

Introduction

FOOD JUSTICE AND COMMUNITY CHANGE

We've always been involved in food, because food is a very basic necessity, and it's the stuff that revolutions are made of.

DAVID HILLIARD, *former Chief of Staff, Black Panther Party*

A few weeks into filming the second season of his ABC reality television show, *Jamie Oliver's Food Revolution*, celebrity chef Jamie Oliver had his permit to film in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) fully revoked. After having been granted initial permission to film culinary classes at West Adams Preparatory High School in Central Los Angeles, Oliver had been hoping to set up shop a few miles away, at South Los Angeles's Manual Arts High School. The LAUSD, however, had second thoughts. "If you look at the last series [Oliver] did in Huntington, West Virginia, it was full of conflict and drama, and we're not interested in that," Robert Alaniz, a media relations official with the LAUSD, was quoted as saying.

According to the LAUSD, conversations with West Virginia's Cabell County School District suggested that Oliver's work in Huntington—where he attempted to transform the local school food environment into a healthier one—may have been great for *his* career, but it had actually cost *them* dearly in money, bad press, and ongoing legal wrangling. Officials also questioned the motives behind the selection of Los Angeles as a site for a reality TV nutritional intervention. Childhood obesity rates in the city had actually begun to decline in recent years, they argued, and recent changes in the LAUSD's cafeteria menus went above and beyond the healthy meal standards required by the federal government. They wondered if Oliver, rather than

aiming to offer actionable solutions to help the LAUSD improve its operations, was simply looking for an excuse to spend a few months in sunny Southern California. Oliver, for his part, told a different tale, suggesting that his filming permit was terminated because he could not promise that his show would make the LAUSD look good. “They fail to see me as a positive,” he explained, “and they fail to see the TV as an incredible way to spread the word, to inspire people, to inform parents, to see other teachers doing pioneering things.”¹

When the first episodes of *Food Revolution*’s second season aired in April of 2011, the LAUSD was depicted on primetime television as an obstructionist villain. Oliver was accused of misrepresenting LAUSD’s food service operations in order to garner more attention for his reality show. “Jamie, come in and work with us,” Alaniz said at a press conference after the season premier, “but leave your cameras behind.” Without LAUSD’s cooperation, Oliver had done his best to piece together the installment of *Food Revolution*. He set up a community kitchen in the affluent neighborhood of Westwood and partnered with celebrity health advocate Jamie Lee Curtis to judge a youth cooking competition. Eventually, Oliver was able to film an interview with the new LAUSD superintendent, John Deasy, in which the district agreed to ban the sugar-laden chocolate and strawberry flavored milks that had long been sold at the city’s schools. Still, Oliver could not replicate the ratings success that he had achieved with season one of *Food Revolution* in West Virginia. After the first two episodes aired to little fanfare, the program was shelved during the high-profile May “sweeps” period, and the final four episodes were broadcast in the television graveyard of June.²

As a researcher and activist living in Los Angeles at the time—focusing my attention on issues related to food, health, and social justice in the city—I found it difficult to take sides in this made-for-TV debate. In one corner was the LAUSD, an enormous bureaucracy of food service, yet one that undoubtedly hoped to do well by the more than 650,000 children who were fed in its cafeterias daily. However, even as the institution showed a sincere commitment to improving the quality of its food offerings, it remained inextricably linked to networks of food production and distribution that too often made highly processed, unhealthy, environmentally unsustainable, and unappetizing meals the centerpiece of school lunches. And while recent changes to LAUSD menus may have played some role in reducing LA’s childhood obesity rates, these statistics could easily deceive, since elevated rates of diet-related disease were still heavily concentrated among children in low-income neighborhoods and communities of color across the district.³

In the other corner was Jamie Oliver, a celebrity chef whose interest in spotlighting the importance of childhood nutrition seemed to be born of good intentions as well. However, his repeated claim of launching a “food revolution” through the sheer force of his personality appeared self-aggrandizing, and his barnstorming approach proved more suitable for reality television than effective advocacy. Not to be overlooked, either, was the fact that Oliver made few attempts while in Los Angeles to build connections with residents and activists from historically marginalized neighborhoods—people who could speak to the broader challenges faced by low-income community members and who could offer remedies for local food system change based on lived experience. Indeed, the fact that his much-ballyhooed community kitchen opened in one of the wealthiest areas of the city belied his understanding of the local economic and nutritional landscapes.⁴

As the conflict between the LAUSD and Jamie Oliver grabbed headlines, the media conversation continued to focus on trying to decide which side seemed best equipped to teach children to “choose the right foods” to eat, on the one hand, and which side stood in the way of community health, on the other. What was missing from the debate, however, was any substantive analysis of the broader food system, its ongoing structural failures, and potential avenues for systemic change. Conspicuously absent from the conversation, as well, were the voices and perspectives of local residents and young people themselves. As time passed and media attention waned, I regretted that we had missed another opportunity to tell a different kind of story about the enduring links between food, health, and youth development. I wanted to have a conversation that would speak of changing not only individual behaviors but also collective systems, one that would look to low-income communities and communities of color as partners in change rather than problems to be solved, and that would include the call for making healthier food choices as part of a broader agenda for *food justice*.

This book tries to tell that story.

MORE THAN JUST FOOD

The chapters to follow describe and analyze the actions of community-based food justice organizations—grassroots, people-of-color-led groups that are working to promote health, equity, and sustainability through urban food activism. This project is based on a combination of ethnographic research

methods, interviews, critical analyses, and participatory inquiries; its primary aim is to highlight the capacity of community action to serve as a power base for a twenty-first century food justice movement. At the same time, however, the research cautions against overly romanticized visions of autonomous, community-based change, emphasizing instead the complicated and often contradictory nature of nonprofit food justice organizing in the contemporary moment. Shifting the dominant cultural narratives and institutional networks of the food system toward greater justice is no easy task, of course, but it is my contention that in-depth scholarship on the topic can serve as a useful tool for evaluation, strategizing, and future visioning. With that in mind, this book also offers a set of concrete recommendations—related to the food justice movement’s organizing, media storytelling, and policy advocacy practices, as well as its relationship to funding agencies, movement allies, and adversaries—that could help increase the impact and staying power of its agenda for people-powered community change.

It is no coincidence that the research for this book was conducted at a moment of significant social, economic, and political strain. The Great Recession that began in 2008 led to massive unemployment and income losses among everyday people in the United States, while the so-called recovery saw inequality widen to nearly unprecedented levels. As one notable indicator among many, enrollment in the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as the Food Stamps program) reached record highs during this period. That system provided support for over 46 million individuals to purchase food in 2014, approximately 20 million more than had received benefits before the economic downturn. Lower-income families and communities of color were particularly hard-hit by these developments, exacerbating already existing disparities in the domains of health, wealth, and educational opportunity.⁵

Simultaneously, while this project was taking shape, issues related to food, agriculture, and nutrition were receiving a nearly unprecedented level of public and media attention. In documentary films and on network television, in bestselling books, and in the halls of the White House, a discursive explosion related to food issues was underway. The topics of discussion varied widely—some called attention to “food deserts” and epidemics of diet-related disease, others implored viewers to discover the joys of eating like a “foodie,” and still others sounded an alarm about the environmental destructiveness of industrialized agricultural practices.⁶ I found myself immersed in learning about the problems of the modern *food system*, a term used to describe the

interlocking dynamics of food production, distribution, and consumption that stretch from seed and sea to plate and body. And, like many others, I followed the oft-repeated suggestion to *get involved* in some of the “alternative food” initiatives that were being offered up as food system solutions. I began to think more critically about my food choices, support local farmers by purchasing at neighborhood produce markets, volunteer with grassroots urban agriculture organizations, and help to found a community garden in my own multicultural Los Angeles neighborhood.

I was also excited to have the chance to blend my alternative food activism with my scholarly research. Indeed, as an early career academic, I was working to stake my claim as an *engaged scholar*, one who hoped to use research as a way to better understand and advance social change that would promote long-term social justice. *Social change*, as I have come to understand the term, refers to any significant alteration to an enduring social structure of society as well as to the underlying cultural value systems that legitimate those social structures. *Social justice* is a related but distinct concept, a normative concern that calls for an equitable distribution of fundamental resources, a universal respect for the dignity of all peoples, and the promotion of political and social rights that ensure all minority groups can equally pursue their life’s interests and voice their visions for change. Advocates for social justice recognize that social, economic, and political inequity rarely occur naturally—rather, these dynamics emerge over time through historical processes of discrimination and favor. From this perspective, then, justice is realized not only through the active promotion of equity, but also by consciously addressing and deconstructing the discrimination that created the inequity in the first place.⁷

My research helped me to fundamentally understand the ways in which the contemporary food system operates as a vast and globally networked entity, one faced with a set of intersecting environmental, economic, and public health crises. That is to say, at the same time as the system offers a bountiful and nourishing harvest to many privileged citizens of the globe, it also serves as a site of significant social injustice in both the developed and developing worlds. For reasons that will be detailed in later chapters of this book, the dominant norms of the industrialized food system are ultimately environmentally destructive; exploitative of farmers, workers, and animals; and inequitable, such that low-income and ethnic minority communities in particular lack access to high-quality affordable foods and face disparities related to food security and chronic disease. In response, diverse sets of social

change initiatives have emerged with an aim to transform both the institutional structures and cultural values of our food system.

Cognizant of the unjust impacts of the ongoing economic crisis and enthralled by the possibilities of food system transformation, I set out to investigate the social justice potential of alternative food activism. It was through this scholar-activist perspective that the idea for this book emerged. Through my grassroots participation, I found that much of what I encountered did not match what I saw in the influential food-focused media productions that were garnering mainstream attention. In popular media, the nutritional, environmental, and social problems of the food system were often portrayed as having utterly simple, conflict-free solutions, generally involving nothing more than individual consumer choices and a little bit of “growing your own.” If we could simply get the general public to understand the importance of healthy eating, pop culture advocates suggested, perhaps by having young boys and girls taste a tomato grown in their own school garden or by opening a community farmers’ market, we would all be well on our way toward health and sustainability.

Unfortunately, missing from the design, deployment, and management of many of the alternative food initiatives I observed was any recognition that inequity in the food system was centrally linked to histories of racial and economic discrimination. As a number of scholars and activists had begun to point out, such programs often lacked substantive participation from those community members who actually faced the challenges of food injustice themselves. Largely as a result, alternative food initiatives tended to benefit mostly white, economically secure, and already healthy consumers. Low-income communities of color, by contrast, were too often treated as subjects to be taught the “right way to eat,” while issues of systemic injustice in the labor force and other barriers to community health were downplayed or ignored. Without a direct social justice consciousness, the evidence suggested, achieving health and sustainability through such programs would prove elusive.⁸

At the grassroots level, by contrast, I began to take stock of a strikingly different narrative. There, I began to hear the term *food justice* used as a way to describe a different type of approach for improving the health of the eating public, of marginalized communities, and of the food system as a whole. The advocates for food justice that I came in contact with argued that the problems of the food system were not simple or conflict-free at all but were actually connected to other systemic social, economic, and racial injustices. Food-

related initiatives, they suggested, could be used as a tool to develop a set of community-based solutions that might help transform the very political and economic systems that had historically oppressed low-income and ethnic minority communities across the United States and around the world. While community-based food justice advocates employed some of the same strategies that were featured in popular media portrayals—building gardens, providing nutrition education, and improving access to healthy food through alternative food networks—they did so in the purpose of a much larger cause. They situated food as a vehicle for a more expansive, people-of-color-led social justice project toward which they were fundamentally committed.

Researchers Robert Gottlieb and Anupama Joshi defined food justice as “ensuring that the benefits and risks of where, what, and how food is grown and produced, transported and distributed, and accessed and eaten are shared fairly” (6). Scholars Alison Hope Alkon and Julian Agyeman added that such efforts must remain “firmly rooted in the low-income communities and communities of color that suffer from inequalities embedded in the food system” (7).⁹ Food justice, I came to learn, had emerged as a counter-force in the United States, not only to the problems of the industrial food system but also to those alternative food networks that tended *not* to place social justice in a position of primacy.

However, as I looked into the scholarship and actions of food justice work, I began to levy a parallel complaint: the solutions proffered in activist and academic settings were often overly simplified and did not match what I was seeing on the ground. Too often, I felt, case studies of community-based and people-of-color-led food justice initiatives leaned toward a general romanticizing of community-focused activity. Notably, such accounts did little to situate the efforts of those nonprofit food justice organizations that were leading the charge within realistic political, economic, and cultural networks. Instead, they tended to imply that these community-based food justice efforts operated in an entirely autonomous fashion, somehow independent of external cultural influences, structural supports, and quite often, the logic of capitalism. In other discussions of food justice, a number of critical scholars seemed to write off the social change capacity of community-based food justice organizing completely. These critics suggested that the educational and community economic development focus of food justice efforts was not so different from that of white-led alternative food initiatives, both tending to reify a neoliberal philosophy of market-driven self-improvement, a strategy that unintentionally absolves the government of its responsibility

to ensure good food for all. Why spend so much time focusing on community-based activism, such accounts tended to argue, when the real levers for substantive social transformation are pulled through changes in food and agricultural policies?¹⁰

Through the course of my own work, I saw real value in the food justice approach, witnessing community-based groups make legitimate strides toward building community capacity, promoting youth development, and improving the ecological health of their neighborhoods from the ground up. At the same time, I recognized the strategy's limitations and contradictions. I observed that the community-based organizations that were advocating for food justice were hardly operating alone, as they partnered with hosts of public and private individuals and groups to advance their goals. Many of these partners were from *outside* of the local communities in which food justice groups organized, and many of them had become engaged in food-related work only after they were encouraged to do so by the types of popular media productions that food justice activists hoped, in part, to counter. I noticed, as well, that food justice groups were depending upon funding and support from major governmental organizations, wealthy foundations, and even major corporations. These institutions consistently pushed food justice activists to incorporate diverse sets of practices and logics into their operations, dynamics that would make them more accountable and "fundable" in the landscape of nonprofit organizing.¹¹

Through it all, however, I also saw food justice groups work hard to keep their community-based, people-of-color-led mission of social transformation at the heart of their efforts. They insisted that their food justice vision was nothing short of a radical call to action, and they pushed back against encroachments from groups and forces that would attempt to co-opt or moderate their message. In a cultural environment in which food system issues had skyrocketed in popularity, they looked for opportunities to catalyze community development while also tapping into networks that would help them tell their food justice story to broader audiences.

I set out to develop a project that would paint a more nuanced and holistic portrait of these developments. The ultimate purpose of *More Than Just Food* is to use ethnographic insights to tell a story of both the potential and limits of community-based food justice organizing in the twenty-first century urban United States. Employing an analytical approach referred to as the *communication ecology perspective*, my work is particularly attentive to the networks and narratives that characterize the actions and philosophies of

food justice practitioners today. Drawing from several years of engaged scholarly research, I aim to address an intersecting set of empirical and critical questions. To what extent can sustainable social change be realized through a community-based approach to food justice? What makes food a worthwhile vehicle for these efforts, and what makes the local community an operative site of action? Embedded as these community-based nonprofit initiatives are—within circuitous networks of power, knowledge, and expertise—does community-based food justice organizing have a chance of fulfilling the lofty social and environmental justice goals it has set out to address? And in the face of neoliberal cultural forces and media-savvy outsiders that are so adept at the marginalization and co-optation of social justice initiatives, can small-scale food justice groups successfully communicate their visions of social transformation to a broader public?

I argue that community-based food justice does indeed offer a valuable model for the promotion of social and racial justice in the contemporary age. The salience of food as a universal social and cultural necessity, combined with the documented ability of local organizing to serve as an avenue for capacity-building within historically marginalized communities, offers a foundation upon which an agenda for sustainable community change can be built. With that said, I do not offer simple and clear-cut solutions to the problem of community-based food injustice but rather recognize that this strategy of community action remains fraught with tension and ambivalence, while the political possibilities of the approach are necessarily constrained. That is to say, if community-based activists hope to parlay local action into a sustained food justice movement, certain criteria—related to ongoing community participation, a committed vision for systemic change, a plan for programmatic sustainability, and an ability to exert influence beyond the local—must be met.

Through the course of my research on community-based food justice organizing, many of the activists with whom I collaborated pointed to the Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire as an inspiration for their work. In his seminal book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire emphasized the importance of *praxis* in the organizing process, a concept he defined as “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (51). For Freire and his adherents, this reinforcing combination of dialogue and application is essential for the liberation of historically marginalized communities.¹² In *More Than Just Food*, I argue that food justice activism can be understood as a *hybrid praxis*, an ever-evolving mix of philosophy and action that takes

shape through an ongoing process of co-construction, collaboration, and conflict in food justice work. Understanding these complex dynamics, I suggest, will be necessary to increase the scale and scope of the food justice movement in the years to come.

THE ROAD AHEAD

More Than Just Food offers an ethnographic exploration of community-based food justice activism in urban America, using the network of Community Services Unlimited Inc. (CSU) as a centering artifact of study. CSU was initially created as the nonprofit arm of the Southern California chapter of the Black Panther Party and today stands as a leading food justice nonprofit organization in its own community of South Los Angeles, with connections to other food justice groups from across the United States and around the world. “We fulfill our mission of serving the people, body and soul, by focusing on building a sustainable community here in South LA,” Neelam Sharma, CSU’s executive director, explained in an interview. “Using food as an access point to engage community in that process, we raise critical awareness of the issues that impact us the most in our neighborhood and, more importantly, build responses.”

However, this book is more than a single case study of a specific South LA-based food justice organization. By combining the deep dive of ethnographic research with networked concepts and multiple strategies for critical and theoretical inquiry, I use CSU as an analytical entry point, one that allows for an interrogation and assessment of the broader field of action in which community-based food justice organizing is situated today. Guided by the extended case method of ethnography, each of the chapters highlights a different set of food justice networks and narratives, employing a nonlinear, multilevel, and multimethod approach that crosses time and space. The pages to follow use participant observation to describe CSU’s local organizing strategies, analyze interviews to understand the motivations of youth food justice advocates from across the nation, draw from historiography to explain the political economic foundations of nonprofit food activism, and apply critical media analysis to the branding materials of new entrants into the food justice landscape.

Taken together, this research approach is grounded in the foundations of what I refer to as the *communication ecology perspective*. Chapter 1 of this

book outlines the key theoretical and methodological foundations that shape this scholarly orientation, points that are also expanded upon in the methodological appendix. The chapter provides a rationale for focusing on the local community as a site of both social change organizing and academic scholarship in an age of digital media and neoliberal politics. From there, I offer a set of working principles for sustainable community change that can be used to evaluate the utility, efficacy, and shortcomings of various community-based food justice initiatives, including those of CSU and other groups highlighted in the chapters that follow.

Chapter 2 turns the reader's attention directly toward the food system, establishing food as a vital social, economic, and environmental infrastructure of modern society, one that is faced with a host of intersecting crises on both local and global scales. Cognizant that the readership will likely have varying degrees of expertise with respect to these topics, I provide an overview of the central risks to human and environmental health that have emerged in recent decades as a result of the changing dynamics of food production, distribution, and consumption. I then describe the rise of the varied "alternative food movements" that have taken shape in response to these interlocking challenges in the food system. The chapter describes how members of community-based food justice organizations have joined a growing chorus of alternative food advocates who identify the local community as a valuable space for food system change.

Chapter 3 is an ethnographic exploration of CSU, a small nonprofit organization focused on food justice in South Los Angeles. It highlights the voices, actions, and knowledge practices of CSU staff, partners, and youth and community collaborators as they collectively endeavor to improve the health of their local neighborhoods. I track how the organization aimed to build a level of critical consciousness and a set of community-based alternative institutions that it hoped would, in its own words, "build a sustainable food system from the ground up in South Central LA, while training local youth, creating real jobs and building the local economy."¹³

Chapter 4 highlights the work of Rooted in Community, a national network of youth food justice organizations with member groups that come from across the United States. CSU served as host for a recent summit of the network that brought together over one hundred youth and dozens of organizational staff into a common space of sharing and strategizing. Linking these geographically dispersed community groups into common cause, I insist, represents a vital opportunity for a broader food justice movement to

coalesce. In order for this to be possible, however, network members must remain reflexive in their attempts to find the right mix between community-focused action and broader movement-building, and they must also balance the priorities of youth-led organizing with parallel interests in policy advocacy and digital media storytelling.

Chapter 5 takes a step back in networked time, employing a genealogical approach in order to understand the historical foundations of CSU's community-based practices. The chapter begins with a discussion of the Black Panther Party and its system of community programs in the 1970s and then tracks how CSU emerged from that history to develop into a "fundable" food justice group in the twenty-first century. Investigating the numerous tensions and successes along the way, the story mirrors the challenges faced by many community-based groups whose social justice missions at times conflict with their nonprofit status. The chapter asks—how does a group go from being founded as part of the Black Panther Party to depending on grant funding from a governmental establishment like the United States Department of Agriculture?

Chapter 6 compares and contrasts the work of CSU with several other groups that have become engaged in efforts to tackle food injustice in the South Los Angeles community—specifically the Teaching Gardens Program of the American Heart Association and the viral video-launched Ron Finley Project. I use a comparison of their respective organizational networks, "theories of change," and digital media strategies to uncover the increasingly competitive nonprofit environment in which contemporary food justice organizing takes place. This environment, I suggest, is in many ways more supportive of groups that are already well capitalized, have access to powerful media channels and communication networks, and are neither "of the community" nor particularly devoted to issues of social justice at all.

The conclusion of the book discusses the implications of my research for scholarship on food justice and community-based activism in general. It also offers thoughts on the utility that the work might have for practitioners and engaged scholars participating in everyday struggles for social justice, in the food system and elsewhere. Collectively, the chapters to follow in many ways reflect the guiding mission of the food justice groups whose work forms the foundation of this account. In the face of daunting challenges across the global food system and within historically marginalized communities, the book aims to demonstrate the ways in which food offers a powerful and engaging avenue for change. However, if researchers and activists are truly committed

to a sustained movement for social justice, they must incorporate more than just food at the center of that process. “Food is a way in which you can get folks to think critically about their environment,” Lawrence DeFreitas, a staff member with CSU explained. “A community that understands how the environment impacts them has the ability to think critically to take action.”

ON ENGAGED SCHOLARSHIP

Before bringing this introduction to a close, a few additional comments regarding my scholarly position and engaged strategy of research are in order. *More Than Just Food* is informed by a theoretical and practical commitment to methods of engaged scholarship. With the use of the term *engaged scholarship*, I refer to academic work that actively engages with research participants through community-based and participatory methods.¹⁴ The aim of engaged scholarship, as I practice the approach, is to produce scholarly knowledge while simultaneously conducting research that may help research participants advance, facilitate, and reflect upon their own social change efforts. This engaged approach differs from some of the traditional standards in American academia, which has often called for a sharp break between researcher and research subjects. Those who follow this engaged methodology, however, believe that a collaborative research practice is ethically sound and can serve as a foundation for the production of scholarly insights that would be difficult to garner through a more neutral observational approach.¹⁵ My own positionality as a white, middle-class male who never lived in the South Los Angeles area, where much of my research for this book takes place, nor ever faced any significant instances of food injustice in my own daily life, actually served to solidify my attachment to an engaged approach. It is my contention that only through a dialogic collaboration with community-based food justice activists could I ever have conducted research on this topic that was simultaneously respectful to those involved and insightful for the scholarly and practitioner communities.

During the development of this project, I spent years living and working in Los Angeles, engaged as both researcher and activist on food justice and urban agricultural issues. My involvement with CSU reaches back to 2009, when I first attended an informational and fundraising event hosted by the group in South Los Angeles. From that time, I intermittently served as a volunteer for various projects and attended a number of their events. More

than a year later, after receiving approval from the University of Southern California's Office for the Protection of Research Subjects, I developed a more formal research relationship with the organization, and they agreed to allow me in to focus on their work as a case study for my ethnographic research. As an engaged scholar and social justice ally, I served in a variety of capacities with CSU during multiple years of fieldwork. I worked as a volunteer in their urban farms and in gardening workshops, sat on the organizing committee for several of their sponsored programs, assisted in writing specific portions of grant applications, and contributed to door-to-door outreach efforts, among other activities. Through that time, I was also engaged in a number of other urban agriculture, nutrition education, and food policy initiatives around the city of Los Angeles. It is important to note that, during my research and writing process, I was never on the payroll of CSU or any other food justice organization, and I was always transparent about the fact that I was there to serve a dual role as a researcher and a contributor to the group. Ultimately, honest transparency with my research collaborators allowed me to develop a level of critical distance that proved to be fundamental in maintaining the integrity of my scholarly project.

I recognize that my active and ongoing engagement with research participants may be objectionable to some readers with a grounding in a traditional model of objective ethnographic investigation. While I understand those critiques, I also think it is important that we consider just how increasingly untenable—and in many ways undesirable—that historically ideal approach is for scholarly practice today. Here, I draw from the thoughts of the ethnographer John L. Jackson, who in 2013 described how scholars “no longer simply *arrive* at our field-sites anymore, at least not like before. Those field-sites already come knocking at our doors or flitting across our computer screens long before we get out of bed—and in ways that actually look and feel much different from the cross-cultural state of affairs just ten or fifteen years ago” (48, emphasis in original). Today, researchers arrive at ethnographic projects to find research “subjects” already actively doing research on their own work, not to mention on the background of the potential academic research partner, as well as actively telling their own stories through a variety of communication and digital media formats. What develops, then, is an increasingly multisited ethnographic field site, a set of networked and iterative landscapes of scholarly and activist inquiry.¹⁶

The first chapter of this book provides more detail regarding the methodological and theoretical foundations that shaped my investigation into

community-based food justice. The chapters that follow provide a mix of description, analysis, and evaluation across intersecting domains of food movement activism. Taken together, my work endeavors to document and assess the networks and narratives that have emerged as the engine for contemporary grassroots organizing for food justice. It offers insights, recommendations, and words of caution for scholars and practitioners with an interest in advancing health, equity, and sustainability in the face of enduring injustice in the food system and beyond.