and economic problems. Meanwhile, foundations are predominantly white, middle-aged and upper class men and women who exemplify inequality in that they are paid exorbitant amounts of money to serve as trustees on the boards of foundations. For example, in 1998, the Annenberg Foundation paid $500,000 to Walter Annenburg.

Right-wing foundations develop think tanks for shaping ideology and capitalistic approaches to social issues. “The well-headed and strategic philanthropy of conservative foundations have successfully moved national ideology, and, hence, policy, toward the Right. As a result, conservative issues, such as downsizing federal government and increasing state’s rights, free-market capitalism and deregulation, individual property rights, and “traditional values” like opposing gay civil rights have become national policy debates” (Rodriguez 2007: 68).

Funding is a source of difficulty in community organizing for several reasons, ranging from a lack of accountability, misallocation of funds, the exclusion of community input, and decreased participation and effectiveness due to a lack of funding. In Grand Rapids, OKT observed that there is no accountability or measurable outcomes around funding dollars actually being spent in the community nor do the residents know this
funding exists or have input in how it is spent. OKT wants to hold organizations accountable that receive large amounts of funding, especially government funding, that is subsidized by taxpayers. To OKT, it seems this funding goes mostly towards salaries and not into the community.

According to OKT, an environmental initiative designed for children’s health disparities was misallocating funds and precluding community impact. OKT belonged to this initiative, funded by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to reduce rates of childhood lead poisoning. It was explained during my research that the funding dollars could not be accounted for in regards to community impact nor had there been community input. Also, OKT was in conflict with members of this EPA funded group who accused OKT of not fulfilling the requirements for their scope of work. The scope of work they wanted OKT to conduct was not in OKT’s contract. For example, OKT indicated it was not their responsibility to organize community events at churches with African American congregations as insisted upon by the coordinator of the initiative. Because of this expectation, some members of OKT later expressed among themselves that they were being “pimped” out as the minority representatives for the initiative. The EPA funded committee moved to have OKT removed from the grant. Everyone voted in favor of this except for one person who made a motion for the record that he did not support this move. He later became one of OKT’s community partners.

The conflict between OKT and the other members of the initiative highlighted the competitive tendency of non-profit organizations in Grand Rapids. Following OKT’s removal, the main coordinator of the EPA project tried to publicly discredit OKT and block OKT from any future funding. OKT was removed from the project during the
beginning of year two of the three-year grant cycle. The grant was for $300,000. OKT was never paid the full amount for their first year’s work. OKT was waiting for the close of the grant cycle to author and publish a paper drawing attention to the fact that the funding, as designated, did not impact, benefit, or tangibly circulate into the community.

OKT argued that when community residents’ insights are excluded from top-down initiatives designed to reduce environmental health disparities and residents are not benefitting from community dollars, this is one aspect of environmental racism. Moreover, OKT became critical of academic research, which they believed did not have any community input or ownership over the data. The equality and ownership over data and products result from the democratization of knowledge, the equal input by all stakeholders in a community project as well as the inclusion of local knowledge that is viewed as expertise for the designing of a culturally or socially sensitive intervention (Christopher et al. 2008). Democracy, at the community level, is understood to be the inclusion of an underserved population in participating in the decision-making processes affecting their community (Holland et al. 2008). OKT was trying to restore a sense of agency and give a voice to those residents whose lives were directly impacted by power dynamics and exclusion.

OKT is unique in having a community-led capacity building model founded upon social capital. However, they still depend on external funding. During my research, OKT was awarded a few small grants totaling no more than a couple thousand dollars from local foundations and churches for the purpose of purchasing garden supplies and to pay members small stipends for their community organizing. OKT utilized several resources that were free such as community partners who volunteered their time and free
plants, compost, and space. OKT encouraged residents to benefit from the resources offered to them. OKT avoided large amounts of funding, believing that it would take away their autonomy in making decisions if they had to meet certain requirements of the grantee. On the other hand, OKT struggled with organizational problems that affiliates attributed to the lack of financial support that was needed to pay members or outsource tasks in order to become more effective and prevent members from burn out.

Fluctuations in participation over the years impacted the organizational structure of OKT and were due to communication problems, individuals having difficulty balancing busy schedules with community organizing, frustrations over events lasting too long, and political differences. At the time of this research, the core group members consisted of five people. Two former core members, active in the past, regularly attended events. Although in 2010, they were not active members of the organization. There were other former members from previous projects who participated on occasion.

The founding member of OKT, while wanting to build consensus for projects, usually made the final decisions around strategies for improving food insecurity because of her full-time commitment and leadership role. While some members of OKT were disappointed that the project did not focus more on teaching nutrition, others viewed this as targeting individual behavior change and not the broader concern for social justice change. Everyone seemed to agree that they did not have the time to take a lead on their suggestions and spoke of the personal time constraints that they felt contributed to their reduced participation.

Communication between OKT’s members and with the general population of neighborhood residents, at times, lacked inclusivity. The language of technical expertise
used in planning meetings or in events, either frustrated or bored participants and led to lack of attendance. The fusion of technology with nature, using social media to invite others to come outdoors, was another topic related to communication and exclusionary practices. Email correspondence lacked consistency in that not everyone was always aware of meetings besides the most currently involved members. OKT tried to improve communication through starting a Google Groups account, a Facebook page, and a website. Unfortunately, there was a lack of communication and organization for finding one person to update and monitor these on-line resources. Email and Facebook were used for building social networks, and announcing events or meetings. It was an effective tool for recruiting attendees and keeping people up-to-date on activities.

Unfortunately, many in the Southeast do not have computers nor could they afford Internet service if they did. The significant challenge of notifying large segments of the affected population was ongoing. Stronger outreach to churches, phone calls, and neighborhood flyers would have bridged this gap but required a larger time commitment by OKT members who were unable to devote additional time. A community organizer for SECA and two community garden organizers from Garfield Park indicated their only success in increasing attendance to events was going door-to-door in lieu of any on-line activity. OKT requested neighborhood associations to notify their neighborhoods about OKT activities and direct them towards using OKT as a resource for gardening support.

A few activists told me that the problem with organizing is finding enough time, though this is often not the case for those who have communal living situations. The K-House, where a few Bloom Collective members lived, is an example where housemates share living tasks and their cost of living is minimalized. Many subsist on freelance or
part time work rather than full time employment, and a few are, therefore, able to take part in community activism. This group has developed a post-industrial cultural solution to a society where people have to sell their labor in order to have food and shelter. As citizens, their critical worldview of capitalism and its direct affect on them demonstrates the impact of food insecurity where one’s labor does not allow them to be a sentient part of a community, because they are in a struggle to survive to eat.

As outlined above, OKT struggled with organizational problems that affiliates attributed to a lack of financial support. At the beginning of winter 2010, OKT held a planning meeting at the SECA’s building. The meeting focused on the ethics of accepting funding and the importance of capacity building since the W.K. Kellogg Foundation had recently approached OKT with the possibility of future funding in the amount of approximately $200,000. A few of the planning meeting’s attendees expressed fear that a large amount of money would deter OKT from encouraging residents to tap into community resources in order to build capacity from the neighborhood level. Instead, the leader of OKT preferred small amounts of funding and applied for a grant from the Unitarian Church in the amount of $500. A biochemist that volunteered his time to OKT was in attendance and encouraged them to accept a large grant. He explained how his employer does what he called ‘back costing’, which is when an organization assumes that they are where they fiscally want to be and then do what it takes to get there by obtaining a grant. He did not think this deterred from capacity building and believed that OKT required a substantial amount of funding to build infrastructure.

OKT, on a later occasion, again met with consultants from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and discussed the fact that capacity building is central to the work of OKT.
The consultants from W.K. Kellogg Foundation explained that they wanted to provide funding, because OKT had a project for improving conditions for vulnerable children and engaging at the neighborhood level with interventions that actually affect people. The Kellogg consultants also said they appreciated the fact that OKT did grassroots work, respected people’s dignity in seeking community input, and anticipated that the FDP would become community owned. They agreed with OKT in not caring for the word empowerment, which individualizes structural causes of poverty. Instead, the foundation wanted to see a viral effect of change and justice at the neighborhood level. One of the consultants even said that the word ‘desert’ in food desert was misleading since it insinuates that it is a natural occurrence when it is actually man made.

**Capacity Building and Collaborative Efforts**

The W.K. Kellogg Foundation recognized the value of OKT’s capacity building strategy for effectively engaging community residents. I describe capacity building as it is understood and practiced by OKT. OKT modeled its efforts after the Building Movement Project (BMP), a group out of Detroit that trains organizations on how to build the capacity of community members. OKT addressed structural inequality through collaboration with groups such as the BMP and individuals who acted as peer educators. OKT partnered with groups that shared a similar perspective on what food security should look like in relationship to the environment, economy, and the principles of justice and the commons. Groups included: Grand Rapids Institute for Information Democracy, a critical social media analysis group that trained OKT members on film methods; Eastern Michigan Environmental Action Council, a group based out of Detroit that used
visual media to raise consciousness and mobilize people; Building Movement Project; Bloom Collective, an anarchist group that hosted educational activities; farmers and gardeners that were knowledgeable about sustainable and organic growing methods; and a biochemist who volunteered his time to facilitate workshops concerning lead in and outside of the home as it relates to growing food and preventing childhood lead poisoning. Beginning with the BMP, the remainder of this chapter provides detail as to how each of these groups and individuals partnered with OKT and aided OKT in its capacity building.

The BMP trainer led a popular education workshop for OKT’s members on how to incorporate the principles of the commons and build capacity for OKT’s two major undertakings, the Re-Media West project and the Food Diversity Project. The BMP works with social service agencies—in this case, a grassroots group—to systemically integrate social change, and to get organizations to tap into the power of the neighborhood to gather and organize their own strategies to fight inequality. The BMP has a ‘applied organizing’ method that guides community groups in solving problems.

OKT referred to their group of participants as a ‘learning circle.’ BMP considers learning circles to be a kind of popular education in action beginning with the raising of consciousness among participants to identify and understand the root causes of issues related to inequality, followed by a process of action steps. The work of a learning circle is progressive, because it aims to transform systems to eliminate inequality and injustices. One set of learning circles was intended for OKT’s Re-Media West project. The Food Diversity Project used the Building Movement Project process. However, there were never any formal learning circle meetings.
environmental disparities in the Southeast. The goal was to identify 8-10 members from
the community who experience environmental injustice on a daily basis and each
eventually would begin their own learning circle. With the exception of one person, all
of the Re-Media West participants were OKT members and participated in the FDP. In
fact, the principles and work of both these projects overlapped in several ways.

Details of the dialogue at one of the first learning circles is presented in totality,
because it provides a clear sense of OKT’s worldview and justice orientation. The BMP
coordinator did most of the speaking in order to educate participants on how to critically
engage with and conceptualize issues in their community. Periodically, participants were
directed to brainstorm. At the training, everyone was told they were building capacity by
relating to their peers, and to pair up for choosing a couple of social issues evident in
Grand Rapids. They began by identifying who labels issues facing the communities as
problems, and then rank them in regards to which ones have the highest impact on how
people perceive these as problems. Everyone came up with a list that included: (1)
corporate media; (2) experts: professional class, academia, government, and non-profit
groups; (3) public displays against injustice such as those seen and defined by activists;
(4) and those who experience these injustices.

The trainer from BMP pointed out that those who are experiencing injustice do
not always get to tell their own story. Instead, those who label their issues create a meta-
narrative. In this case, a meta-narrative is an overarching theme of the beliefs, customs
and values of a nation, and why people make the assumptions that they do, which are
attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs. For example, in Grand Rapids, there is the religious
ideology surrounding charity that divides people into the deserving and undeserving poor.
The job of the learning circle was to construct a different narrative in this community and develop a language that is at odds with a meta-narrative that is deeply ingrained in people’s consciousness and lives.

Problems associated with poverty are framed by these meta-narratives. The BMP’s trainer chose infant mortality, urban revitalization, and youth violence as issues with metanarratives that the participants had to deconstruct. They were asked to pay attention to the fact that the general population tends to assume that these problems are of behavioral origin, and sometimes structural. They were to list issues that the general public attributes to these social problems and the common assumptions about the origins of these issues. One example was the meta-narrative that there is a need for urban revitalization in the inner city due to decaying neighborhoods (behavioral); gang violence (behavioral); people incapable of maintaining their homes due to apathy (behavioral); poor municipal services that lead to decreased property values (structural); inability to sustain successful businesses (behavioral); disincentive for investment because people claim theft or property damage (structural and behavioral); absent landlords because there are high rates of renters who are transient (behavioral); high foreclosures (behavioral and structural); pollution (behavioral and structural); and traffic concerns-congestion (structural).

It was explained by the BMP trainer that the above assumptions are racist: people making these assumptions view what they consider to be behavioral issues as being a part of an overall cultural pattern belonging to African Americans living in urban cores and possessing innate cultural traits. Examples of these stereotypical traits are noisiness and a preference for movement about the streets. The assumption is that these are cultural traits
originating out of Africa, the Caribbean, or the Southern United States. Urban
revitalization is the lifting of what has been homogenized as one culture to make a “cool”
city and replace the “bad” culture. This “bad” culture is maintained in contained spaces
with the onset of gentrification. “Experts” reinforce these assumptions when they design
cultural and behavioral rather than environmental and structural solutions to issues.
Deconstructing meta-narratives allows community organizers to define their own values
and identify those of the larger populous in which they need to challenge with informed
tactics. In addition, as indicated by the BMP trainer, when professionals are doing
community work, they are often told that they have to be neutral (objective), but she said,
there is no such thing. She continued on to say that professionals define issues differently
than the community. Therefore:

We need to take into consideration that people’s assumptions are not our
own, and they are scripted. This is why we should look at history and how
these scripts are created historically in relation to whatever type of
community work. How can we get the voice of others into the
conversation? This does not have to be academia. The role in learning
about social change work has been hijacked by academia, which shuts out
the voice of community members. Instead, we use a variety of methods to
reach and teach people.

The Citizenship Schools of the 1950s were a model of peer-to-peer work without
the involvement of experts and to meet the needs of African American rural and southern
citizens.43 The BMP trainer described the brief history of these schools. The first school
began behind a grocery store. The volunteers of these underground schools taught adults
how to read in order to pass the voter registrar’s test and achieve economic justice by
learning how to start a bank account, pay bills, and other similar tasks. At the schools,

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43 The Citizenship Schools became known to be a part what is now named the Highlander Research and
Education Center (http://highlandercenter.org/media/timeline/).
attendees discussed justice, democracy, citizenship, the right to vote, community leadership, organizing, and power. The Citizenship Schools were an example of popular education and capacity building, especially how learning is an important tool for social change.

Popular education is inherent to the BMP’s capacity building training. Thus, OKT’s learning circle participants were taught how to do a root analysis to establish the causes of injustices. Using the specific example of lead poisoning, the BMP’s trainer highlighted the common techniques of training, education, and skill building by those who target individual behaviors. Since lead poisoning is a major concern of OKT, this discussion was informative because it distinguished the difference in approaching this issue through capacity building versus targeting individual behavior. Participants in the workshop were asked who should be at the table talking about these issues and participants listed parents with their kids, the health department, housing commission, lead experts, and property owners. Directing everyone’s attention to the fact that they listed experts, the trainer asked if it really was important to have experts at the table. Experts write solutions into grants based on changing behaviors and if these fail, the victims are blamed. With regards to lead poisoning, examples of targeting individual behaviors include washing children’s hands, vacuuming, and dusting.

The use of learning circles to bring community members together, gives them their own voice about their concerns and an opportunity to understand and change them. First, patterns in experiences should be established to determine how people’s lives are impacted by lead exposure. Learning circles can listen to the patterns of those experiencing the problem. For example, Child Protective Services threatens families or
removes their children and do not advocate on the behalf of families. Moreover, landlord/tenant court does not work in the favor of tenants. Experts do not always see patterns or causes when they are focused on behavioral change.

The two main entities dealing with lead exposure in Grand Rapids are (1) Healthy Homes Coalition, which uses Americorps to clean lead out of homes; and (2) the city’s Department of Housing Rehabilitation and Grants Administration, which disperses HUD (United States Department of Housing and Urban Development) funding to organizations for lead remediation in and around the home. The health department has programs to reduce lead exposure, though they are also focused on behavior.

OKT realized public money from the city does not go towards fixing this problem in an effective way and “brochures are not enough,” says OKT’s lead organizer. Contractors tend to nail a window shut or replace it with a bad window that emits PBCs. OKT argues that it would be cheaper for people to learn how to restore their own windows. People are threatened to learn about lead because to talk about this involves spending money. However, restoration can be done at low costs and public money can be spent in this way. HUD has no warranties or guarantees around their work. In Grand Rapids, according to one OKT member, HUD received 6 million dollars to address lead, but it mostly went towards targeting individual behavior with education and skill building rather than systemic issues.

Lead abatement initiatives have lacked success, because there has been a breakdown in housing codes and ordinances about structural and environmental problems. Before the time of the FDP, OKT realized the breakdown in housing codes and ordinances when helping residents understand the contracts they were signing for
organizations dealing with lead. At this time, one of OKT’s members received HUD money to do lead abatement in and outside of her home. The city then listed her home as lead free. When the city retested it at a later date, the lead levels were still too high. The landlord in this instance was held responsible for how much it would cost to reduce the levels even though she followed the HUD lead abatement requirements. In many cases, on the other hand, landlords are not held accountable.

After this incident with a member, OKT’s frustration increased because citizens had no say in public money. Believing this money needs to be leveraged to reframe lead contamination as an environmental justice issue, OKT decided to bring together women to reeducate themselves around lead in order to learn it is not a behavioral problem and to look at the root causes of it. They wanted to hold non-profit groups accountable to focusing on the causes rather than consequences. A couple of individuals from non-profit groups disparagingly reported that SE residents were not cooperative; instead, residents complained about neglect and that “no one cares.” OKT members recognized that the community internalized the idea that they had behavioral issues and did not trust outside organizations that they regarded as patronizing. A learning circle, however, was a safe place for people to talk, know the issue, identify the issue, conduct an analysis of the issue with solutions as well as strategies, and then rejoin as a group to reflect on the process. Learning circles, as taught by the BMP, were not a linear process.

The final segment of the BMP workshop was devoted to defining power. It was explained that power is based upon assumptions, values, and beliefs. It is mostly experienced negatively and distributed on an unequal basis in society. Participants in the workshop generated a list of those who are in power in Grand Rapids and controlling the
commons (land, water use, energy, and etc.) or other community resources such as leadership, public policy, and consensus. Participants listed generalized and specific examples: the Catholic Diocese of Grand Rapids, the Christian Reformed Church, the Mayor, large manufacturing companies (e.g., Steel Case), large-scale developers (e.g., the Van Andel and Devos families), non-profit community development corporations (e.g., ICCF and Dwelling Place), community foundations, Chamber of Commerce, colleges and universities, Rockford Construction, the media, Kent County Commissioners, and lawyers.

According to the BMP trainer, justice begins when a community finds their own power to use against systems, and discovers who is using power and if it is benefiting or being used against them. Groups can successfully challenge power through policy, understanding the power of the collective, and mobilizing people to push an agenda. Elected leaders should be held accountable to their policy decisions. Furthermore, challenging power requires adhering to a set of principles. When groups are not in accordance over their principles or do not spend time defining them then they splinter and fracture. There must be collective action as opposed to someone assuming leadership and control over decisions and tasks. Finally, collective power does not require money to address resources.

OKT takes the position that structural change begins with a critical understanding of structural inequality, in which causes are rooted in history, politics, the economy, and ideology. Systems are often hidden. Systems need to be named and families need to be heard, regarding their problems. Learning circles are a step towards the need for mass
systemic change. People are educated by giving them a voice. Media and art are good methods for initiating systemic change.

**Re-Media West**

The goal of Re-Media West was to shift the worldview of cultural and behavioral solutions to health disparities to one of systemic solutions, and to use media as a powerful tool for formulating counter meta-narratives. Re-Media West was one of OKT’s capacity building projects. Besides the trainer from the Building Movement Project (BMP) who provided the popular education framework and instruction, OKT did this project in collaboration with Grand Rapids Institute for Information Democracy (GRIID) and Eastern Michigan Environmental Action Council (EMEAC). EMEAC is based out of Detroit and advised Re-Media West on the process.

Beyond the scope of this dissertation is a description of a closely related environmental justice project, named the North End Environmental Coalition (NEEC). It took place in Detroit and involved the founding member of OKT, OKT’s BMP trainer, and EAMEAC. This was a capacity building project for training the residents living under the jurisdiction of the North End Community Development Corporation to remediate their own homes from environmental contaminants and begin a business repairing others’ homes, eventually building a localized economy of small businesses. The NEEC project was organized in reaction to environmental racism in Detroit and examined air, water, and land quality issues as well as unequal access to the commons (water, land use, public education, and etc.). The NEEC project strongly influenced the
development of Re-Media West and the FDP. All three of these projects occurred during the same year and the founder of OKT was part of the development for all three projects.

The months of March through May of 2010 were devoted to joining together as a learning circle for the Re-Media West project. The FDP also transpired that spring and the bulk of its activities began in May. Besides one individual, both projects had the same members and explored the links between environmental justice and local food. The learning circles for the Re-Media project were held in the space of two of OKT’s collaborative partners: the Bloom Collective, whose lending library was located there, and GRIID, located in the room behind the library. GRIID’s on-line publication was an initiative of the Film Farm that rented the space.

Three of the ReMedia learning circle meetings were devoted to educating participants about environmental injustice. Everyone met as a group to read articles that they were assigned prior to the meeting. The articles chosen by the organizers focused on environmental hazards in which low-income and minority individuals are exposed. The complexity of these articles pushed beyond the obvious fact that race and income are indicators of environmental injustice. These articles explained and illustrated how people who lack social power are targeted for hazardous wastes sites, because they do not have the ability to contest the powerful corporate owners.

The Re-Media West project consisted of the learning circle participants each preparing three to five minute long environmental justice documentaries for the 2010 United States Social Forum (USSF) that was held in Detroit, Michigan. Everyone created one based either on environmental justice or food insecurity issues in Grand Rapids. OKT collaborated with GRIID and EMEAC for the media component of Re-
Media West. In Detroit, EMEAC trained a group of activists aligned with different causes to produce films for the USSF. They referred to themselves as Re-Media East. Two GRIID members trained Re-Media West on film methods. One of these GRIID members owned the Film Farm where he digitalized film and supplied the space and film equipment for GRIID. Two other members of GRIID were Re-Media West participants: a journalist who was also a member of OKT and the Bloom Collective, and another OKT member who filmed for GRIID.

At the first media training class, participants were told that all media is constructed. A sample clip was used to demonstrate how media is constructed through the elements of images, sounds, and transitions between scenes. Media is constructed with these elements as with the elements of language that are constructed with the building blocks of grammar. The work of Noam Chomsky was explained and used in the learning circle to explore how language is an innate ability of humans. Similar to understanding language through its deconstruction, as when media is deconstructed, one will understand the elements of lighting, sound and framing shots, the building blocks. The purpose of this training was to illustrate that media is constructed through manipulating the elements of film and this can be done to convey a message of social justice.

The general public has a lifetime of exposure to the medium of film. High exposure to film prepares viewers in having the ability to deconstruct it and use its elements in a different and less deceptive way than mainstream media. Thus, the group was guided in a deconstruction exercise of an Audi commercial. The purpose of the activity was to learn parody. The commercial was one of green capitalism and in direct
contrast to activists’ common belief that radical change is necessary to achieve a livable environment. The commercial was about green consciousness as illustrated by the green ‘police state’ of officers in green outfits. The police enforced environmental change by denigrating the energy wasting behaviors of individuals drinking bottled water, sitting in a hot tub that is too hot, and other actions. Audi’s commercial was a parody of the growing consciousness around the environment. The advertisement promoted the common ideology that solutions to environmental issues are not systematic and then moved on to honor the individual behavior of buying a fuel-efficient vehicle.

One of the educational components of the Re-Media West project was learning how to select elected officials and the importance of becoming familiar with the policies that they support in order to influence their vote. OKT recognized the facilitator for the Re-Media West training on policy as very informed about policy analysis, tracking voting records, profiling politicians near election time, and knew him as a member of the Green Party. When he met with the learning circle, he was serving as a contact for the Green Party but was not active, though he recently did a few voting record descriptions for their website. As a profile resource, he directed everyone to the National League of the Council of Environmental Voters that maintains voting records. Everyone’s assignment was to identify their local Commissioner at the city and county level as well as at the state representative for their district. During this learning circle, he profiled each elected official everyone identified as being one of their functionaries for where they resided. Participants at the learning circle were reminded by OKT to monitor the local paper for when candidates are appearing publicly to debate each other.
At this particular learning circle, the group discussed Governor Granholm’s 2009 draft for the *Michigan Environmental Justice Plan*. The document was open for public comments until the final draft was submitted later that summer. The group discussed critical insights into the fact that this was not accessible to the communities targeted by OKT. The draft is not widely circulated for public knowledge nor do people know the appropriate channels for submitting their community input. Stronger neighborhood associations could distribute this information. Instead, people are unable to connect through these local entities to have a say in policies impacting their lives. Moreover, the language was not accessible due to being technical and full of legal jargon pertaining to policies.

Someone on the board of the draft reported to OKT that the writing committee was fortunate to produce the current draft given the influential voices of industry representatives sitting on the board, such as members from Dow Chemical Company, Michigan Manufacturers Association, DTE Energy, and Consumers Energy. These are examples of groups whose profit margin would not benefit from environmental justice policies, especially if they have or intend to build on sites located in low-income and minority communities. Conversely, the draft begins with a disclaimer that its intention is not to be a potential obstacle to economic growth:

Minority and low-income communities, no less than other communities, want vibrant businesses that add to their economic base without harming their individual health and wellbeing. Accordingly, the environmental justice plan is not designed or intended to run contrary to larger economic development efforts of the state. Instead, the focus of this plan, and the hope of the working group, is that this plan provides the best avenue for balancing productive business growth with the high quality of life that is important to all humans.
OKT takes the position that a high quality of life should be the priority and not viewed as a hindrance that needs to accommodate business growth. The Re-Media project was an opportunity for members to confront these matters. Through self-determination and reclaiming the commons, both this project and the FDP were aimed at improving health disparities connected to food insecurity and the legacy issues of industry, including toxins in the soil.

**The Food Diversity Project**

The Food Diversity Project (FDP) was OKT’s major capacity building project during this research and its origin dates back to when OKT partook in the FPA 2007 Building Food Power project funded with USDA support. OKT conducted a survey for the BFP as well as reviewed data collected and maintained by a locally based collaboration workgroup called the Environmental Indicator Group, which was a part of the Children’s Environmental Health Initiative that addressed childhood lead poisoning. OKT reported that these data verified both food apartheid and environmental racism in the SE neighborhoods of Garfield Park, Eastown, SECA, and Baxter. OKT began the FDP based on these data in addition to community residents’ concerns. Attendees of OKT’s community meetings were most interested in expanding the number of urban yard food gardens, followed by reducing lead exposure. Observing neighborhood assets, it was evident that many residents knew how to grow food. The FDP began to establish an urban garden group patterned on a cooperative model of growing and sharing food as well as growing knowledge. Since this was a community-based project, OKT asked the
neighborhood association and churches to recruit gardeners. As of March 2010, OKT recruited an estimated 60 people expressing interest in gardening.

OKT values nutritious food as a right for all human beings and something that should not be contingent on agricultural businesses, the efforts of outside organizations, or on a person’s income or place of residence. One way to increase access to fresh and affordable food is providing residents with the means to own their food production. Residents do not need to depend on an organization for their daily subsistence when they have the knowledge and ability to secure their own food. For this reason, OKT views food security as the equivalent of self-determinative and sustainable food production. Through self-determination, low-income residents should eventually be able to maintain their neighborhood food system by deciding how to introduce nutritious food into their communities and partaking in creating their own local food movement in which affordability will not exclude them from participation.

According to research conducted on community gardens, increased participation in gardens leads to a greater accumulation of social capital (Meares 1999; Glover 2004). Community assets that build social relationships are a critical factor for building the capacity of communities that are divided by political, social, and economic factors that are not addressed by the state’s intervention on behalf of low income people (Hyland 2005). The FDP supports and encourages community members to build capacity around their own social capital (resources/assets), which entails designing a neighborhood-based support system convened around the growing and sharing of food. OKT provides the following resources (social capital): knowledge, gardening coaches (OKT assigned experienced gardeners to assist novice gardeners), seeds, starter plants, compost, a food
buying club, other organizations, and community organizing skills. OKT has the future goals of (1) maintaining a seed bank and (2) sponsoring a community kitchen where people can access foods that include fruits, vegetables and herbs, as well as do mass cooking and storage of food.

During the 2010 winter and spring, planning meetings for the FDP were held at the Bloom Collective and at the SECA building. Members debated over how to incorporate the principles of justice and preserving the commons into capacity building activities. Meeting topics covered the history of food in Grand Rapids, who is doing what and how around local food, who is growing food, the costs of growing a garden, how to share food, how and what activities to plan, how others define local and sustainability from the perspective of economic development, encouraging bio-diversity and diversity in plants grown, and how to compliment the Neighborhood Farmers Market (NFM).

One meeting illustrated OKT’s worldview on sustainability as discussed during popular education activities. One OKT member pointed out that biodiversity prevents disease from wiping out an entire plant species. Maintaining biodiversity requires a localized food system as discussed in chapter 2. Exporting and transporting food over long distances is a practice of corporate agriculture, which monopolizes seeds, causing the erasure of biodiversity. For this reason, she and another OKT member both agreed that people should eat in season. For example, oranges cannot be grown in Michigan during the winter and so they are shipped across the country, which is harmful to the environment. Similar critical conversations occurred at the FDP’s activities, particularly
the seed saving workshop that addressed biodiversity and cooking workshops that highlighted the importance of using local food.

As evident in the dialogue between participants, the FDP encourages neighborhood residents to affect systemic change in a collective and self-determined manner. Through popular education, participants are taught how to be agents in shaping social change. In turn, they build their own capacity through resident-led activities that combat power. Through these activities, people relate how growing their own food and local food challenges the power impacting their livelihoods, supplements income, and has health benefits. First, the raising of consciousness must occur for people to learn the historical, economical, and political context for their poverty and lack of food security. Thus, the FDP takes an interactive educational approach for connecting these issues to sustainable living as well as the deeply interconnected issues of environmental racism and degradation.

As mentioned in the introduction, OKT began to facilitate neighborhood based capacity building and educational activities in 2008 that included the first food garden tour, outdoor grilling with fresh produce, and hosting a public health speaker during a food sampling event. All events began or were held at the NFM. Activities in 2009 included a canning and seed saving event; cooking demonstrations with local produce; food garden tours; and introducing new gardeners to experienced gardeners (gardening coaches) in order for them to begin growing and sharing food for building a self-contained community, to improve their health status, and to build capacity for developing a local food system. In 2010, these same activities occurred in addition to a herbal food garden tour for health and culinary purposes; urban foraging for edible fruit, nuts, and
weeds that grow in public spaces within the city; encouraging existing and new gardeners to grow and share food collectively but also diversify their gardens by planting foods they were unfamiliar with; a bike food garden tour; lead workshops that also taught about composting and organic growing practices, as well as other environmental toxins; and gardens were used as demonstration gardens for testing lead.

OKT joined a food-buying club in 2010. Country Life Foods is the farm and wholesale provider who supplies the food. Country Life Foods is a part of the 7th Day Adventists, who are vegetarian and conscious about healthy food. The church sponsors cooking events and is located in Pullman, Michigan. Country Life is a place that supplies to co-ops, has organically grown food, sells in bulk, and there is minimal waste because the food comes in tubs or paper bags that can be recycled. The food-buying club serves as an opportunity for OKT’s participants to learn about cooking healthy foods like grains. This is where the K-house gets their food. The K-House began adding OKT participants’ food requests to their order.

The K-House is one group out of many that supports OKT’s activities. OKT addresses structural inequality in collaboration with other groups and individuals who volunteer their time and share a similar perspective on what food security should look like in relationship to the environment, economy, and the principle of justice. During this research, several individuals provided their expertise, services, and/or time to OKT. A farmer from Detroit delivered 2-3 yards of compost for free when he drove to visit a farm located near Grand Rapids. He assisted OKT gardeners when he was in the area. A writer and editor for a monthly journal publication attended meetings during the spring of 2010, because she wanted to publicize OKT’s events and learn about the organization.
An herbal specialist led an herbal tour, because herbs grow along sidewalks and can be used for culinary or medicinal purposes. The herbal specialist also organized the 4th Street Garden Oasis in which she would collaborate with OKT on events. A SE church offered its kitchen facility for OKT to use in the future as a community kitchen, a place for people to bring their excess food to share and cook and for those who do not have kitchens or have dysfunctional kitchens. OKT accredited one member from the Bloom Collective and GRIID as an inspirational influence to the FDP. He held classes to educate OKT and community members on structural inequality. The K-House, where he lives, has kept a garden for 25 years. At the house, he hosted seed-saving and canning events for OKT, which he did on an annual basis as well as assisted gardeners in the SECA neighborhood.44

Capacity building activities also address the challenges associated with growing in areas that present environmental challenges, such as water scarcity, legacy issues resulting from industrial land use, and poor air quality. The Southeast is an area of heavy environmental pollution and has several abandoned industrial sites. Growing food is dependent on having access to contaminate free land, air, and water. Air quality was touched upon in workshops. For example, there are particular plants that filter the air and OKT was exploring whether or not this would be beneficial to those vulnerable to asthma. Recycling water for plants in order to conserve water and money was another topic of discussion. For the most part, these workshops informed residents about lead contamination.

44 The K-House is located in the middle of where ICCF bought up the surrounding property, one block south of the Southgate Community Garden.
OKT’s biochemist partner facilitated a number of workshops in order to instruct residents about (1) the locations where lead contamination tends to be concentrated in soil surrounding homes; (2) childhood lead poisoning; (3) soil testing for lead; and (4) avoiding lead exposure inside the home and from food plants. Residents were informed that lead is likely to be detected in the soil located near standing structures (e.g., houses, garages, and driveways) even after the structures have been removed. The lead in the soil originates from the time when it was an approved additive in paint or gasoline and resulted from exhaust fumes, oil or gas spills in the yard, and flaking paint chips.

According to the Healthy Homes Coalition (2010), 90 percent of lead poisoning cases are the result of exposure to lead based paint and dust that originates from homes built before 1978, the year which lead was banned from paint. 85 percent of Grand Rapids housing stock was built before 1978. The biochemist reported that land use studies demonstrate that there were once apple orchards located in the SE area. The orchards were heavily sprayed with pesticides, containing arsenic and lead.

Concerned with high rates of lead poisoning among children, OKT explicitly connects the activity of gardening to lead contamination in the soil. Children tend to play in gardens and the soil, where they ingest it and are exposed to lead. Lead is tracked into the homes via shoes and small children tend to play on the carpet and insert their hands into their mouths. OKT first began working with SE communities due to such environmental hazards in and around the homes. OKT hosted a series of three workshops in 2010 for educating about lead contamination and linking it to growing food. In the past and in 2010, the facilitator of the workshops also accompanied attendees on the food garden tours to educate about lead. Lead contamination is endemic to Michigan, which,
according to the facilitator, has nearly two times the amount of lead than other states because of heavy industry.

In June of 2010, SECA provided the space for two of the lead workshop events. Difficulties in organizing and issues of exclusivity were evident in these very informative events. A few of OKT’s regular participants and members complained about meetings or events typically running past time, feeling that this was disrespectful to their time. The first lead workshop was supposed to end by 9:00 p.m. and went on until 9:45 p.m., which caused people to become restless. Attendees were already restless, because the first two hours consisted of a formal lecture followed by everyone having the hands on experience of using a lead testing kit. Generally, events were more interactive. The material was exclusive in the sense that it was very technical. For example, instruction included specialized knowledge of biochemistry in regards to changing the chemical composition of the soil and pH levels, as well as how to improve its nutritional quality of nitrogen, phosphorous, and potassium. In laymen terms, coffee was a straightforward example of how to increase depleted levels of pH in the soil.

Exclusivity was evident in the fact that there are those who cannot afford to test their soil for lead. This first workshop acknowledged the issue of cost and the fact that protecting against contaminants is not affordable for everyone. Lead testing at a lab usually costs $10 and to check nutrients at MSU extension costs $10. Home soil testing kits for lead cost $15, and the biochemist suggested testing for lead from three areas of soil.

The workshop contained a lot of valuable information concerning a sustainable approach to growing food and how to avoid exposure to toxic contaminants in the soil.

45 In 2011, OKT began providing free soil sampling to families.
Suggestions included weeding by hand rather than using pesticides. Pesticides are used for killing insects by attacking their nervous system and the neurological composition of our brains is similar to insects and not so much like plants. Therefore, comparatively, pesticides are horrendous in their effect on children. There are more natural ways to adjust the ecosystem of a garden. One can use barriers around the plant, pull weeds, and grow or introduce something natural to divert pests from a plant. For example, wasps kill caterpillars, and beer or salt kills slugs.

The second workshop of the series began with a plant give-away that preceded teaching about lead poisoning. The SECA’s community garden was selected as the soil test site for lead. Growers were warned that they should know the source of their soil. Different companies, at some point in time, filtered metal out of soil and disposed of it by giving it to city lots, where residents grow their gardens. The workshop’s facilitator provided everyone with a diagram of where they should plant a garden, which should be two feet from the house, garage, and a previously standing structure in order to avoid lead based paint chips. Gardens should also be two feet from a driveway, garage, or street where there may have been gas or oil in the soil, as well as away from where trees have been removed since lead and arsenic were in the pesticides used when the Southeast was once apple orchards. For these reasons, one should understand the legacy of their home’s land.

The third workshop of the series was held at the Barefoot Victory Garden (BFVG), located in Eastown off Wealthy Street. The BFVG was planted with twelve 5x3 foot raised beds in an abandoned lot where the owner allowed the founder and her friends to have a community garden. The gardeners were in their late teens and early twenties,
mostly white females and college students. The garden was open to the surrounding neighborhood’s majority African American residents, though they did not participate in this garden.

Similar to the workshops at SECA, most of the attendees to this event were Caucasian females of all ages who participated in the local food movement. Event attendance of African American participants, in general, usually ranged from 4-5 women who were usually members of OKT. OKT speculated on the reason for this and reached no definitive conclusion. One reason may be that African American residents living in the Southeast are more likely to not have the means or extra time to attend events. OKT recognizes the fact that the local food movement tends to be an elitist movement among more affluent and usually white participants whose curiosity is peaked by urban-based events.

At the BFVG event, both lead and arsenic contamination in the soil and compost were discussed. Attendees learned that raised beds are a method for avoiding lead. However, the topsoil still needs to be tested. Growers should test their compost since there are hardly any state or federal laws regulating the testing of compost. For instance, companies make compost out of leaves that fall along streets and highways, which have been exposed to lead. The facilitator described how companies often use cow and chicken excrement, the second most common source for compost. The FDA allows a certain level of arsenic in chicken feed, because when it is time to process the chickens, their feathers easily fall out which is convenient and less expensive for manufacturers. The FDA claims the arsenic is not in the body but in the feces. The facilitator once did a
OKT wants to ensure policy that supports growing food and reducing health disparities. Integral to the environment is the growing of food, especially in relationship to the soil and water. Hence, the FDP aims to create food secure neighborhoods in which people grow and share food in a sustainable manner, and is in reaction to the local, national, and international policies responsible for environmental degradation and poverty. Along with raising awareness and creating autonomous solutions, OKT engages in policy-changing activities at the city and state levels with the goal of transforming a system responsible for food insecurity and environmental health disparities. In 2010, OKT worked on the Michigan Good Food Summit, a food security initiative to change Michigan legislation, which included the objective of improving urban food security. Two of OKT members were board members of the Food Policy Advocates (FDP); again, this group has the mission of supporting food policies that promote a secure and sustainable local food system. OKT also assisted with the chicken ordinance. Mostly, OKT emphasized a radical approach to food security and mobilized people to take self-determinative action independent of any government policy.

OKT’s policy activities involved endorsing a member of OKT as a candidate for District 17 County Commissioner. The hope was that, if elected, she would give voice to policies related to food insecurity and environmental injustice. OKT assisted her campaign by canvassing neighborhoods with fliers to homes. Besides one other woman in a different district, she was the first African American woman in 15 years to run for County Commissioner in the state of Michigan. In 2010, she became the first African
American woman to become County Commissioner in the state of Michigan.

Overall, the FDP is a community owned and managed bottom up approach for building food security and sustainability. Capacity building consists of connecting people to existing resources in the community, networking to avoid replicating available resources, and community led organizing. Community organizing entails groups joining in collective action to raise consciousness and help neighborhood residents recognize themselves as political subjects (Goode 2001). The FDP has a deeply ingrained food justice perspective for challenging power through encouraging people to live and grow their food in a long-term and sustainable manner. Structural change needs to occur for eradicating the conditions in which people live in poverty and are food insecure.

Everyone has the right to food through autonomy and self-determination as well as the assurance that one can have food sovereignty independent of grocers, charity, federal funding, non-profit, and community development groups. OKT believes their strategy of environmental stewardship is best achieved via collective action and communal support. Following the concept of social justice developed in other social movements, the FDP is creating a network of backyard and community gardeners who are reclaiming the commons.

OKT supported several families in growing food during the time of this research and outreached, through activities, to approximately 200 people. However, the FDP was still in its infancy in regards to residents building an infrastructure of a self-sufficient network of food growers, in which they grow and share food as well as resources without an overseeing organization. The next chapter highlights the stories of the actual SE growers, participating in or supporting the FDP.
GOT SOUL? COME GET SOME!
WITH THE AUTHOR OF VEGAN SOUL KITCHEN

A LIVE COOKING DEMONSTRATION
AND ALL-YOU-CAN-EAT VEGAN SOUL FOOD BUFFET

BRYANT TERRY

SATURDAY, JANUARY 23, 11:00 AM

BRICK ROAD PIZZA, 1017 WEALTHY STREET, GRAND RAPIDS.

SPONSORED BY CALVIN COLLEGE OFFICE OF MULTICULTURAL AFFAIRS, DEPARTMENTS OF PHILOSOPHY, BIOLOGY, AND ART & ART HISTORY, STUDENT LIFE, AND STUDENTS FOR COMPASSIONATE LIVING, & BRICK ROAD PIZZA

DEMO IS FREE AND OPEN TO THE PUBLIC; OPTIONAL BUFFET IS $10.00.
Our Kitchen Table 3rd Annual FOOD GARDEN TOURS

View food gardens, discuss food issues and connect with gardeners. We'll conclude with delicious samples of grilled garden foods at our last stop. Except for the first bike tour, each 1 to 2 mile walking tour stops at 8 to 10 diverse gardens. Wear comfortable clothing and walking shoes; bring a water bottle (we'll fill it!) The Food Garden Tours are one part of Our Kitchen Table’s Food Diversity Project.

Gather at 5:30 p.m. Tour 6 - 7:30. Communal garden treat meal 7:30 - 8:30.

- Thurs. 8/19 Millenium Park, Wild Edible Food and Medicinal Plant Bike Tour. Meet at bike trail head @ Butterworth SW. Info: chrysta_faye@riseup.net
- Tues. 8/24 SECA Walking Tour, 1409 Madison SE
- Thurs. 8/26 ECA Walking Tour, Barefoot Victory Garden, 1350 Wealthy SE
- Sat. 8/28 4th St. Garden Oasis, 4th St. at Stocking and Pettibone NW

While you’re on the tour, you’ll have opportunity to:

- Join OKT’s Food Buying Club! No cost for membership!
- Join OKT’s Free Seed Saving Bank
- Bring used household batteries and CFL light bulbs for recycling.
- Exchange your mercury thermometer for a free digital thermometer
- Sign up and receive free recycle bins
- [If you have a food garden in one of the above neighborhoods, contact Lisa. We’d love to show it off on the tour!]

For information, contact Lisa O-K lisask1@aol.com or 616-719-9779
Tours will be canceled and rescheduled if weather is inclement (rain or heat alert).

OKT’s Announcement of Upcoming Food Garden Tours Figure 4
Food Diversity Project

OKToberfest!

Fall Food Garden Bicycle Tour

Free!

3-5 p.m.

Sat.

Oct. 9

Tour begins at
Oakdale Neighbors,
1260 Kalamazoo SE

- Visit 5 to 7 food gardens that include nut and fruit trees and/or fruit vines.
- Discover which leaves are good for composting.
- Learn what to do with fallen nuts.

After the tour participate in a Harvest Cooking Demo and more!

Bring used household batteries/CFL light bulbs (twistees) to properly dispose. Sign up for single stream recycling. Join a free food buying club. Participate in Fall/Winter garden activities.

For more information, contact Lisa O-K
lisask1@aol.com or 616-719-9779.

OKT’s Fall Bicycle Food Garden Tour

Figure 5
CANNING HOW-TO

1– 5 P.M. SUNDAY
SEPT. 19 SALSA
OCT. 24 APPLESAUCE

Join experienced canners from The Bloom Collective, GR Free School and Our Kitchen Table for four hours of hands-on fun with fruit and vegetables.

Bring jars, lids, knife, cutting board and produce for canning.

Salsa: washed tomatoes, onions, garlic, peppers and your favorite salsa ingredients.

Applesauce: washed apples.

At Steepletown Center 671 Davis NW
Corner of 5th & Davis

Info: bloomcollective@gmail.com
www.thebloomcollective.org

OKT’s Canning Workshop
Collectives provide valuable empowerment and support for those working for change. Decisions are made by consensus to consider and accommodate each collective member.

We believe that running The Bloom as a collective models the space on the type of world that we would like to see. Where the existing world is characterized by hierarchy, competition and commerce, we strive to make decisions by consensus, emphasize cooperation and promote mutual aid.

While how we run The Bloom is not going to bring radical social change, we believe functioning as a collective helps us to build strong relationships of trust that overcome the distrust fostered by existing social structures.

The Bloom Collective seeks to support other groups and organizations working for change and justice through partnerships, promotions and events. Let’s talk about how we can be a resource for your group or organization.

Books, Videos & DVDs
The Bloom Collective has more than 2,000 titles covering topics from anarchism to Zapatistas.

- Anarchism
- Education
- Electoral Politics
- Environment
- Feminism
- Food
- Globalization
- History
- Labor
- Latin America
- Media
- Middle East
- Organizing
- Race
- Religious Right
- US Foreign Policy
- and more

Zines
Stop by and browse through our extensive Zine Library to read up on radical politics, do-it-yourself and punk rock.

Local Art, Buttons, Patches and Sale Books
Want to support The Bloom? Buy your local art, buttons and patches here. We also have a limited quantity of DVDs and used books for sale—mostly titles we have more than one copy of.
OKT’s Food Summit

Figure 8

OKT’s Food Summit

Who’s growing food in Grand Rapids?

What kinds of gardens are we growing—container, backyard or community gardens?

What foods are being eaten from area food gardens?

How can we share resources?

How can we share our food?

How can we collectively address the local food system?

For information and registration, contact Lisa O-K, lisask1@aol.com or 616-719-9779

OKT Food Diversity Project Series includes events related to planting and maintaining diverse food gardens, spotlighting new food gardens, piloting a community kitchen and more.
Join OKT in welcoming and supporting the urban gardeners of The Barefoot Victory Garden, a new neighborhood food garden in the Eastown community.

Free Workshop!
How to Start a Food Garden
Sat. April 17
9 a.m.—Noon

Learn how to pick a spot, get to know your soil and many more pointers for successful food gardening.

Tell us about your new or existing food garden in Eastown.

Hey let's celebrate growing food because it matters to our local food system and our neighbors! Let's support healthy eating and growing food!

For more information, contact Lisa O-K lisaskl@aol.com or 616-719-9779.
Educating Participants about Lead at the BFVG

Figure 10
Steps to growing

Healthy Urban Food Gardens

For new gardeners, container gardeners and any gardener’s looking for their "green thumb."

Clinton Boyd PhD., Sr. Scientist, Sustainable Research Group, shares how to:

- Pick a spot, get to know your soil and more tips for successful food gardening.
- Collect soil samples for testing—at a laboratory or with a DIY kit.
- Understand soil test results.
- And More!

During the workshops, you can also:
- Join OKT’s Food Buying Club! No cost for membership!
- Join OKT's Free Seed Saving Bank.
- Bring used household batteries and CFL light bulbs for recycling.
- Exchange mercury thermometers for free digital thermometers.
- Sign up and receive free recycle bins.

For information and registration, contact Lisa O-K lisaski@aol.com or 616-719-9779

OKT Food Diversity Project Series includes events related to planting and maintaining diverse food gardens, spotlighting new food gardens, hosting a food summit, piloting a community kitchen and more.
Steps to growing
Healthy Urban Food Gardens Part 2
For new gardeners, container gardeners and any gardener's looking for their "green thumb."

Continue the Conversation with Clinton Boyd PhD., Sr. Scientist, Sustainable Research Group, as he shares how to:
- Interpret test results.
- Create nutrient rich soil.
- Evaluate "cides," pesticides, herbicides and insecticides.
- Container, yard, or raised bed? Which food garden is best for you?
- Use natural integrated pest management.
- Select veggies, fruits and herbs.

During the workshops, you can also:
- Join OKT’s Food Buying Club! No cost for membership!
- Join OKT’s Free Seed Saving Bank.
- Bring used household batteries and CFL light bulbs for recycling.
- Exchange mercury thermometers for free digital thermometers.
- Sign up and receive free recycle bins.

For information and registration, contact Lisa O-K  
lisaski@aol.com or 616-719-9779

OKT Food Diversity Project Series includes events related to planting and maintaining diverse food gardens, spotlighting new food gardens, hosting a food summit, piloting a community kitchen and more.
Chapter 6

The Southeast Growers

“Why do I garden huh? No small question. Certainly one reason is because it's a form of therapy, it's very cathartic to get your hands in the soil, to see things grow from a seed to a plant, because of the beauty that occurs growing. So it's sort of almost a spiritual activity to participate in that process” (Kristen, Garfield Park gardener).

“I used to watch her (grandmother) from my window. It was her labor of love. I mean she would, she worked that garden even when she was in her late seventies and eighties. It gave her longevity so it was a passion of hers. My grandmother kind of inspired me to do gardening” (Devon, OKT member and gardener).

The previous chapters contrasted approaches to food security and demonstrated the power dynamics in the local food movement. This chapter aims to portray the actual experiences of SE gardeners. Throughout this chapter, I will include descriptions of the gardens that I visited and the gardeners’ stories. I visited and assisted in both backyard and community gardens. I highlight the food growing stories of the Barefoot Victory Garden (BFVG), OKT members, gardeners from the K-House and Southgate garden in the Southeast Community Neighborhood Association (SECA), and backyard growers throughout the Southeast, most of who partnered with OKT for events. Gardens across the Southeast vary in their appearance and are gardened by people with diverse backgrounds. What connects these stories is the fact that growers are constantly creating a sense of place, which entails infusing places with social importance and meaning.

Through growing food, they attempt to connect to nature, each other, the past and their memories of loved ones, or a greater Being.
Individuals’ stories were quite eclectic, especially since the demographics of the Southeast diversified with the onset of gentrification. By and large, attributes were mutual among community gardens within and outside of the Southeast; they had similar values and reasons for growing food and why they started their garden. Typical examples included:

- Not wanting to buy food if it was produced by migrant labor
- Growing particular foods for taste and cooking
- Being self-sufficient and having the ability to provide for oneself
- Saving money
- Using food to bring people together for meals
- Having a spiritual connection to the land
- Learning from the land by paying attention to one’s natural environment
- Gaining a sense of accomplishment
- Having a cathartic experience
- Using the time to become inspired about some other aspect of life
- Experiencing the challenge of learning a new skill
- Educating children
- Seeking an alternative to a global food system and GE crops
- Having a physical activity
- Improving health and knowing what’s in one’s own food
- Wanting the opportunity to share food
- Enjoying the sense of giving to the community at large by participating in a community garden
Individuals never listed a singular benefit. Rather they always spoke of several motivating factors for why they gardened:

I grow food because to me it's an activity that reminds and teaches me about my interdependence with the non-human world. It’s a way to remind me I need other people, other living beings for me to be able to survive and thrive. And I think the more you garden the more you realize the diversity there is in a garden, the better it will do. And then understanding how gardens are really just part of larger ecosystems which means you kind of rely on birds, insect, worms, all kinds of other creatures that also make the garden more beneficial. I think if you stay put and work the soil in a particular place for a long time, your knowledge is better because you learn from that place over time (Matt, SECA gardener).

I lose track of everything else. I can spend eight hours and I'm oblivious to anything going on around me. It's quite nice. I don't think about radio, cable TV, bills, finances, anything else than what I'm doing, what's directly in front of me and that's peaceful. I think that's how people were designed to be. At peace and doing one task in front of you at a time instead of trying to race around from one red light to the next to get nowhere, to be able to hurry and stand in line for something. That's the other thing I like, I don't have to stand in line and wait. I'm hungry, I walk out in the yard and grab something and I eat it. I don't have the hassles of getting in the car, driving to the store...that store has good tomatoes, bad oranges...this store has good strawberries...whatever. It's at my house (Ms. Evelyn, Eastown gardener).

Food growers often described the sensation of how it felt to have their hands in the soil; the memories of loved ones; the joy spent working alongside others; or a spiritual feeling of peace when they interacted with their natural environment. Overall, people expressed a need to connect to the land or each other, living or dead. Ms. Avery, for instance, is a SECA gardener and showcased her garden for an OKT food garden tour. After she suffered a massive heart attack, she began growing food to keep her high blood pressure down. In her garden, she can grow healthy food and get exercise. Overall, it provides her with an activity to counter her loneliness that she attributes to the death of
her husband. Kathy, a SECA gardener, planted a burning bush shrub in memory of her daughter that died from epilepsy earlier that spring.

Ms. Evelyn, an Eastown food grower, gardens in order to feel close to both her deceased mother and living family. She converted her backyard into a living memorial to her deceased mother who planted the original garden. She refers to this place as her Memory Garden. Visitors enter into her backyard through a tall fence that is overgrown with ivy and connects to the two-story house at the end of a short driveway. The backyard is about a half an acre, surrounded with a six-foot tall, white, wooden fence. There are two large old growth trees and the entire yard is almost entirely devoted to growing food, besides a shed in the back and a cobblestone patio area with a large stainless steel grill and an eight person glass top patio table with chairs. There is a cobblestone pathway to the left of the patio that leads into and exits a trellised atrium covered in ivy and in the shape of an arch with seven-foot high entryways. It is in honor of her mother, whose picture hangs above the front entryway. Along the side fences, each garden bed belongs to each of Ms. Evelyn’s children that still live at home. Her children have their own picture plaques hanging from three-foot decorative metal poles. Each of these four children, with the exception of her ten-year-old boy, maintains their section of the yard with the foods that they choose to grow. Her oldest daughter lives across the street and keeps a garden at her house.

Cocoa shells that emit a potent chocolate smell are spread throughout Ms. Evelyn’s yard in different sections devoted to flowers and edible plants. She has decorative knickknacks placed around the yard that include birdbaths and ceramic animals. Whenever I have entered her backyard with others, everyone always stops in
awe. One would not think that they are still in the city upon entering the Memory Garden. It is similar to a tropical haven in that it is always humid from her constant watering and plant life grows everywhere, which attracts diverse species of birds, butterflies, and wildlife.

On one occasion, I went along with an OKT member to visit Ms. Evelyn in preparation for OKT’s Eastown food garden tour. Ms. Evelyn’s fourteen-year-old daughter eagerly volunteered to show us her garden bed. She showed us her new kiwi tree and pointed out she had separated the male and female plant from each other across one of the stone pathways. She showed us her kale, cucumbers, strawberries, and potato plants. She directed our attention towards her sister’s pear tree. She walked us towards the back to show us a small pond built into the bottom of a plastic rain barrel containing a lily and a goldfish.

Prior to this visit, Ms. Evelyn invited me over for their annual family-planting day held, two months before, on Memorial Day weekend. On this occasion, the morning started with donuts, cereal, fruit, and orange juice. Ms. Evelyn’s nephew and his family from Cincinnati were there for the occasion. We were all given tasks after breakfast. My task was to assist one of her teenage daughters with planting marigolds, which repel insects. Gardening is a key activity in bringing together the members of her family.

Gardeners like Ms. Evelyn keep a connection to the past, cultural practices, and agricultural heritage when they cultivate their land as well as grow and cook their own food. Often, gardeners fondly recall memories of relatives and their childhood (Klindienst 2006). Pete, an Eastown gardener, described how he felt close to his deceased grandfather whenever he works in his garden, “It’s like my grandpa is standing
right here with his rake looking over me and I’m back in my childhood and the garden, the land, and I feel safe.”

Pete and his partner, Danny, have been a part of the OKT’s Eastown food garden tour since 2008. They live down the street from Ms. Evelyn in a historically restored two-story house painted yellow, pink, and green. The garden beds are located in front of the porch, alongside the house, and in the corner of their lot that faces two cross streets. They aesthetically blend food into the flower arrangement. In these beds, they have fennel, Echinacea, a prickly pear cactus, rhubarb, and Swiss Chard that they use as decorative plants to mix into their other food plants.

As Pete gave a tour of his yard during our interview, he explained that the deceased spirits are here in the garden and connected to the plants and his memories. He said the plants speak to people. For instance, Pete and Danny were given the rhubarb from a neighbor who introduced them to each other. She has since passed. Pete reported that she is with them in the garden since her rhubarb is planted there. Another neighbor gave them bloom poppy flowers. Pete said, “I hope I don’t creep you out but look here.” He bent over to move a plant to the side and pointed to moss, which originated from his grandmother’s grave. He brought it home to feel closer to her. The plants carry the essence of their loved ones, who speak to the living through memories. This is why they planned on bringing these plants with them when they move back to Pete’s family’s land in Sparta. The aforementioned friends and family, both living and deceased, connected Pete to food and to nature. He led me around front again to show me the rhubarb. He told me that they use the rhubarb for a pie recipe that his grandma used to make for him. I pointed out that not only does it connect him to his grandma through the recipe but the
memory of his neighbor bringing him and Danny together. He wistfully smiled and nodded his head in agreement.

Besides those who commune with the deceased in their gardens, people long to feel an attachment to a place and the living. Refugees, immigrants, and displaced peoples often find social cohesion in gardens where they can gather to revitalize a shared cultural history and identity. Here, a sense of place is conjured as a means to communicate memories through a collective history. Woelfe-Erskine (2002) interviewed contemporary refugee and migrant gardeners from all over the United States. They expressed that a longing for place as well as a desire to retain familial knowledge are the motivating factors behind their gardens. In addition, they want to connect with a similar community of people and generations within their families. One interview was of Rosetta. She lives with her family in Philadelphia. Her story is similar to those in my fieldwork, who are also of African American ancestry, migrated from the southern United States, and are ages fifty and above. Rosetta belongs to the last generation to grow up in the rural South before WWII. Her family was a part of the last wave of African American migrations, which brought agricultural knowledge to northern cities. Families began planting gardens in the city to recreate the green spaces with which they grew up. Nonetheless, wage jobs caused the city born children to lose the experience of growing food. As expressed by participants in my study, Rosetta hopes to pass on her knowledge of gardening to the youth, thereby strengthening her community and bringing generations together in a communal activity.

Hooks (2009) describes early twentieth century African American organic farmers in Kentucky who engaged in sustainable practices in which they valued self-
reliance, wasted nothing, and found solace in their view that nature was more powerful
than the white oppressors of their time. They lived in what she coins a ‘culture of place
and belonging.’ According to Hooks, the children of Kentucky farmers and those
generations who migrated to the North now look down on farming. Instead, they uphold
the capitalist values of individualism and materialism, which are the values of the
dominant culture that they struggle to fit into. On the contrary, during my fieldwork, I
observed that there are members of OKT and many SE residents, usually above the age of
30, who continue to share the same values as these elder generations from the South.

Bernice, for example, is a SE gardener and OKT member. She said that when her
parents moved from the South to Chicago, it was a big financial improvement for her
father who found a job with the railroad. Her father lived through the Great Depression.
She discussed the ways her family was impacted by poverty in the South, “If you didn’t
grow nothing, you didn’t eat, if you didn’t raise anything, you didn’t eat so they had to
live off the land because there were no jobs.” Influenced by her parents, she has
continued the tradition of growing food. Moreover, she grows her own food because she
is opposed to the industrial food system in which food travels far and harms the
environment, migrants are exploited, and people have health problems. She joined OKT
three years prior to this research when she was in graduate school doing research on lead
poisoning. She graduated with her masters in social work and public administration in
May of 2010. She works for a nearby prison, where she coordinates a garden.

During the event planned by Calvin College, described in chapter 5, Bryant
Terry—food activist and author—told his life story. His insights further support my
observation that individuals from the South continue to value their relationship with the
land. He grew up in Memphis, Tennessee with urban gardens. His grandparents brought this knowledge from the farms that they lived on in Mississippi. When his grandparents moved to Memphis, they brought with them the desire to grow and live an agrarian life. They did not call their garden organic but they insisted on not using fertilizer or pesticides. He came from a progressive family with men who cooked. His grandpa would harvest greens from their gardens and raised chickens to cook in the kitchen. They always had fresh food from the months of April through November and enough for the winter that was preserved and canned. His grandma would sing hymns while cooking and Bryant said that this added spirituality to her cooking. Even though he grew up in an organic garden, he switched to a diet of fast food during his teenage and college years, only to return to a diet similar to that of his youth. He now wants to revitalize the growing habits of past generations and does this by cooking vegan soul food.

Bryant explained that, in the 1960s, soul food was a way for African Americans to reclaim the agrarian South. Soul food became popular in the North but was reduced to comfort food or viewed as an exotic cuisine of pig feet or other animal bi-products not familiar to many American palates. People now associate it with slave food scraps. In actuality, soul food is complex. Soul food has traveled from Africa and the Caribbean to here. His soul food consists of the original African American, Native American, and European influences. He takes traditional dishes and transforms them into vegan recipes, saving the essence and flavor from them. He tested his recipes on his family and friends in the South, who he had in mind while making these recipes. He was proud to report that 90 percent of them approved of his cooking, which is inspired by an agrarian
tradition and agricultural identity that values local food and respects a human interdependence with the land.

Seremetakis (1994) draws attention to the importance of place in individuals’ lives and how mass produced food erases memory and identity as species and varieties of food are lost forever. She recalls the peach of her childhood, now an extinct variety. It was attached to the memories of her grandmother in Greece, which were triggered by eating this particular peach. Large agribusinesses displaced the local farmers who grew this type of peach. Due to this loss, she experienced what Basso (1996) describes as being deprived of attachment to place, when we realize that we are left feeling lost and in unfamiliar surroundings: We realize a “profound connection” to places that are “a part of us as we are of them.”

Several of the SE gardeners in Grand Rapids save seeds to grow and cook particular foods for maintaining continuity with past places and their ancestors. Seeds come from different places including Jamaica, Guatemala, Southern Italy, Mexico, Greece, the southern United States, and from deceased and living relatives or friends who reside in Michigan. This awakens embodied memories for people of a similar background, because individuals invest meaning into these places and attach values to their food procurement practices. The act of preparing and salivating over food arouses a collective memory of past places, prompts the sharing of stories from the past, and causes one to relate to others (Seremetakis 1994).

In Grand Rapids, there were many food growers displaced from their land of origin or who saved seeds to preserve a link to a lost land. Evidence of this, in general, became apparent in our nation’s early twentieth century history. Gardens belonged to
displaced populations, such as immigrants and Native Americans, attempting to maintain their identities while resisting forced cultural assimilation into hegemonic American values and culture. The keeping of a garden was a tactic towards protecting cultural heritage in face of everything—ethnocide and genocide—that threatened the survival of these groups (Klindienst 2006). Klindienst (2006) collected the stories of several of these gardeners. She interviewed two Native American gardeners, one of Mohawk and the other of Mohegan ancestry. Both men spoke of boarding schools, where eating traditional food or speaking their language was not allowed. At home, gardens allowed them to eat traditional food, have a place to freely speak their language, and maintain their identity through seeds preserved for prolonging an ancestral relationship to the Earth. The use of heirloom seeds for providing continuity with ancestors and landscape is a common thread throughout the stories Klindienst (2006) collected. Gardeners who fled from Mussolini’s Italy, for example, claimed that the food of their gardens, grown from the seeds of their homelands, metaphysically linked them to their native landscape—the soil, water, and trees.

OKT’s Food Diversity Project educates participants about why preserving biodiversity is not just personally valuable but interconnected with self-sufficient and sustainable neighborhoods. OKT encourages biodiversity in drawing special attention to gardeners who grow food native to their homeland. For example, Yolanda is an Eastown gardener of Lebanese descent. When she showcased her garden for an OKT food garden tour, she told visitors about her mom bringing a grape leaf tree from Lebanon in 1968. Yolanda now cultivates the tree. She made stuffed grape leaves for the visitors in order
to demonstrate the timeless connection between her grape leaf tree, mom’s recipe, Lebanon, and her heritage.

The Southgate garden has gardeners of various backgrounds who recognize the link between their heritage and growing food. Deidre who coordinates the garden recalled an interaction with an eight-year old girl from Guatemala and the girl’s foster mother who was from Cuba. The foster mom walked her foster daughter over to the Southgate garden one afternoon and admired the okra growing, commenting that she had not eaten fresh okra in awhile and loved to pair it with rice. Deidre informed them that if they put one hour of work into the garden, they could eat whatever they wanted. The foster mother said, “Okay, okay, we’ll be back to work.” She brought her foster daughter at seven o’clock the next morning and told Deidre that the girl really wanted to garden there, because she used to work in the fields in Guatemala and the garden gave her good memories.

The majority of the Southgate gardeners were not only displaced from their homeland or families of origin, they were displaced members of society who had or recently had no residence to live. Over the summer of 2010, nine people gardened on a regular basis. Every Thursday morning, everyone met at 7:30 a.m. to work in the garden. The gardeners either walked there or Deidre drove them. They came from transitional living situations and often struggled with mental illness, drug addiction, and/or alcoholism. Attendance usually depended on people’s personal lives.

I volunteered to work in the garden every Thursday. While we did our assigned activities, people would tell me about their lives. Patty was Kiowa and from Kansas. She grew up watching her mom garden greens and squash. When she was young, she
moved with her mom and other family members to Michigan. Her family still owned land in Kansas to which she wanted to return. However, she struggled with homelessness and drug addiction. The Southgate garden was a place where she could remember her land and mother as a youth. Bert was from the veterans’ home. He advocated for migrant workers’ rights. He himself was Hispanic. He lived with his father in Houston, Texas until the age of thirteen when his father died. Bert went to live with his grandfather in Grant, Michigan for four years and worked on his 80-acre farm. He said that this was the best four years of his life. Bert shared his growing knowledge with me and enjoyed working in this garden that reminded him of being on his grandfather’s farm.

The K-House was located in the Southeast, almost across the street from the Southgate garden, where the Inner City Christian Federation (ICCF) was spearheading its large development project. ICCF owned the surrounding properties and bulldozed over the Southgate garden in 2011. In an interview, one of the K-House housemates shared how—through the growing of food—they were trying to maintain community and celebrate diverse heritages in the face of this gentrification. I include a lengthy excerpt from this interview with one of the housemates, Matt, since it speaks directly to the heart of what it means to live in one of these historically working class and minority based neighborhoods and to build relationships around the growing of food, as well as maintaining a bond to the past through the preservation and sharing of seeds:

Yeah, like this neighborhood has evolved in the 25 years we've been here from predominantly African American to now about half African American and half Latino, because of the immigration patterns and housing stock…rental, so there’s been a turnover of people.

But there are several families and people in the area that we have developed relationships with over the years primarily because of
gardening. So there's an older African American woman who grew up in Mississippi and moved here to get a job in the auto industry, so lots of people moved from the south in the '50s. She lives a couple blocks from here and because she's a senior citizen, has asked us to do a few things like trim trees for her. So I'd been going over to her house to help her. I realized she has a garden. We began sitting and having conversations about those kinds of things. I'd share plants with her and she with me, things we didn't have.

Then Mr. Williams around the corner was doing the same things, another elderly African American guy. Doesn't matter what day of the week, he wears bib overalls. I love him. The first strawberry plants we had were from him. He had a pretty good patch of strawberries and got to be too much; they bent over to the ground because there was so much. He said, ‘If you want some, pick ‘em and take a bunch.’ So for strawberries I got some, and we still have some from his batch from 20 yrs. ago. He and his wife have both since passed.

Then there's a Mexican family around the corner from them. One year there was a vacant lot next to their house, and the neighborhood association planted a sort of small community garden for the residents. The one Mexican family, Alfredo and his family participated and enjoyed it; then they were able to convince the city to sell them the lot, so now it's part of theirs, and they have a big garden there. He has a peach tree. We used to have them here, and we gave him the seedling.

So it's been that kind of relational thing. So when I walk the dog or I'm out and about if I see him we stop and talk and invariably almost always about the garden because that was our topic of initiation of the relationship with the garden. ‘How’s the tomatoes doing?’ and that sort of thing. It's really fun.

Then there's a Cuban family just a block up that also does a big garden; they grew in Cuba and want to continue to grow food here. We do the same thing. They particularly love some of the heirloom tomatoes we have, so we've swapped over the years. And they in turn have given us a couple of recipes, which has been real fun.

Then one of the other neighbors, another Mexican family, the woman makes tamales to sell as a way to support herself. The first time we met her, I was in the garden and she walked by and wanted to know if she could buy some peppers because we have so many types of peppers and she wanted hot peppers for her tamales. I said, ‘Well, maybe something different, how about I give you peppers and when you make tamales, you give us some?’ So even better. So it's an annual sort of thing. It's a great...
So just in our immediate neighborhood there's been years of that kind of interaction with people. You know and there's always people who don't live here, whether from the shelters or more transient populations, but see the garden and are like ‘Wow, that's cool, can I get some?’ So yeah, I'm all in favor of sharing things with people if we have it.

And even over the years with kids it's been a great opportunity to, just the reality of urban kids these days is that they have no idea where their food comes from actually and to see plants. Sometimes we ask them to help plant seeds, or we give them space in the corner to plant stuff, and say, ‘You come back and have to water and do this kind of stuff,’ you know.

I remember there were two sisters, Nini and Nessie, one day we were making dill pickles and they had no idea how they were made or where they even came from. They just know those dill pickles you buy in the jar. So I showed them cucumber plants and told them, ‘Next time we harvest them, you come over and we'll make pickles.’ We made pickles. It's a fifteen-day period from when you pack them until you start eating them. So they were funny, they'd come over almost every day, ‘Is it ready yet?’ and I'd say ‘No, 15 days...gotta wait 15 days.’

But when the fifteen days were up, they were over and we busted out a jar and ate the whole jar in fifteen minutes because they were so good, nice and crunchy, good flavor. So you know, they moved, don't know where they moved or how they're doing, but you like to think that those little experiences have some kind of lasting impact on people...makes them think about those simple things about pickles or our relationship with food.

The K-House has housemates and seeds from other countries, mainly Latin American countries where they visited, lived, or from where they took in refugees. House members speak of the importance of these seeds and retaining ties to nature and one’s heritage. Both Cristina and Jose, ten years ago, moved from towns near Mexico City. They met in Michigan and became a couple. Like others at the K-House, they grow food because they are critical of GE crops and big agri-business. To Jose, it is unnatural not to grow your own food:
The way we live today, we are so disconnected from having a garden. The first time I heard of organic food was here, was when I moved to Grand Rapids. In Mexico, I never heard that because we don’t have the difference of organic, not organic, everything is organic. I don’t want to call it organic, I want to call it natural.

One evening in June, I helped Matt, Cristina, and Jose in the garden. Jose welcomed me at the gate. Ramona, the dog, ran up to the gate to greet me with her ball. She followed me to the garden, knowing not to enter. When I walked into the backyard, I felt as if I was walking into an oasis of trees and tall plants. A large half an acre garden stood to my right on the edge of the property and an eighth an acre garden was straight ahead towards the back. Attached to the side of the house and to my left was a greenhouse. There was hardly any grass growing in the yard. There were a couple of overgrown walkways made out of brick, a fire area, and a back deck with firewood on the north side of it. A cherry tree hung over the half of an acre garden where we worked. The perimeter of the backside of the yard had strawberries and black berries growing over the chain link fence.

About one third of the larger garden was already planted when I arrived and we finished the rest. It took about an hour and ten minutes. Everyone worked in pairs or together. Someone would hoe a hole and the other person would follow, place a plant and cover it’s base in soil, and then water it. We dispersed the water with watering cans and buckets. Matt showed me their planting routine and instructed me on how far apart to plant the tomatillos and the zucchini. For my first task, I weeded and dug up mounds around two posts for cucumbers. Cristina and Jose teased Matt on how he wanted the mounds done. They complained to each other that he wanted it done differently every
year. Cristina explained that the soil was dry and there was not enough water but this is how Matt liked it. She showed me how to make the mounds for the squash.

Cristina shared her extensive gardening knowledge with me. She advised me that you have to plan where to plant everything ahead of time. For example, the peppers need to be separated to prevent cross-pollination. She assured me that after about two years, I would learn how to identify the plants. She instructed me to plant the larger plants first since the smaller ones are less likely to make it. Together, Cristina and I planted jalapenos, a couple of types of hot peppers, squash, cucumber, tomatillos, different varieties of tomatoes, and eggplant. The plants were all from heirloom seeds. Besides the squash and cucumber, the plants were started in the green house.

It was a beautiful evening and the temperature cooled down into the mid seventies. All of the growth in the yard provided for a natural habitat in which crickets and fireflies began to come out. It was a quintessential Michigan evening in June. When Cristina, Jose and I later rode bikes to get ice cream, shortly after nine o’clock, Cristina described the sky as an upside down fire and the clouds as the smoke. This upside down fire was shaded with light and dark hues of blue.

The Barefoot Victory Garden (BFVG), located in Eastown, was unique from the K-house and other Southeast gardens in that white teenagers and college students organized the garden rather than people who traditionally lived in the neighborhood. However, the BFVG was similar to the K-house garden in that an organization or non-profit group, as typically seen in other gardens, did not start it. The youth were replacing the traditional residents in Eastown, where the BFVG was located. Most of the gardeners lived in walking distance. They started the BFVG as a “do-gooder” effort for addressing
the economic needs of the surrounding neighborhood and for themselves. Most of all, they wanted to grow food and create a meeting space for activities among a group of like-minded peers. Trisha was the main organizer and her friend owned the property, the vacant site of a home that burned down. The garden was intended to include the neighborhood residents. I observed Trisha inviting them to join whenever she encountered someone while she gardened. However, a few of the neighbors reported that they did not realize the garden was open to the public and no one ever participated besides a four-year-old neighborhood boy. Until the gardening infrastructure was established and everything planted, Thursdays from 4:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m. were the regularly scheduled work times. The gardeners were all friends that Trisha brought together rather than nearby residents. Besides six women who regularly showed up, there were nine other participants who attended on an infrequent basis. Everyone helped build the twelve 5x3 foot raised bed gardens that were planted around a gathering area in the middle. There was a handcrafted wooden sign painted with the garden’s name and displaying a bulletin board of activities. It stood at the top of the four wooden steps that led up to the property from the sidewalk.

The following fieldwork experience was a typical day of work at the BFVG. Myself, Christy, Lily, Trisha and Katie worked in the garden one Thursday. When I arrived, Trisha and Lily were tearing apart a fence to make a trellis for the peas. Lily, at some point, planted the peas and someone planted radishes on a non-scheduled meeting day. The three of us sat down while Trisha made a chart of where to plant what and everyone decided what activities to do for the day. Trisha spread out all of the seed packets in front of her in the grass. She and Lily decided that the trellises were not yet
necessary since the peas just sprouted. As we sat, I listened to their excitement and “Oohs and ahs.” Trisha clapped her hands when she realized the artichokes sprouted and accredited their success to a woman who was teaching her intercropping. On this day, she wanted to plant pole and bush beans. The lettuce did not sprout so she was considering planting Swiss Chard lettuce and spinach. She decided that we would plant seeds on a later date. Instead, for the evening, we topped off four of the beds that needed soil. I attended all of these gardening meetings early in the season. A lot of work was done and decisions made between Trisha and her friends outside of meetings.

This same group of people and others in the “hipster” community would gather every Thursday evening at the garden for potlucks, playing music, and sewing circles. “Hipsters” can be characterized as a subculture of men and women in their 20’s and 30’s that value independent thinking, media and music, as well as counter-culture and progressive politics. This subculture often has distinct fashion preferences that include vintage and thrift store clothes, tight fitting jeans, old-school sneakers, thick-rimmed glasses, and androgynous hairstyles marked by messy shag cuts. The sub-culture of hipsters is an expression of anti-consumerism, evident in Grand Rapids and in the trend of growing rather than purchasing one’s own food.

Hipsters in Grand Rapids involve those who also identify as part of the “punk” movement that is aligned with anarchist values. In general, hipsters take a similar stance against consumerism and an industrial food system. Conversely, Clark (2008) argues how punks’ politics are a part of their identity. To be punk is to critique privilege and social hierarchy. “Punks” political views tend to be anarchist. Anarchism is a critique of sexism, racism, and corporate domination. Whether someone in Grand Rapids identifies
as having the same political ideology as an anarchist, punk or hipster, they most likely associate our mainstream food system with the takeover of nature by white males and corporate domination. Modern food production methods equate to the corporate capitalistic destruction of the rainforest, cash crops, and cancers caused by pesticides that pollute the land and water. According to Clark (2008), these youth act out these political critiques in their dietary practices as one of their most powerful and symbolic gestures.

Vegetarianism and veganism are two such types of dietary practices. For some, veganism and vegetarianism is a critique of animal cruelty and/or the production of meat. Others may practice it for this reason but also because of their beliefs about the environment and the destructive practices of industrial agriculture. As mentioned in chapter 5, Food Not Bombs upholds these values. Someone who identifies as a punk, anarchist, or a hipster are likely to prefer consuming raw foods since they are less processed, closer to the wild, organic, and disposed. Dumpster diving is an example of the disposed. Clark (2008) points out dumpster diving may include processed food but it is symbolic to reclaim this wasted food when there are one billion hungry people in the world. Also, dumpsters are kept under surveillance to prevent people such as the homeless from retrieving the contents. Thus, dumpster diving is also a critique of the idea of whiteness and the racist idea that white is pure and the homeless are filthy.

Punk’s identities are evident in their hygiene practices, another symbolic criticism of our social order (Clark 2008). The marketing of common hygiene products is directed towards what constitutes cleanliness. Punks and hipsters resist these products because the chemicals damage the environment and animals are harmed during production. Furthermore, these products are believed to represent ideas of whiteness and suburbia’s
fear of dark bodies (Clark 2008). The Bloom Collective educates about these ideas and once hosted a women’s workshop with a session on how to sew your own washable sanitary napkins to avoid toxic chemicals and prevent excess waste and damage to the environment.

Groups with an anarchist orientation typically organize community activities. Kristen of the BFVG started a short-lived guerilla gardening group, which was critical of the corporate production of food. The novice group did a few projects before becoming frustrated due to their efforts being vandalized. For example, they cut plastic milk jug containers in half for planters that they hung from telephone posts in the Baxter neighborhood. The planters were all removed by some unknown entity. Their project at Wealthy and Fuller streets, in which they planted a garden at the street corner one night, remained intact. The group was based on the premise of bringing nature into the city. The name of the group was Urban Sprouting and Kristen wrote a description about their vision titled *Urban Sprouting: Bringing Nature Back to the City*, posted on June 7\(^\text{th}\) 2010, for their website:

The goal of Urban Sprouting is to get the citizens of Grand Rapids to reclaim the fallow land on the sides of our roads and next to the city’s abandoned buildings. We want people to ponder the place of nature in our world that has been confined by streets, houses, and skyscrapers, all in an effort to bring awareness to our disconnect from the soil and the sun. We want to bring color and joy into peoples lives in the simplest way possible: through the beauty and grace of nature.

The BFVG gardeners held a benefit concert in which 150 people from a community of their peers attended. They made $700 for covering garden expenses. A friend of Trisha’s loaned his large Wealthy Street office space for free. Another friend of hers was in a band that played for no cost. Word of mouth, Facebook, and flyers
attracted the attendees. Jane, a stay-at-mom who lived next door to me, asked me about this concert, after learning about it on Facebook.

Jane, like many residents in my neighborhood area, held progressive rather than conservative political ideology and values, was critical of the food system, and grew her own food. My neighbor, Steve, across the street, fit this categorization as well. My dog Thomas and his dog Moseley were playmates. I spent many days socializing with both Steve and Jane as we stood in our front yards. Both of these neighbors maintained raised bed gardens and compost piles in their backyards. They knew of my research and regularly reported what they learned of local food happenings in the greater Grand Rapids area. My neighbors were informative resources. One day, for example, I stated that I did not know where to buy grass fed cow beef besides the farmers market or going directly to a farmer. Steve informed me that Heffron Farms owned a store on the corner of Plainfield Avenue and I-96 where they sold meat, cheese, eggs, and dairy. Jane added that her family buys from the Heffron Farms store on 54th Street, where they accept Bridge Card, EBT.

My neighbors and I bartered favors and supported each other in meeting expenses and the demands of daily life. At times I would bring Mosely, Steve’s dog, to the dog park along with Thomas. In return, Steve helped me out at times. On one snowy day, he gave me a hand in breaking up the ice on my sidewalk in order to prevent the city from coming later that day and fining me $200 for violating city code. To Jane, I would bring produce leftover from the Neighborhood Farmers Market or from gardens I worked in. I fed her family’s cat when they traveled. In exchange, she gave me food from her garden and housesat my dog. The Grand Valley State University professor collaborating with
OKT lived right around the corner from us. She, Jane, and another woman took turns watching each other’s children.

I appreciated this sense of community. Jane said it made her life easier. The same was true for me. When my car broke down, Jane loaned me their van to drive and teach at Muskegon Community College, forty-five minutes outside of Grand Rapids. She told me that she was “always down with bartering,” and I could drive their van if I did something in exchange like pick up their meat from Heffron Farms. At this moment, it occurred to me that I lived next door to my neighbors for more than a year, the year prior to my research, before I ever really engaged with them besides brief sidewalk chats and watching the dogs play together. It was our communication and exchanges over food that brought us closer together.

I found more of a sense of community within my neighborhood and other informal groups than that of community gardens. This discovery is contrary to what is reported by the literature. Lawson (2005); Lyson (2004); Hyland (2005) and Putman (2005) indicate that community gardeners place value upon belonging to a community and emphasize the fact that this is one of the major benefits. The backyard gardeners of OKT created a sense of community when they came together for activities unlike the majority of participants belonging to community gardens in Grand Rapids. Community gardeners tended to only garden their own plots and not socialize outside of the garden. Food growers believed it was easier to find the time to tend a garden in one’s own yard and then find extra time to attend activities rather than find the time to commute to a garden on a daily basis. I learned of many novice community gardeners who abandoned their plots by mid summer due to frustration over their inexperience, the demands on
their time, discipline of traveling there, and disappointment in not getting to know a community of people. A representative of the Eastown Community Association told me that the association’s garden shared these problems, making it difficult to retain participation. However, her neighbors living in Eastown came together around growing food in their backyards and built a sense of community. They joined together for cooking and sharing food from their gardens, which opened up the opportunity for more extensive relationships of mutual obligations. For example, people watched over each other’s homes if someone were on vacation.

Devon was successful in finding a community of people. She lived right outside the city of Grand Rapids and joined OKT looking to connect with a community of people. During our interview, she told me:

Really, I started wondering what I could do to help the community and to engage with the community and other people. My background is that my grandmother had a large garden, and she lived next door. And she grew a variety of crops, very diverse, corn, greens, tomatoes, potatoes, onions. I wasn’t a gardener and when I became involved with OKT, we started talking about issues with food insecurity. I thought to myself, ‘Well, I have the space and it’s already been a garden in back of my house, and it’s not being used and I can try it.’ So I tried it and I liked the success and also just watching food grow, what to do for it, how to care for the plants, also how it connects me to other people in the community, it connects me to my neighbor, it connects me to my children that no longer live here. It was a good way to interact with community and neighbors.

Despite where gardeners come from, they express a longing for the metaphysical experience of attaching to something whether a loved one, place, the Earth, greater Being, or a community of people. Gardens serve as this transformative porthole. Beyond the pragmatics of gardening to counter food insecurity and an ineffective food system, growing food lends deeper meaning to individuals’ lives and defines the essence of the
human experience. Food production has historically been and continues to be a key component of how members of a society organize themselves and express different cultural norms and identities.
An Announcement for the BFVG’s Benefit Concert

Figure 13
SECA’s Community Garden

Figure 14
Chapter 7

Conclusion

In concluding this dissertation, I describe what is at stake in regards to the politics of urban agricultural initiatives and gentrifying cities, as well as whether or not anthropology can advance social movements as they relate to efforts such as OKT. These movements inform anthropology as a discipline about contemporary concerns. Anthropology, in turn, is positioned to support activism through collaborative methods and disclosing critical insights into its benefits and limitations within an urban setting.

I emphasize the fact that this study aims to uncover what Bradbury and Reason (2003) refer to as the practicable knowledge that people use in their everyday lives to increase overall well being. However, this knowledge must be realized and contextualized in the larger power structures that circumvent community members’ efforts in growing local food systems and maintaining economic livelihoods. Cultural anthropology can bring institutional accountability, facilitate transparency in political and social matters, and encourage big picture understandings for a deeper perspective of social reality (Borofsky 2000). Individuals create and alter, through everyday practices and speech, the social structures that they exist within and endow with meaning (Mintz 1985). Thus, as noted by Bourgouis (2003), ethnography greatly benefits from situating micro practices within the macro.

As in my research, by examining the cultural production of place making and social networking, through the discursive practices of speech communities, ethnography can begin to better understand the process and values of those involved in local food
initiatives. Discourse about the importance of “community,” “local,” “social justice,” and “sustainability” is what compels citizens to take action in regards to the urban poverty and food sustainability issues that are common to our current political and social landscape. Gardens especially provide an ideal venue to engage in sustainable practices where people can construct communities in a segmented world filled with social unrest and hunger. Hyland and Bennett (2005) report that community building is a common response to urban poverty issues. It is about new ideas of place (place making), which involves the process of relationship building (social networking) to anchor new and old institutions of people when faced with crisis. In Grand Rapids, employing the same discourse, both top down food security and development efforts also engage in the practices of place making and social networking. However, their incentive is to financially benefit from poverty rather than rally against it.

OKT members view their work as “a justice for all” approach rather than one of Protestantism that emphasizes targeting individual change and depends on capitalistic solutions to food insecurity and health disparities. OKT has generated a public forum for discussions of social justice in order to create a paradigm shift from traditional approaches to food security and, instead, raise awareness about structural inequality and the politics of exclusion.

Unlike OKT’s Food Diversity Project, top down approaches do not facilitate self-determinative methods of food production and tend to promote the agendas of organizers who, even unintentionally, are reinforcing the structural causes of food insecurity and environmental hazards. Top down approaches are not very effective in helping community residents understand environmental health hazards and how to avoid them as
they relate to growing their food and/or food insecurity. Initiatives done in the name of community fail to address issues of power and fail to provide critical insight into social change (Cleaver 2001).

In regards to social change, OKT also faces limitations. Global social movements that critique the food system influence this urban social movement, which is also seeking to identify, shape, and model itself after other food justice models in U.S. cities. OKT members educate citizens on the ineffectiveness of globalized agriculture in order to illustrate the importance of growing local food. This makes a minimal impact on agri-business. However, OKT has designed an autonomous food-growing model that provides residents with access to healthy, fresh and affordable food, educates residents on the relevance of local food as it relates to the structural inequality in their lives, and demonstrates ways in which to avoid childhood lead poisoning.

Realizing that structural change is beyond targeting individual behaviors, OKT addresses public policy as a method to institute change. As with global approaches to food sovereignty, U.S. citizens face difficulty with reclaiming the commons due to neoliberal policies that increasingly appropriate collective ownership over public space. How can a sovereign food movement be built when cities are rapidly gentrifying with the support of misappropriated public dollars and private funding intended to address food insecurity and environmental justice issues?

Through my collaboration with OKT, I hoped to find solutions to this question. At the onset of this study, I realized that neoliberal policies and gentrification negatively impact the lives of residents. I was able to identify how this inequality related to food security initiatives as I learned the ways in which OKT practiced an alternative approach.
OKT educated me about the ineffectiveness of top down approaches, ways to which give community a voice, and about social movements and issues of justice. Therefore, the focus of my study became one of justice and how to situate a social movement within studies of power.

OKT is a group of women living in these communities who recognize that their activism is situated within a broader context of the inequitable distribution of power between economic developers and Southeast residents. In consultation with OKT, I applied anthropological methods to reveal insights that directly benefited their objective of instituting food justice. I disclosed observations of power dynamics in which business stakeholders justify their gentrifying efforts by seeking neoliberal solutions to reducing food insecurity, which essentially deliver little in the way of real opportunities. Armed with this knowledge, OKT could further educate residents and better design strategies for dealing with inequality.

Through our collaboration, OKT demonstrated the importance of why solutions depend on citizen-led movements. OKT employs strategies for interacting with the public that better inform academia in how to aid groups in effecting systemic social change. OKT addresses public policy, has a community-owned food growing model, and utilizes popular education tactics for raising consciousness within neighborhoods by organizing workshops that engage in critical dialogue and producing media as a resource for creating deeper understandings of social reality. When community groups are the experts, anthropologists are positioned to use methodological tools for supporting activism.
Since the close of my research in November 2010, OKT hired me as a consultant in order to use anthropological methods to assess the politics of food security. With this information, OKT can more effectively position their social movement in this larger context. One of my assignments over the summer of 2012 was to provide an overview of local food and food security initiatives in Grand Rapids, Michigan, specifically those targeting OKT’s focus neighborhood associations of Baxter, Eastown, SECA and Garfield Park. I explored: (1) which policies are in place that impact the raising, growing or selling of local food; (2) funding dollars flowing into the community for local food related initiatives; (3) overall activities; and (4) the “local” food culture. My observations strengthen the argument that power dynamics in the local food movement are causing these neighborhoods to further gentrify. The following description is an update of new activities occurring in the area, as well as city policy activity since I finalized my research.

As in 2010, Grand Rapid’s social network of local government officials, wealthy stakeholders, and non-profit groups continues to secure public and private funding and use university data to “revitalize” neighborhoods via entrepreneurial local food security projects, resulting in the further gentrification of the SE neighborhoods. For instance, the Grand Rapids Community Foundation (GRCF) published a pamphlet titled _Big Change In Action Vibrant Neighborhoods_, no. 1 Spring 2012. The pamphlet indicates they used Grand Valley State University’s Community Research Institute (CRI) data on food deserts to justify granting $650,000 to the Downtown Market.\footnote{CRI is short for Community Research Institute, which is a part of the Johnson Center at Grand Valley State University, located in Grand Rapids. Their data is borrowed from a study put together by Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC), a national corporation based out of Chicago that owns MetroEdge, a collection of data.} The Downtown Market,
upon completion, is now officially designed to host chic bars, upscale restaurants, three
green houses, a commercial kitchen, an outdoor farmers market, and an indoor farmers
market.

Thus far, discussions with stakeholders have not revealed how this market will
address food insecurity. However, it is an investment tool for private investors who own
nearby businesses and is partially funded by public money that includes tax credits and
money granted from the city’s Downtown Development Authority (DDA). The New
York Times released an article on November 13th, 2012 that heralded the market and the
city of Grand Rapids for its entrepreneurial nature:

The Downtown Market, in effect, is the newest piece of civic equipment
built here since the mid-1990s to leverage the same urban economic trends
of the 21st century — higher education, hospitals and health care, housing,
entertainment, transit, and cleaner air and water — that are reviving most
large American cities.

Few small cities, and possibly none in the industrial Midwest, have been
nearly as successful. One reason is the distinctive partnerships formed
between this city’s redevelopment agencies and wealthy industrialists and
philanthropists. Hundreds of millions of private dollars have been raised
here to build a downtown that encourages entrepreneurs, develops career-
track jobs and attracts new residents.

The GRCF pamphlet also indicates the foundation loaned $400,000 to the recently
established Kent County Land Bank for acquiring and reselling 50 vacant homes. This is
another example of how a social network of investors uses the resources of money and
university data for economic gain, done in the name of food security. The buying up of
foreclosed homes ties into the other business, corridor improvement, and mixed use
housing projects, detailed in chapter 4, occurring in the Southeast. As mentioned, these
projects secure funding dollars based on the CRI data, showing how much money could
be captured if there was less “leakage” in dollars that are not spent in the community. For instance, Neighborhood Ventures uses these data and captures the food leakage dollars with foundation money (W.K. Kellogg Foundation) and public subsidies for their *Fit Project*. The first phase of this project was organized through Michigan State University in collaboration with Grand Valley State University nursing students. The most recent phase of the project is titled the *Healthy Corner Store Initiative* in which Neighborhood Ventures is currently updating corner/liquor stores in their appearance and supplying storage for fresh food.

Urban revitalization initiatives raise property values and attract new residents, a customer base for new businesses. Not for profit community development corporations that are operating in the region assist in the spearheading of these initiatives. As reported by Smith (2012) and described in chapter 4, the Inner City Christian Federation, one of these entities, built condos for the Wealthy-Jefferson Development Initiative. At the corner of Wealthy Street and Jefferson Streets is the almost completed Tapestry Square with one-bedroom apartments that rent for $895 dollars a month and the two bedrooms rent for $1095 dollars a month.\(^{47}\) 2010 research revealed that these efforts are one component of their plan to make a “mixed use” and “mixed income” community where people “Live, Shop, and Work.”\(^{48}\) A part of this concept is their hope to supply that corner with a grocery store for addressing food insecurity.

Finally, Dwelling Place is a not for profit community development corporation that builds “mixed used” neighborhoods. They provide affordable housing and supportive services for social service oriented needs and they claim to revitalize

\(^{47}\) These are considered high rent prices compared to other rentals in the area.

\(^{48}\) “Live, shop, and work” is the business corridor improvement slogan found on street banners in the Southeast.
neighborhoods with their different projects. For example, in 2012, they submitted a grant proposal along with Goodwill Industries and Grand Action to the United States Department of Health and Human Services for $800,000 in order to cover the cost of a commercial kitchen at the Downtown Market, staff for job training there, and support for the local food sector. As argued in chapter 4, the Downtown Market is not likely to reduce the rates of food insecurity or positively impact nearby residents.

Since the close of my research, there have only been a few new developments around food security initiatives in the Southeast. The NFM now accepts “Double-Up Food Bucks,” a program for Michigan’s farmers’ markets and residents receiving food assistance. This program has nearly 30 funders. Bridge Card holders are eligible. Each time, someone, with a Bridge Card, shops at a farmers market, they are matched up to $20 for the purchase of fresh fruits and vegetables. Other developments include a couple additional community gardens, and the YMCA now has a Veggie Mobile that sells fresh produce to the Baxter neighborhood once a week.

The Baxter Community Center (BCC) is responsible for the newest and largest development in the Southeast. Beginning in 2012, with major funding support, the BCC established a large food security initiative. They own a greenhouse and gardens. They coordinate activities very similar to those of OKT. In fact, individuals report that the BCC’s food security initiative has “stolen” OKT’s ideas and misinforms the public that the two groups closely collaborate with each other. Without further research, the implications of these accusations are unclear though it speaks to the competitive nature of local food efforts, which was discussed in chapter 3. The BCC offers children and adult educational classes in the greenhouse and gardens. Community members facilitate
classes and educate others on how to grow food. The community center provides canning sessions and gives away greenhouse plants to the community and their pantry. Events have included making strawberry freezer jam and a summer strawberry social neighborhood party, tomato festival and neighborhood party, an herb class for seniors, a pickling class, a vegan soul food activity, peach canning, and cooking classes.

A new project that bears significance in the future is an upcoming and unnamed community garden project. The main organizer anticipates starting several gardens to recruit neighbors living in and near the Baxter and Eastown neighborhoods to grow food on their respective blocks. The organizer intends to generate profit by selling the harvest to local food restaurants. Many of these are the Local First restaurants that are a part of the new wave of businesses encroaching upon the Southeast. The organizer is renting land from Guy Bazzani, a green design builder, of Bazzani Associates who has done several projects in Eastown. The organizer reports that Bazzani Associates is not involved in the project. Nonetheless, individuals from the community conjecture that Bazzani Associates stands to gain in some sort of undisclosed way that will benefit his development projects in the adjacent neighborhoods.

City policy that is supportive of local food growth continues to be minimal even though Green Grand Rapids, a set of policies, was formalized in 2012. As a result, farmers’ markets are now officially allowed in residential zones. Moreover, community gardens are allowed to be located in residential or mixed-use commercial zones by right, a right that was previously ambiguous in the code because the code did not speak specifically to gardens. As of now, no permits or approval process are required for gardens. Nonetheless, the city’s “best use” land use policy that grants priority to
developers, food-waste composting ban, nuisance code on plant length restriction, and lack of policy dealing with access to water continue to be obstacles to maintaining community gardens.

There have been two other policy issues related to food. In 2011, there was the food truck debate in which it was decided that the trucks could sell from private property. Food trucks consist of selling hot meals for sale that range from gourmet to hot dogs. This decision came after restaurant owners complained about the competition. Currently, an ordinance for municipal composting is in the process of being developed. For a fee, the city will treat compost like a curbside trash service.

Despite the many efforts described throughout this dissertation, to date, there are no data supporting a reduction in food insecurity. Then again, major funding dollars were granted as recent as 2010. Since the projects are ongoing, there may not be significant measurable outcomes given the brief period of time. There is substantial evidence of economic development, as the Downtown Market will be completed by the summer of 2013. Non-profit development groups continue to buy up foreclosed or vacant property (Dwelling Place and the Inner City Christian Federation) or obtain funding for business zone redevelopment (Neighborhood Ventures). As a result, the original and mostly African American storeowners and residents are being forced out of these neighborhoods. Predominantly white owned businesses are increasingly opening; many are restaurants offering local food.

Food security initiatives are often counterproductive to OKT’s objective of building commonly owned space and residents’ capacity to grow and share their own food. The difficulty in securing resources for the startup costs for any social service
oriented—or self-proclaimed—project is a motivating factor for why most groups solicit grants or the patronage of an organization that controls resources. Funding is obtained by private non-profit organizations competing for government grants or funding from foundations that stress market-based solutions to poverty. Recipients of this money are subject to becoming dependent on these grants. Lyon-Callo (2004) refers to this relationship of dependency as a type of neoliberal governance. As discussed throughout this dissertation, several grant based food security projects in Grand Rapids often reinforce the conditions of poverty. These projects provide Band-Aid solutions to food insecurity due to their reliance on market-based solutions that do not address structural inequality. Market-based solutions are evident in the economic development efforts that are further gentrifying the SE neighborhoods.

During my fieldwork, I observed OKT’s debate over whether or not to accept funding. Having examined OKT’s organizational difficulties and critique of structural inequality, I was able to understand OKT’s attraction to and hesitation about funding. OKT members realized that they would benefit from financial support yet wanted to avoid dependency on any organization, especially one that supports economic development solutions, does not address public policy or recognize the importance of a community-led project, and, in general, does not share all of the same food justice objectives. When OKT met with two representatives from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, one woman informed OKT that she did not care for the term “empowerment” and they were looking for a true “grassroots” approach. The representatives said they intended to fund OKT because of OKT’s ties and positioning within the community, and justice orientation towards food insecurity. The W.K. Kellogg Foundation’s stated vision of
racial equity (www.wkkf.org/) shares OKT’s goals of identifying assets and changing policy. My research highlights the implications of the foundation’s vision for other places facing food insecurity issues that inequitably impact low-income communities of color. As illustrated in my study, projects must account for how they are situated in their larger political-economic setting. Fetterman (2001) critiques the W.K. Kellogg Foundation for having a neoliberal approach to social issues, which is based on “empowering” communities. In actuality, as outlined in the introduction, the term empowerment represents an ideal and it does not necessarily transform “structures of subordination” through radical changes in law, property rights, and the institutions of society (Cleaver 2001). Instead, it favors predominant discourses of development that are infiltrated by hegemonic ideas of cost effectiveness and individualism. The W.K. Kellogg Foundation’s concept of empowerment essentially states that individuals at the local level should find cost effective solutions in order to solve their own problems through organizations and institutions that they devise through community based programming (Fetterman 2001). Thus, groups such as OKT that operate within a justice paradigm contradict the foundation’s overall approach to food security. OKT currently functions within a system that they organize against; the foundation is funding projects such as the Downtown Market that are targeting food insecurity in the Southeast and further adding to the gentrification of these neighborhoods.

The effectiveness of the foundation’s funding (or any funding) also depends on the internal organization of groups that target racial inequality. Can these groups be effective if there are power struggles over how resources are shared or decisions are
made? OKT faced the obstacle of members struggling to find time to devote to the project and to carry out community outreach. Does funding resolve these issues, or does it introduce conflict into a group? As seen with other food security projects in my study, competition intensified and community voices were precluded when groups depended on or were seeking funding. In general, do these possible conflicts of interest deter from the foundation’s goal of asset identification for building capacity and challenging policy?

As an attempt to positively contribute to the work of OKT, I provided solicited feedback on the internal dynamics of OKT so that they may more efficiently function as a group and not replicate other top-down initiatives in which community members are denied input and access to decision-making and resources. OKT supported my research undertakings and provided me with much valuable insight. Therefore, I tried to reciprocate this support by volunteering my time to assist in organizing events and canvassing neighborhoods for gardens and environmental hazards, as well as engaging in the co-production of knowledge through authoring written descriptions of the Food Diversity Project, presenting at conferences, and producing media through the medium of film. Most of all, my study is a documentation of the experiences and methods of a social justice movement that possesses substantive tenets and tactics in which other food sovereignty projects can model themselves and take part in exchanges of dialogue in how to grow in solidarity across the nation.

OKT does offer an alternative institutional framework for food sovereignty as opposed to the typical neoliberal approaches that target individual change. Through the building of public space for collective food production, residents are autonomously supplying their own local food in an environmentally sustainable and affordable way.
Food growers are also connecting to the intangible elements of life; gardening as an activity provides a sense of place as well as community. Food was once fully integral to humans’ social, economic, and political lives. Efforts such as OKT’s FDP seek to restore our relationship with food as a fundamental human right.

Food insecurity will continue in the Southeast as long as the voices of actual community members are excluded from efforts and neoliberal solutions are sought. Participants face land tenure issues, gentrification, unsupportive public policies, environmental health issues, and difficulty accessing resources. Social movement and grassroots groups are critical of this structural inequality and have approaches to building food security that are an alternative to those of outside and top-down organized agencies. Positive outcomes include the preservation of biodiversity, healthy diets, economic security, and the maintenance of cultural heritage and identity.

Ultimately, this study serves as a resource for urban cities in the United States, providing valuable suggestions for constructing effective and equitable approaches to sustaining a local food strategy that addresses the needs of those who are marginalized. My study demonstrates that documentation of how values are practiced and resources circulated within social networks reveals power relations. Examining power relations, as defined in this study, illustrates the ineffectiveness and harmful impacts inherent to neoliberal solutions that target issues related to poverty. Food needs to be grown in a just way that challenges a system that supports injustice and reinforces neoliberal solutions. Anthropological studies of food can raise awareness about and explore systemic solutions to inequality.
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