Positioning Food Justice

Race, Urban Policy and the Local Food Movement

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Abstract

The growing culture of local and fresh food movements around the country have renewed concerns about food access in underserved communities of many U.S. cities. Historically, these cities have experienced high social inequality, with unequal distribution of resources, and populated within areas considered food deserts—leaving residents without access to vital nutrition. Chronic disease and mortality rates are high in these areas and run predominantly along racial and ethnic lines (Geronimus, 2000; Alkon and Agyeman, 2011; Allen, 2010; Slocum, 2010). These overwhelming health disadvantages can be analyzed by the structural factors that have produced food inaccessibility. Segregation, economic isolation, and race-based urban policies have created concentrations of poverty and staggering inequality in many urban communities (Slocum, 2010; Mele, 2013).

Until recently the “local food movement” has been slow to engage the issue of food access for low-income communities of color and ignored the privilege inherent in their food rhetoric (Alkon and Agyeman, 2011). Through food justice, “local food” movements and a growing number of urban farm programs have linked with social activism, and attempted to address the landscape of food access in urban communities. Likewise, many local and state policies around the country have attempted to reverse health disadvantages of the urban poor. However, many programs and policies over the last 25 years have been subsumed into a larger
neoliberal, urban redevelopment process that does not effectively engage the social
diversity of these communities, and has reinforced the deeply engrained structural
factors surrounding race, poverty, and health (Mele, 2013).

New Orleans has struggled with insurmountable poverty that existed long
before Hurricane Katrina laid the city bare as a national case study. By looking at
public policy and community activism in New Orleans, I plan to give a clearer
understanding of which methods will be more effective. This study is guided by the
principle that awareness of the socioeconomic causes of poor health, along with an
active local government and substantive citizenship, will allow community-based,
food justice movements to better serve urban neighborhoods. By laying a
foundation of the structural causes of food access, this study will focus on an urban
farm in New Orleans, Grow Dat Youth Farm. By placing Grow Dat in the urban
context in which it exists, this study will pursue their particular methods as a
sustainable model and discuss the dilemmas of urban policy and non-profits.
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**INTRODUCTION**

“Food justice” and “food security” are two of the more popular terms among academics, non-profits and organizations attempting to address public health concerns in the context of adequate nutritional choices. The term “food security” and “food sovereignty” are borrowed from development economics and refer to the ability of a country or region to secure its own food source. According to the World Health Organization, and the USDA, the terms became widely used in 1996 to define “when all people at all times have access to efficient, safe, nutritious food to maintain a healthy and active lifestyle” (WHO, 2013; Alkon and Agyeman, 2011).

While acknowledging how these terms are used globally, they are not necessarily interchangeable in the discussion of food access in many cities around the U.S. The existing momentum of the ‘local food’ movement, alongside the meaning of food security throughout the world has been coopted by food equality advocates to mobilize and increase awareness of food related inequality in the U.S. “Food justice” has become the banner phrase of this social movement. It is the call to arms for organizations that have set up in urban communities where food access is limited. “Food deserts,” the term used to describe many of these locations, are
areas where availability of fresh produce and proteins are scarce. In these areas, grocery stores that typically sell fresh food items either do not exist or are too far for residents to access (Alkon and Agyeman, 2011).

There are disagreements over the use of the term “food desert;” some question whether they actually exist or if “food desert” is an appropriate metaphor (Alkon and Agyeman, 2011). However, in 2009 the USDA came out with a report on the phenomenon that elaborated how transportation and proximity are factors in determining these locations considered food deserts and the correlation with diet-related health problems (Bitler and Holder, 2010; USDA, 2009; Alkon and Agyeman, 2011). Some foods are most likely available in underserved neighborhoods, but the nutritional value of those foods is questionable. Fresh fruits and vegetables are usually limited while fast food options are readily available. As used in this study, the line of contention between these two different views lays between hunger and good nutrition. The conventional wisdom is that limited food options correlate with low-income neighborhoods of color, thus creating food deserts and poor health (Alkon and Agyeman, 2011). My study uses the term similarly, and in a way that contrasts food deserts from affluent neighborhoods where healthy food choices are in abundance.

The Evolution of Food Access

Consumer choices related to diet are directly affected by the geographical availability of foods that are considered healthy and nutritious. Historically, food retail was a personal experience and shop owners lived in the neighborhoods where
they sold food. Supermarkets now outnumber the smaller mom-and-pop grocers and farmers markets around the nation and for the last 70 years have more or less taken over the food industry (CDFI, 2009). “The supermarket industry in the U.S. is mature, highly competitive and rapidly consolidating. It is not uncommon to find competing supermarkets within a mile or two from each other.” In 2009, chain supermarkets produced $528 billion in sales, controlling 95% of the market (CDFI 2009).

When populations began moving to the suburbs, food retailers moved with them. Large companies that now control the greater share in the food sale market only establish locations in areas that are economically viable---where consumer purchasing is high (Alkon and Agyeman, 2011). According to the Financing Healthy Food Options Implementation Handbook, “when consumers have more disposable income they may purchase branded or gourmet type food as opposed to when they have less disposable income and...when consumer confidence is low, consumers tend to spend less.” Location of supermarkets is one of the largest barriers for low-income residents seeking access to healthy and affordable food (CDFI). The capitalization of the food system, with its selective location process, has created a divergence in availability of nutritious fresh foods between high and low-income areas (Chen and Florax, 2010; Alkon and Agyeman, 2011).

Food security is determined by the underlying social, economic, and institutional factors within a community that affect the quantity of affordable food. A USDA study in 2009 found that 11.5 million people, over 4 percent of the American population, “live in low income areas, more than 1 mile from a grocery store” (USDA
2009). Without larger grocery stores, residents in low-income areas rely on the corner stores and fast food options that sell mostly processed “junk food.” The convenience and vast availability of fast food leads to greater quantities of consumption. The high fat, sugar, and salt content of these types of foods also have clear markers of a poor diet (Harlan 2011).

These factors have led to further exploration of the linkages between diet and food access, race and income, and how limited dietary choices have had an impact on health. There is research that suggests the racial and ethnic disparities in food access are common in low-income neighborhoods across the U.S. One study in Detroit found that the proximity of supermarkets was around 5% for residents of poverty of varying racial/ethnic background. The same study showed that compared to Whites, Blacks lived 1.1 miles farther away from supermarkets on average (Larson et.al, 2009). Food insecurity is especially prevalent in inner cities, in households with children, in female-headed households, and among African Americans and Latinos (Allen, 2010; Geronimus, 2000).

**Methodology**

Over a 20-week period I engaged in participant-observation at Grow Dat Youth Farm, an urban farm program devoted to food justice and youth leadership in New Orleans. From January 22nd to June 15th 2013, I spent an average of 25 hours a week preparing the farm and working with the student workers. I typically spent those hours observing the work of the program while participating in a volunteer capacity. On other days I worked as an intern and performed an array of
administrative duties, assisted with the procurement of licenses and permits, performed database entry and created an organizational history. I also conducted interviews and research on the development of the program, as the inspiration for my research on creating a sustainable food access model.

Most of the formal interviews were recorded on audio/video and conducted with the program directors, staff, and the institutions that partner with Grow Dat. There was some emphasis on the directors and additional interviews helped to clarify their purpose and the needs of the community they serve. A total of 15 interviews were scheduled throughout the duration of the study. Introductory and exit interviews of student workers, conducted by Grow Dat staff, were used in gauging the effectiveness of the program. Other conversations with students occurred informally, and added insight into their day-to-day involvement of the program. All of the organizational information and media that I collected will go into a 3-5 minute short film that will serve as a visual presentation of my research as well as promotional material to benefit Grow Dat’s program.

**Literature Review**

In addition to my field study research, I utilized multidisciplinary research that engages food access. This includes articles, journals, full-length texts, USDA stats, and scholarly papers from a range of disciplines, such as sociology, economics, epidemiology and urban policy. Many of the terms used in this paper are derived from the field of sociology and used frequently in conventional socioeconomic analysis. Texts that analyze urban policy and describe the ideological changes that
have occurred through 20th century urbanization were particularly useful to my process. I believe using a theoretical framework best supports some of the dilemmas of inequality in urban food access and the race and class tensions in urban development.

I also utilized epidemiological studies to demonstrate the health risks of poor food access, as well as literature by activists within the food justice movements. Central to framing my study was a book titled *Cultivating Food Justice*, this anthology of scholars analyzes the emergence of food justice and it’s many facets within contemporary food discourse. To further the discussion, I place food justice in the political economy both nationally and at the local farmers market level. All of the evidence I have compiled facilitates a critical understanding of food movement rhetoric and current urban development initiatives. The aim is to construct a scaffolding that analyzes the ways in which community and government actors attempt to cure public ills through poorly conceived social programs, urban policy, and non-profits. With this, I plan to strengthen the discussion of food access, and bolster more substantive social action.
Before discussing the ways that race and inequality have impacted urban food access, it is important to lay a theoretical framework for understanding race and racism. First, according to Bonilla-Silva, racism is a pervasive and autonomous process that has perpetuated over time in ways that have disadvantaged certain racial groups. Second, race and racism, from a theoretical context, can only be understood by the historical ways in which one has informed the other. Third, racism has perpetuated racial inequality and silently informed the demarcation of segregated neighborhoods and the neoliberal process of urban development in every city throughout the U.S (Bonilla-Silva 1997; Mele 2013).

The historically embedded ideology of racial superiority has survived from the transatlantic slave trade, through abolition and Jim Crow, and has lingered far after desegregation in the 1960’s. "Racial ascriptions (initially) were imposed externally to justify the collective exploitation of a people and were maintained to preserve status differences" (Bonilla-Silva 1997). Today, structural racism exists in institutions, government agencies, police policy that includes racial profiling, and the prison system by excluding or targeting people of color “either overtly or in their effects” (Alkon and Agyeman, 2011; Alexander, 2013). Racism, therefore, has become institutionalized in the ways in which race has continued to inform social interaction between racial groups, namely, the privileging of white groups over other racial groups. These privileges pervade in order to advantage white people,
settling into institutions that subvert and damage the social and political capacity of other races.

This is evident in the way that race, largely, has been congruent with class structures. It is empirically true that communities of color are disproportionately poorer than whites (Allen, 2010). Even further, racial inequalities have been built into how communities, industry and good and services come to be found in certain locations (Alkon and Agyeman, 2011). “Most important [however, is that] after a social formation is racialized, its "normal dynamics always include a racial component”---black kids drink this; white kids drink that. Racism, from this vantage point, can be seen as more than a historical legacy, but rather a contemporary structure that is ever changing and autonomous (Bonilla-Silva, 1997).

In 2007 the USDA reported that 13.2 million U.S. citizens live in households that are food insecure. The number of black households that were food insecure was around 22 percent, compared to 20 percent for Hispanic households. White households were only 8 percent food insecure (Alkon and Agyeman, 2011). The increase in health inequities between whites and ethnic/racial minority populations is also linked to urban poverty. Minorities make up 80 percent of residents in high poverty U.S. metropolitan areas. “African Americans alone account for 50% of residents of high poverty in urban areas nationally, and between 80% and 90% of the population in some of the largest urban [communities]”(Geronimus, 2000).

The contrast between the two types of communities is stark, and leads to a greater connection between race and health. According to Rachel Slocum:
Laying this framework is essential to understanding the ways in which the study of race is connected to the study of food, the process and geographical locations by which it is grown, manufactured and distributed. In other words, by “bringing together anti-racist theory and food research... we can better understand farming and provisioning, tasting and picking, eating and being eaten, going hungry and gardening by paying attention to race (Slocum 2010).

Around the country there are 12.4 million children that live in houses that are food insecure (Alkon and Agyeman, 2011). Studies of these larger cities have shown that fast-food restaurants are more available in “lower-income and minority neighborhoods than in high-income and predominantly white neighborhoods” (Larson et.al 2009). Many of the youth in low-income communities are employed by the fast food industry (Grow Dat, 2013). Often these adolescents are working and feeding younger siblings in homes where parents, usually single mothers, are working multiple jobs. The meals for both the teens and their siblings come from these restaurants because of the availability and convenience for the home (Grow Dat, 2013).

The consumption of fast foods has been found in studies as a link to increased weight gain, obesity, and poor nutrition (Larson et.al. 2009). The presence of refined carbohydrates, such as sugar, and food that is high in fat correlate with nutritional health and related disease (Wickramasinghe, 2013). For low-income African Americans, the high rates of morbidity and mortality only increases during the young to middle adult ages, and suggests health consequences of persistent disadvantage (Geronimus, 2000). Often, struggling households purchase calorically
dense foods that compromise nutrition and lead to overeating (Alkon and Agyeman, 2011).

The Food Research and action Center has combined around 85 studies that corroborate the connections between food insecurity of low-income individuals and the prevalence of obesity. There is also lower physical activity in low-income communities because disrepair, a lack of public parks, and crime. The main contributing factor is the difficulty to adopt healthy choices when there are limited healthy options available. The consistent exposure to unhealthy foods, corresponding with cycles of deprivation and overeating lead to these types of health problems (FRAC, 2011). Obesity decreases dopamine activity and increases brain levels of serotonin resulting from overeating. Studies have found that obesity can greatly contribute to breast cancer rates, subfertility (in both men and women), menstrual irregularity, and poor pregnancy outcomes including miscarriage (Kirchengast, 2013).

As shown by epidemiological studies on prenatal health, there are long-term effects of early nutrition. Fetal development from preconception to up to 24 months is vital for the foundation of lifelong health. Malnutrition in early development shown to health risks later in life including blood pressure, cardiovascular mortality, and abnormal lipid metabolism and glucose levels. "Maternal under-nutrition predisposes the offspring to foetal under-nutrition" (Wickramasinghe, 2013). This leads to overfeeding infants in order to achieve a “catch up growth” by parents and physicians, leading to central adiposity. Central adiposity is the storage of fat that
can lead to major risk factors in cardiovascular disease and diabetes (Wickramasinghe, 2013).

In most studies on the subject of health in low-income communities the determining factor often represented in improper nutrition is the lack of a close proximity to supermarkets (Larson, 2009; Geronimus, 2000; Slocum 2010; Alkon and Agyeman, 2011). From capital flight and historical redlining to urban development and neoliberalism, there have been arrays of factors that have produced this type of food inaccessibility. Racist practices in housing and revitalization have contributed to deep inequality in urban communities. In the next section of this study I explore how early racist urban policies have produced unequal food access. Because what and how people eat is determined by where people live, it is necessary to compare the issue of food access to housing and urban development. Later we will discuss the local food movement, and how its colorblind mentality has ignored food inequality. We will also look at how food justice, the social movement that has developed to address food access, may be standing in the way of true food equality.
Urban Development

“The current urban environment developed under the influence of race-conscious policies”

(Geronimus, 2000).

To understand the wide range of food inaccessibility in low-income urban areas we should consider how these socioeconomic factors, in addition to the historical and structural factors, have left them so disadvantaged. A large-scale migration of African Americans from southern rural areas into northern urban locations began in the early 1900s, initially in response to increased demand for labor to sustain the war effort. There, many African Americans found employment in the industrial factories in larger urban areas. “In these northern destinations, European immigrant neighborhood groups, government officials, and developers worked to avoid the integration of African Americans with established immigrant neighborhoods, producing the outlines of urban Black ghettos” (Geronimus, 2000).

In the subsequent decades racial inequality continued to be a fundamental mechanism for developing inner cities in the U.S. The flows of capital tended to bypass many of the black and ethnic communities, and as a result, urban development was sluggish (Brown, 1999; Sugrue, 1996). “These inequalities shape the physical and social landscape of the typical inner city where neighborhoods with high concentrations of poor and minority residents continue to reel from the legacies capital investment, deteriorated housing, discriminatory labor markets, school segregation and social isolation” (Mele, 2013).
The practice of bank and real estate redlining during the early part of the 20th century halted the flow of investment capital and mortgage into parts of cities where mostly people of color lived. Many of these neighborhoods were ranked “D-Fourth Grade” for hazardous and colored red on the map” (Alkon and Agyeman, 2011). This systematically shut out blacks from the private housing market and delineated geographical lines between races (Sugrue, 1996). In 1968, the Fair Housing Act attempted to prohibit the use of redlining, but it still remained as “self reproducing, de facto” process for zoning, housing prices, denial of loan applications and relocation of insurance agencies (Alkon and Agyeman, 2011). Through systemic disinvestment, bankers rarely lent to black homebuyers, and housing appraisals rated black neighborhoods too risky for most home loans or mortgage subsidies. Without loans for so much as renovation, blacks were forced to live in the most segregated neighborhoods with housing in need of “ongoing maintenance, repair and rehabilitation” (Sugrue, 1996).

The changes in socioeconomic and demographic landscape in urban areas after WWII left even greater concentrations of poverty and increased mortality rates. Northern cities grew even as aspirations of black migrants faced overcrowding and substandard housing (Sugrue 1996). Because they were confined to the lowest paying insecure jobs, much lower than their white counterparts, they were unable to afford better housing. The gradual decrease in industrial manufacturing jobs increased unemployment. Meanwhile, many closures of public facilities and services in industrial cities increased concentrating them in affluent
areas. This process entrenched the racial barriers and marginalized African American communities (Alkon and Agyeman, 2011).

The decline in working-class wages, affordable housing, and infrastructure created high levels of crime and other toxic environmental exposures. Houses were foreclosed and abandoned, leaving many “blighted” urban communities. This created a surge of family homelessness and often led to double family homes (Geronimus 2000). City officials condemned many blighted neighborhoods and removed them to build highways, civic centers, and housing projects.

With the growth of the middle class, descendants of white immigrants became upwardly mobile and began moving out of the city and into the suburbs. This was part of the capital flight, or “white flight,” that further segregated the urban landscape. When the middle-class residents left, they took big retail and the dominant food market with them.

Under the banner of urban renewal, urban redevelopment programs displaced those living in these blighted areas, increasing the number of duplexes and multi-family homes (Alkon and Agyeman, 2011; Sugrue, 1996). Without adequate services such as fire departments, the empty wood framed buildings were susceptible to fire hazards, and many burned down, further deteriorating the housing stock. Drug trafficking moved into many of the dilapidated public spaces ushering in crime and violence (Geronimus, 2000).

The pressurization of economic containment and established discriminatory policies created virulent environments for the urban poor. The lack of an adequate social structure increased crime and drug use, producing all kinds of black
stereotypes including the aggressive black male. “A relatively large body of...empirical research has evaluated this argument by examining the relationship between a variety of socioeconomic deprivation and rates of violent crime including homicide” (Peterson, 1993). Persistent inequality engenders conflict and hostility and the concentration of economic hardship can lead to diffuse aggression and criminal violence. Because of the concentration of socioeconomic hardship the urban black poor are at greater risk of being victims of lethal violence, a cause of lower life expectancy among African American males (Geronimus, 2000; Peterson, 1993).

**Urban Renewal: Public Housing and Supermarket Flight**

The expansion of public housing and the constructions of highways increased the isolation of black communities. The highway systems surrounded many U.S. cities, and in a continuation of the redlining process acted as large physical barriers for communities of color. This, along with restrictive racial covenants and discriminatory mortgage lending, continued to steer African Americans into areas of urban poverty and away from the suburbs.

Powerful homeowners’ associations made up of primarily white homeowners, actively resisted the “invasion” of blacks into certain neighborhoods, even harassing white sellers who offered their houses to people of color. Restricting blacks from home ownership was a distinctly racist practice. Prominent civil rights advocate and Detroit minister Reverend Charles W. Butler, characterized it
poignantly when he said, “the desire and ability to move, without the right to move, is refined slavery” (Sugrue, 1996).

The domestic policies of the Great Society attempted to address the “urban poor problem” in America. The federal program, pushed forth by Lyndon B. Johnson, set out to reduce poverty and extinguish the racial injustice in U. S. cities. It led to many reforms in health care, education, infrastructure, food stamp act and the creation of “affordable,” or “public,” housing. The results of these policies were only a “fragmented pattern of social provisions” (Goetz, 2013). Many objected to the increase in federal assistance and saw it as way to create dependency for the lowest-income Americans. It was seen as a drain of federal funding (Goetz, 2013). According to Michael K. Brown, the policies of the Great Society “failed to establish a common interest among citizens in the welfare state and further divided blacks from whites” (Brown 1999).

Public housing attempted to combat the poor living conditions of urban black communities by federally subsidizing rent. The overall funding was subsequently minimized under later administrations through budget cuts and downsizing of federal programs. These cuts produced egregious mismanagement that led to deteriorating living conditions. This resulted in concentrations of poverty because of a failure to support the residents “who had no choice but to live in them” (Goetz, 2013; Arena, 2013; Brown, 1999). Some of these buildings were stark high rises that came to act as dehumanizing symbols (Goetz, 2013). “There is a discourse of disaster about public housing in the United States… emphasizing social pathologies such as crime, violence, family breakdown, and drugs” (Goetz 2013). As
affordable housing was being stigmatized, it had also become “the housing of last resort” for marginalized African Americans of poverty (Goetz, 2013).

Within the context of the late 1960's Great Society programs, black urban communities were economically contained through capital devaluation. Economic depression was concentrated in low-income areas. As a result of disinvestment, major retailers and supermarkets continued to struggle, subsequently moving their stores into the suburbs. “This pattern of capital flight and devaluation transformed food access during the era of deindustrialization... in U.S. ‘inner cities’ on the whole” (Alkon and Agyeman, 2011), and further threatened [adequate food sources], economic interests and communal identities (Sugrue, 1996).

During this urban restructuring, agriculture and food systems simultaneously became more industrialized and large government subsidies were given to mono-crops and large food corporations. The aggregation of new processed foods that came from these subsidized commodities began to take over in larger one-stop shopping supermarkets. Unable to compete, many of the small grocery stores were left vacant or replaced by thrift and dollar stores for consumers with low purchasing power. The capital flight of the supermarkets diminished access to fresh food choices for most low-income communities. In 1990, affluent urban neighborhoods had almost double the retail supermarket space as the poorest urban neighborhoods (Alkon and Agyeman, 2011).

With most of the supermarkets being consolidated in the white-populated suburbs, many fast food chains capitalized on the retail vacuum in the now fresh food deserts of the urban landscape. Supermarkets that did linger began an
“industry practice of charging lower prices in suburban versus urban locations, through which communities of color have been systematically disadvantaged” (Alkon and Agyeman, 2011). With most supermarkets only accessible by car, low-income residents had to rely on less healthy more expensive choices. The influx of liquor stores in the 1980’s and 1990’s began to take the place of the declining grocery stores and began serving as a primary food source.

The city of Oakland, CA, exemplifies this decline. From 1935 to 1977 the ratio of grocery stores to liquor stores had gone from eight to one, to less than two to one. By 2007, it had increased to three to six liquor stores per 1,000 residents---three times the city average (Alkon and Agyeman, 2011). Prices in these liquor stores were comparatively higher than in supermarkets. For residents, the locations were more convenient than the distant commute for a supermarket, but fresh foods were unavailable. The differences in the two types of food retail options between low and high-income neighborhoods had clear impacts on nutritional intake, and very different effects on public health (Alkon and Agyeman, 2011).

**Neoliberalism and Urban America**

The capitalization of the food retail industry corresponded with the capital flight from low-income urban communities. But there are further implications of how capitalism has shaped urban inequality through neoliberal city policy.

Neoliberalism is an economic term used to define the city policies pursued over the last 25 years. It was characterized by “free” enterprise where the market flow of goods and services moves freely while cutting social programs, deregulating
financial institutions and privatizing state run services. It promoted the ideology of individualism and self-determination as a desirable alternative to government aid and safety nets (Corpwatch.org 2013).

According to Christopher Mele, “The gradual and cumulative entrenched neoliberalism of urban governance over the last 40 years has fundamentally transformed the ways of planning, building and governing the city” (Mele, 2013). Large businesses invested in real estate, as urban land became a way to increase capital through redevelopment. This brought in more businesses and capital flow into previously abandoned or poverty-stricken areas in a revitalization of urban space. The encouragement of tourism and gentrification brought in additional flow of capital as privatized infrastructure was introduced. While this process was seemingly beneficial to cities, it created even deeper inequality, and displaced the poor black citizens (Mele, 2013; Goetz, 2013).

The 1990’s saw a rise in real estate development, as urban land became more of a valuable commodity. Targeting these urban spaces accelerated gentrification, making land that was historically not valuable—where mostly people of color lived in devalued private housing—now valuable through redevelopment. Descendants of white immigrants, younger white couples, and middle-aged couples with no children began returning to these newly revitalized urban areas. This brought in specialty stores and high priced gourmet grocers like Whole Foods (Alkon and Agyeman, 2010). This action of business development combined with gentrification functioned as a kind of ‘white re-flight,’ with capital flowing back into urban areas (Goetz, 2013; Arena, 2012; Mele, 2013; Smith, 2013).
In this new era of urbanization, redevelopment tended to be exclusionary and reinforced patterns of class and racial segregation. Many developers often tactfully promoted urban diversity to attract developers and white residents to “authentic” ethnic neighborhoods. Subsequently, this increased the cost of living and slowly dislocated existing residents. For example, after the demolition of the St. Thomas public housing in New Orleans the value of surrounding neighborhoods increased by 80 percent (Arena, 2013; Goetz, 2013). However, the perception that benefits of gentrification and redevelopment would be widespread was a misconception. Low-income residents typically moved to “other segregated neighborhoods with higher-poverty” (Goetz, 2013). In his article on the subject, Christopher Mele points to how these claims of social diversity mask a reality of urban inequality in neoliberal urbanism. He states that:

Key ideological premises associated with a particular contemporary form of racializing discourse... coincide with political economic aims of neoliberal urbanism to render exclusionary urban development legitimate, realizing and seemingly attractive to distressed cities.” Development practices that promote assistance and a gradual rehabilitation of poor communities by way of social diversity only serve to reproduce socio-spatial inequality (Mele, 2013).

Often, this type of development determines the way urban locations can attract the most capital by giving preference to tourism and big businesses. In the case of Chester, Pennsylvania, many residents had to live without a primary grocery store since the closing of a Food Center in 2001. Many residents had to commute on
long bus trips outside of the city and into the suburbs for groceries. When a Harrah’s casino was built in that location in 2007, residents and neighborhood associations questioned why there wasn’t a supermarket included into the city plans. One city official said, “that Chester’s retail market was not viable enough to sustain a chain grocery store” (Mele, 2013). Low-income residents in these communities continue to lack access to basic goods because of race based urban policies that have affected the food retail market.

In new urban redevelopment the visual contrast is both physically and socially pronounced. Many business and restaurants are erected next to dilapidated buildings and low-income neighborhoods. Large projects are assembled ushering in office spaces and stadiums, often by outsourcing labor. Low-income residents needs such as grocery stores and basic employment opportunities go overlooked and with no opposition. Developers utilize influence with local, state, and federal agencies to assure permits, tax abatements and quick upgrading of localized infrastructures. This essentially makes protest out of reach for most indigenous residents who are virtually powerless to the developmental power and momentum of big companies (Mele, 2013).

Generally, there is very little interaction between low-income residents and these newly developed urban spaces with high-end gourmet supermarkets. Inner-city gentrification has especially led leftover public housing units to become “islands of poverty and distress” surrounded by areas of prosperity and renewal (Goetz, 2013). In this way, many large city redevelopment initiatives tend to “normalize existing patterns of race and class segregation.” The redevelopment of expensive
buildings and restaurants and the contrast in food access resemble what Mele calls ‘advanced marginality’ (Mele, 2013).

**NEW ORLEANS**

In New Orleans, food access has been shaped by these urban strategies and policy designs. In a city that is known for its regionally specific cuisines with strong roots in southern black culture, many “New Orleans residents still struggle to gain access to basic amounts of food, despite their rich food history and resources” (Foster, 2010). In recent years, much attention has been paid to New Orleans food access in the wake of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. The issue of food access and neighborhood food quality has been the focus of several studies, along with the location and amount of supermarkets.

One study by Rose et al. (2009) examined food deserts in New Orleans by compiling phone listings, business directories and public records to find retail food stores in the city. This information was then compared to an Info USA database. Teams were then sent out to mark store locations and verify if stores still existed. One third of existing stores were researched to determine quality of food that they sold. Researchers looked for predefined vegetables and fruits, energy-dense snack foods, and measured the amount of shelf space that was devoted to each item.
The results showed that around twenty percent of the stores in the database had gone out of business, and thirty percent of stores that they found were not in the database. They found that the number of food deserts declined by two thirds when fruits and vegetables were found in small stores and included into the study. They also found that the number of corner and liquor stores greatly outnumbered the amount of grocery stores (Rose et al. 2009). These corner stores are a strong part of New Orleans communities, as many residents have come to depend on them (Foster, 2010). According to Custer, “corner stores have long been an integral part of New Orleans history and culture. Because of the process of capital flight, low income residents have had to rely on these smaller corner stores” (Custer, 2009). Typically these stores were the only places that allowed families to purchase food on credit during difficult times of need. Some stores still continue this policy as a practice, as they remain a reliable place where numerous households obtain groceries toiletries and other items.

According to a survey conducted by Tulane University residents in low-income New Orleans neighborhoods shop at corner stores an average of 14 times a month. It also reported that because most lived more than three miles away from a grocery, they preferred neighborhood stores that were within walking distance (Custer, 2009). Looking back, “by 1990, African American youths in some urban areas faced lower probabilities of surviving to 45 years of age than White youths nationwide faced of surviving to 65 years... chronic diseases such as diabetes in early and middle adulthood are key contributors to these health inequalities and to
their growth” (Geronimus 2000). Youth that were around ten years of age in 1990 are now in there thirties and dealing with health related problems from food access.

New Orleans has dense urban areas downtown and mid city. The African American population is larger than average at 61.2 percent, and the level of racial segregation at 65.5 percent is greater than average, as measured by the Index of Dissimilarity (JCPES, 2012). As of 2009, incomes below the Federal Poverty Level made up almost one fourth of the population. Records from those census tracts show a persistence of poverty for over the last two decades. Mortality rates and low birth rates in New Orleans are higher than in all of Louisiana and U.S. averages on the whole (JCPES, 2012).

The Joint Center for Political and Economic Matters conducted a study that found that life expectancy in New Orleans varies 25 years conditional to certain zip codes. Zip codes with low-income and neighborhoods of color made up the higher percentages of low life expectancy. Access to proper nutritious foods is recorded as a determinant community risk factor among “high concentrations of people living in poverty, overcrowded households, households without a vehicle, and vacant housing” (JCPES, 2012).

Before Hurricane Katrina hit there were 30 supermarkets in New Orleans. At 350.2 square miles, and with a population density of about 2000 per square mile, the number of supermarkets is quite low. After the storm, 15 of those stores had returned and in 2009 only an additional five stores were rebuilt. The average grocery store serves nearly 16,000 people in New Orleans, two times the national average (Foster 2010). As reported by the Second Harvest Food Bank of Greater
New Orleans, within their service area 60 percent of household with children admitted to having to choose between paying basic utilities and purchasing food. Black zip codes have less than half the number of grocery stores compared to white zip codes. “The overall pattern suggests that socioeconomic conditions in low-income and non-white neighborhoods make it more difficult for people in these communities to live healthy lives” (JCPES 2012).

Disparities in food access have long existed in New Orleans, but after the storm the retail food landscape on the whole was dramatically affected. After the storm, 60 percent of the stores were still unable to open. For predominantly African-American neighborhoods that had already half the supermarkets of other neighborhoods the disparities in food access was remarkable (Ulmer et.al., 2012). The corner stores that were able to reopen continued to be the only sources of food for many residents.

Many of the obstacles that New Orleans residents faced in food access had developed long before the storm. A large part of the urban governance created policies that sought to dismantle low-income communities already struggling for employment and housing. Looking at the contention in the public housing system can be key to understanding low-income neighborhoods in New Orleans, and how non-profits, the predominant form of organization currently working in the area of food access, participated in the dismantling of public housing.
**New Orleans, Neoliberalism, and non-profits**

“In 2000, approximately 99 percent of New Orleans public housing residents were African American” (Goetz, 2013).

With the persistence of poverty in urban cities, neoliberal politics questioned the efficacy of welfare policy and government assistance. To dismantle the old system in many U.S. cities, Congress approved the HOPE VI program with the goal of reducing the public housing stock to “deconcentrate” urban poverty (Goetz, 2013; Arena, 2012). The ideology is based on the perception that for true growth and prosperity, the market is better equipped to provide social welfare than government redistribution. “The debate about urban slum clearance vs. socialism gave way to a story line about public housing that focused on race, welfare dependency, and crime” (Goetz, 2013). In the ways that urban policy has historically dictated housing, supermarket flight, and food access, neoliberal city strategies in New Orleans have affected the overall wellbeing of low-income communities through the dismantling of public housing (Arena, 2012). The new city policies included demolition, redevelopment, and privatization of public housing (Goetz, 2013).

For impoverished communities this was more than a shift in policy, it was a “full scale attack on public housing... as a means of eliminating entire communities of poor black residents” (Goetz, 2013). Such was the case for the St. Thomas public housing project in New Orleans. Historically, but with some opposition, residents were able to mobilize over community issues, and led campaigns to improve public housing conditions. Creating the St. Thomas Resident Council (STRC) with
influential tenant leaders, residents were able voice to their concerns to city
officials. Through the 1980’s and 1990’s the resident organizations were able to
protest and stage sit-ins at Housing Authority of New Orleans (HANO) city council
meetings (Arena, 2012).

As federal funding dwindled and quality of the housing stock diminished,
residents began to organize with the help of middle-class black leadership and
collective action. With these tools they were able to impose a rent strike for over a
year, putting their combined rents into a bank account. The strike stood; HANO was
forced to comply, providing renovations for the locations in question. In many
instances residents were able to bargain for jobs in the renovation or demolition
process, but these were mere consolations (Times-Picayune, 2013). The jobs were
only short term and offered no training for residents to receive future employment.

As direct action sit-ins became more frequent, New Orleans city officials were
searching for ways to steer residents away from these protests, and did so by
incorporating black leadership into HANO. This appeased the federal prerequisite
for tenant participation to receive funding, but it also started the process of
dismantling the residents’ protests. But as additional federal funds were being cut,
and neoliberal city initiatives attempted to downsize public housing, the residents
faced tougher opposition. Tourism and gentrification began taking over the
surrounding economy (Arena, 2012).

The incorporation of the black middle class made way for black politicians
and mayors to establish themselves as community elites. The rise of the black urban
regime and non-profit organizations, according to Arena, were pivotal in the process
of the “deconcentration” of public housing (Arena, 2013; Goetz 2013). These black politicians and city officials were incorporated into the economic-political agenda, and by now redevelopment and tourism were considered the panacea to the New Orleans urban crisis. This coincided with the new arrival of both black and white ‘gentrifiers’ that considered themselves politically progressive on racial issues and neighborhood preservation. Also, politicians and urban developers began driving out businesses and multifamily apartments in neighborhoods that served low-income people.

As quoted by Arena, a New Orleans developer said, it was “courageous black leadership [that] was critical to gain the residents consent to redevelopment (Arena, 2012).” In the end, the “white-led” business elites relied on the black political class to take on “sensitive issues such as public housing demolition” (Arena, 2012). As they saw it, the way for effective governance was to remove black impediments from economic regeneration. The only tool available to residents was their ability to mobilize and force agreements through direct action and civil disobedience (Arena, 2012). The efforts of residents were successfully split when they aligned themselves with black politicians because of an assumed solidarity between African American citizens (Smith, 2013).

According to Arena, for black, working-class New Orleans residents, the assumption of electing a black politician was that they would uphold some of the ideals of the civil rights movement in a sort of organic, similar interest. Many politicians ran on these slogans, or were elected based on those assumptions. But the messages of these politicians had taken on the new neoliberal rhetoric:
communities and individuals need to be more independent. They pushed the ideology that no one should rely on government assistance; the community should rise together and take charge of its own future and embrace the redevelopment for the betterment of themselves and of the city. While this secured elections with the black vote, black government officials needed governing power. This support came from the white business class developers, a sign of an overall lack of power and influence (Arena, 2012).

Now that the business elite owned the land, they wanted to develop it. They viewed the lower working-class residents as impediments to tourism and the ability to bring white capital into the city. Therefore, they needed the presence of black politicians to give legitimacy to the redevelopment and gentrification (Arena, 2012; Smith, 2013). With the language of civil rights activism, politicians gained residents’ support. The black middle class helped to bring the contracts “down the line” with an alliance that was both formally and informally funded by real estate dollars. The business developers eliminated the power of the residents making them complicit in the neoliberal scheme. They fostered an image that public housing was negative, by putting it in the mouths of black politicians. By playing the politics of race to their advantage white business elites and black politicians facilitated capitalism and perpetuated class struggles (Smith, 2013).

By finding a way to address the disagreements and gaining consent between the business-class, the black political elite, and residents, non-profit organizations in New Orleans played a key role in this process. Using similar rhetoric, non-profits
promoted self-help and individualism. This absorbed the energy of community activism into the organizational structure of non-profits.

With public and private partnerships, non-profits supplanted themselves as the buffer that would help residents with finding jobs and better affordable housing. By gaining support of key leaders, non-profits were able to promote the ability of residents to take control of development rather than pressing for concessions from the government. “This self-help ideology ‘facilitated’ the corresponding growth of a new [ideology and political practice] exemplified by an increased faith in the capacity of private institutions and voluntary actions... to improve black social conditions” (Smith, 2012; Arena, 2012). This allowed public housing communities to be dismantled and dispersed consensually and reconstituted within the non-profit structure, which virtually unraveled political oversight and dissolved community participation further distancing residents from power (Arena, 2012; Mele, 2013).

Ellen Wratten defines the neoliberal ideology thusly:

On the one hand, poverty is attributed to the personal failings of the individuals concerned, which leads to self-perpetuating cycles of social pathology. On the other hand, it is viewed as the inevitable outcome of an unfairly structured political and economic system, which discriminates against disadvantaged groups. The former perspective is intellectually rooted in laissez-faire individualism and the legitimization of racial discrimination. It tends to lead to free-market economic policies coupled with residual social policies, which focus on the psychological rehabilitation of the poor (Wratten, 1995).
Margret Mayer in her article on “First World Urban Activism” puts forth a legitimate argument about the ways that social movements have easily been absorbed into or co-opted by the neoliberal ideology.

Community-based organizations were developed to deal with the social problems that the city and state cost reduction of social welfare created. This refashioning of social services integrated development and public-private partnerships as urban regeneration through civic engagement, by taking progressive goals and turning them into the neoliberal growth machine (Mayer, 2013).

Peck et.al. extend this argument stating, “[the process of neoliberalism,] profoundly shap[ed] the ideological and operational parameters of urbanization... [and had the] ability not only to survive, but to gain further momentum in the exploitation of crisis conditions for which it is often largely responsible” (Peck et.al., 2013).

This is important to consider when positioning the current emergence of food justice movements in an urban context. According to Goetz, “a focus on neighborhood conditions and their role in conditioning the life chances of the poor is a simplification if it excludes a range of other potentially determinative factors” (Goetz, 2013). Therefore it is important to the study of food access to fully understand urban development as a multifaceted and highly unequal process. Further, if non-profits are acting as new forms of social activism through new food
movements, it is important to question how they have been able to address the issue of food access.

Since local and state governments have more or less ignored food policy (Alkon and Agyeman 2011), which communities and what individuals are being served must be examined in the process in urban redevelopment. If non-profit and community organizations capitulate to the larger development agenda, then they can be susceptible to wheel-spinning by setting forth initiatives that actually have little effect on the urban poor. If food distribution, like public housing, is going to be dictated by these neoliberal principles, how are the marginalized poor expected to have access to foods that are essential for living a healthy life? (Alkon and Agyeman, 2011)

Food Policy in New Orleans

The national attention to the issue of food access has motivated city planners to commission reports on city demographics, and the locations of supermarkets compared to corner stores. On the whole, citywide policy has manifested as more of a suggestion and food access initiatives have become the burden of small coalitions and community-based organizations (Ulmer et.al., 2012).
One commissioned report prepared by The Orleans Place Matters Team proposed many possible initiatives for city planners to implement around the problems of food access for low-income communities. Specific suggestions included a ‘one-stop shopping’ approach to assist business when “making inquiries and submitting applications for licenses and permits” (NOFPAC, 2009). They suggest making information and forms on a city website would help to fast-track permitting processes for fresh food retailers that plan to locate in underserved communities. However, this disregards the economic difficulties in these neighborhoods and how entrepreneurs tend to steer away from such locations. It also ignores the fact that many existing stores in these communities have limited resources and may not have adequate access to internet.

Other suggestions by the report include offering technical assistance to existing stores to enable them to expand their fresh food selections. It promotes the idea of urban farming by calling for recommendations to modify New Orleans Comprehensive Zoning Ordinances. This effort, the study argues, will encourage people to grow fruits and vegetables in gardens, nurseries where they can sell there vegetables to members of the community on site and on mobile markets as vendors. However, the report admits that current city code “may curtail the revitalization of such activities” (NOFPAC, 2009).

The Orleans Place Matters Team has primarily focused its recommendations on children in schools by providing access to educational services for both youth and adults that may have not graduated (JPEC, 2012). Of the suggestions for types of policy of addressing community health and development are: keeping students in
school and out of prison, providing opportunities for those who have been incarcerated, addressing mental health needs of youth and families, and developing student centric policies (JPEC, 2012). While the approach of this report sees the issues of health as multifaceted and structural, it does not present any actual policy.

According to Patricia Allen, “overall, little effort is made to link policy responses to the underlying causes of food deserts” (Allen, 2010). In her article “Realizing Justice in Local Food Systems,” she utilizes several studies to discuss how existing policies don’t always consider underlying causes of food deserts directly and therefore cannot motivate policy responses. While there has been useful data, the reasons why they exist has been more or less inconclusive and has rendered the creation of appropriate policy ineffective.

Policymakers tend to require extensive and conclusive research in order to legislate social driven economic problems... individual choices to improve social equity does not address the basic political economic structures, resource allocations and cultural conditions that have created inequity in the first place (Allen, 2010).

Addressing the problem of inequality requires deeper social analysis to find solutions. The marketplace controls individual choices, such as those that make a person purchase a certain type of food over another. It is difficult to legislate fairness in a system that is controlled by purchasing power. Certain economic evidence such as market failures and supply and demand that determine the location and availability of food are necessary to address the conditions of food
deserts (Allen, 2010). Arline Geronimus, in a structural analysis of food disparities states:

If social, political, and economic exclusion are among the distal causes of the disproportionate health burden absorbed by the urban minority poor, and if, as a result, community members own and control little, the prospects for local community initiatives to alter fundamental causes of morbidity and mortality may be modest (Geronimus, 2000).

One way that some community leaders and activists have been thinking about potential solutions to the challenges of food insecurity has been through food retail stores themselves. Some have worked with organization around New Orleans to increase the availability of healthy foods in the local corner stores (Foster 2010). These stores outnumber grocery stores and continue to be the only options for low-income residents. Typically they have only provided alcohol and tobacco, sugar-sweetened drinks, and high-calorie snacks, but increasing the number of fresh fruits and vegetables may increase access for residents.

Helping corner stores acquire fresh foods may be a strong start in addressing food availability in underserved communities. One illustrative study in a random sample of 102 individuals in New Orleans found that each additional linear meter of vegetable shelf space in local small food stores within a city block of a residence was related to an increase in vegetable intake of 0.35 daily servings (Bodor et.al. 2008). Because they are such an important community asset, corner stores could offer a big step for solutions.
Economic development programs have been established to achieve the corner store improvement strategy. In some cases, retailers are excluded from these programs that are afforded to larger supermarkets. Small neighborhood stores usually have limited staff, and may no be aware of the existence of such programs, or may not have the resources to pursue them. Creating a project that could assist and advocate for the inclusion of affordable fresh foods in these locations could improve the quality of food access in New Orleans.

Despite the lack of adequate policy, there have been a great number of organizations within New Orleans working on the issue of food access. New Orleans Food and Farm Network has been working since 2002 to create a network around the issue of food access (noffn.org, 2013). Likewise, the Tulane City Center of Tulane University has worked in collaboration with community organizations to assist in the development of working programs (tulanecitycenter.org, 2013). Grow Dat Youth Farm, which I will discuss later, is a program that has effectively engaged many of the structural issues in youth employment and food inequality in New Orleans.

**Local Food Movement**

The rise in participation of local food movements can be attributed to national bestsellers and pseudo-celebrity nutritionists touting the benefits of locally procured, nutritious foods. Urban farms and food movements have sprung up across
the “United States with advocates promoting social, economic, and environmental justice” (Allen, 2010; Alkon and Agyeman, 2011). While supporters have been able to successfully promote sustainable farming, some have overlooked “the needs of low-income consumers and the ways that food and health are tied to race” (Alkon and Agyeman, 2011).

Food movements have deftly created an opposition to industrial agriculture and monoculture, in a sort of health and environmental link. They maintain that the practices of corporate consolidation and the use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides have created a capitalized food system that is environmentally harmful, and have an effect on diet-related disease (Alkon and Agyeman, 2011). While these efforts are important for the discussion of environmentalism and public health, it is ethically questionable to impose a dietary philosophy onto the food choices other cultures.

Food is woven into personal and cultural identities. Some writers on the subject have gone as far as calling food an “intimate commodity” (Alkon, Agyeman 2011). What we eat is tied to cultural symbols of history and the racial identities of individuals, families and communities. For example, foods that were considered soul food in southern African American culture and ethnic cuisines brought to America from the global south were, historically, the only alternatives for slaves and impoverished immigrants. In this way, racial identities shape what we cook and eat (Slocum, 2010). According to Julie Guthman, “in some ways the food movement’s failure to incorporate the histories and experiences of people of color into its
narrative leads to the creation of ostensibly colorblind alternatives that subtly reflect white cultural histories” (Alkon, Agyeman 2011).

Consisting mostly of white middle-class Americans, local food movement followers advocate their food ideology as political action; by choosing these healthy local food options, a consumer is taking a stand against the capitalization and environmentally unfriendly food markets. Participants in this movement have disposable income in which to participate in this strategy, a position that can appear elitist when considering that food access for low-income, marginalized groups has been determined by availability and affordability. Further, their doctrine excludes cultural differences in food consumption and the ways that certain diets are part of ethnic heritage. Despite the efforts of a few social food movements, impoverished communities that have no access, or can't afford these types of foods, are being excluded in the larger, critical rhetoric of the white-led food movement (Alkon, Agyeman 2011).

The local food movement urges everyone to switch from the industrial food system and support locally farmed foods by “voting with your fork” (Alkon, Agyeman 2011). By this action you are supporting the consumerism of non-industry goods. Yet, the positionality of upper-middle class individuals affords them opportunities to make these choices. How are the economically depressed, urban poor supposed to choose when there are little to no choices available? It is hard to imagine them having the ability to “vote with their fork.” But while the local food narrative has often neglected this semblance of classicism, it equally disregards the racial implication of whiteness (Alkon, Agyeman 2011).
The participation of farmer’s markets and CSA’s is overwhelmingly white. Many African Americans are “cognizant of the whiteness of these spaces,” and do not proportionately share in the alternative food systems with the same velocity as white populations. While there is some participation of African American growers and food organizers, it would be hubristic to think of these numbers as a solution to the overarching racial exclusion inherent in the white discourse of alternative food institutions. According to Guthman, “much alternative food discourse hails a white subject to these spaces of alternative food practice and thus codes them as white. Insofar as this has a chilling effect on people of color, it not only works as an exclusionary practice, but it also colors the character of food politics more broadly and may thus work against a more transformative politics” (Guthman 2008).

Rachel Slocum points out, “community food movements have been slow to address issues of white privilege” (Alkon, Agyeman 2011; Slocum 2006). The approaches of the local food movement have ranged from an indifferent exclusivity to charity programs that have proliferated as outreach movements. Many in these food-related humanitarian efforts attempt to side step racism because of a liberal notion of being morally good. However, it is presumptuous and condescending to promote a “particular vision of the good life” by telling folks to eat foods that they cannot find or afford while giving it to them as charity. This discourse of “whiteness” within alternative food initiatives happens unconsciously and ignores, or even denies, racist implications. By condemning those that eat industrial foods and perpetuating a food ideology, while also ignoring the structural injustices of food
access, members of these local food movements reflect their race and class privilege (Alkon, Agyeman 2011).

As observed in several studies, (Guthman, 2008; Hinrichs, 2002), often the programs that attempt to address these issues are unsuccessful and do not effectively engage the social diversity of the communities themselves. These studies have shown that increased involvement of fresh market programs in impoverished communities has little effect on social inclusiveness (Hinrichs and Kremer 2002). Further, the political implications of “white people” coming to the dietary rescue of the urban black poor only reify glaring notions of white supremacy. Therefore, it is important to distinguish the difference in engaging the structural impediments in these underserved communities, rather than simply providing charity.

As the 2002 study performed by Claire Hinrichs and Kathy S. Kremer shows, providing healthy food options of fresh produce to low-income communities in a farmer’s market setting has little effect on participation. In addition, those that did participate showed a strong correlation to middle-class income and education. Most universal programs aimed at providing support for low-income families, such as social security and property tax credits, have not benefited those that are truly in need. They mostly provide for the upper and middle-classes, or the “advantaged” (Hinrichs, Kremer 2002).
Food Justice

In response to both the injustice of the food system and the racial blindness of the local food movement, food justice has taken root in many cities across the United States. Communities of color are also beginning to engage in food justice activism and have mobilized to address the economic injustices and empower marginalized citizens. “Essential to the food justice movement is an analysis that recognizes the food system itself as a racial project and problematizes the influence of race and class on the production, distribution and consumption of food” (Alkon and Agyeman 2011). By combining social justice with an alternative food discourse, food justice is establishing a socioeconomic consciousness to the food movement.

These programs are working to leverage the food-based economic development that has marginalized their communities by emphasizing the view that people are not consumers, they are citizens. Many programs have been rethinking local strategies with the global food movement. There is an increasing use of the word justice and healthy communities. This work can be seen by a few of the organizers that have started doing food access work in their communities: The People’s Grocery in West Oakland (DeSanctis, 2010); the California Food and Justice Coalition; Ron Finley, guerilla gardener of South Central L.A.; and the Detroit Food Justice Task Force in Detroit (detroitfoodjustice.org).

Growing Power Inc. is based in Milwaukee and Chicago and diverted its resources to develop Growing Food and Justice for All Initiative, a sub-organization whose mission is to dismantle racism within the food system. The Agricultural Justice Project’s standards are being developed through a participatory process with
input from stakeholders, including farmers, farmworkers and indigenous citizens, retailers and consumers. By using antiracist strategies in their food work, these organizations have built relationships between local governments, researchers, non-profits, and educational institutions to understand food security (Alkon and Agyeman 2011).

However, the application of local food rhetoric as it pertains to social justice in the food movement is a fairly new concept. Most of the organizations that are currently focusing on racially motivated food justice are typically “scant and scattered” (Alkon and Agyeman 2011). There is no collective organizational unit and these movements are more or less isolated. Further, there are ways in which the terms that are used to describe food justice, the local food movement and sustainability have been blurred.

The ways that food justice is used across alternative food movements varies depending on the focus of the particular movement. For instance, some of the definitions of food justice used in sustainable and ecologically sound agriculture seem to have more ambiguous definitions (Mazzarino, 2012). This perspective is more of an agrarian notion of how communities can globally work agricultural land in a way that is sustainable (Alkon and Agyemen, 2011). Other definitions tend to blend all food related issues together from working conditions of immigrant farmers, genetically modified plants (GMO’s), an opposition to companies like Monsanto, industrial food production, and food deserts (Leonard, 2013).

Food justice, among the many definitions, has formed around inequality in food access. As participation from low-income communities of color slowly
increases, to be politically effective food justice’s function should be completely inclusive and operate on the fact that causes of food inaccessibility have been historically racial (Alkon and Agyemen, 2011; Geronimus, 2000). As I’ve shown thus far, the aims toward a just political food system are vast and are rife with politics of competing interests. Therefore the notion of justice as a banner phrase for food access should be examined in both process and practice. Furthermore, the strategies of urban farming and community gardening by non-profits and food justice organizations should be investigated.

 Often, these communities have such high concentrations of poverty and crime that a garden placed in an urban lot, albeit for good purposes, cannot begin to address the larger structural issues that have informed food access. Yet food access is one piece in the aggregated processes of injustice, and urban farm programs cannot be the panacea for such a large impetus of underserved community health and prosperity (Alkon and Agyeman, 2011). However, these groups have the potential to provide new political challenges as well as providing individual opportunities in underserved communities. Therefore the function of non-profits and these new activist organizations promoting food justice should be explored analytically and politically in order to strengthen their ability to help others.

**Justice for Whom and the dilemma of non-profits**

Increasingly there seems to be connections between phrases like “local food” and “good food” in food justice activism. Food Justice on the local level also supports the notion that the local food market is ideal (Alkon and Agyeman, 2011). As E.
Melanie DuPuis et.al. asks in the paper *Just Food?, “is ‘the local’ intrinsically just?”* (Alkon and Agyeman 2011). Their paper warns food justice advocates from referring to “the good,” as in “good food,” to move society towards an ideal. As they state, this may be the “creation of a single set of universal values intrinsically non-egalitarian, creating a situation where some determine a single set of ideals...” (Alkon and Agyeman 2011). If the new rhetoric of *local* and *justice* is supposed to add a value of what should be right and just through food discourse, then as DuPuis asks, can this be viewed as an amendment to the Social Contract?

The notion of creating a single set of values is contrary to the ideals that modern society was founded upon. This is what Hobbes called the state of social chaos that creates tension between individual liberty and the Social Contract. According to DuPuis, both Marx and Rawls agree, “the solution to social problems was not the reestablishment of particular normative values, but the establishment of better political processes” (Alkon and Agyeman 2011).

Further, many of these food justice programs that align with local food initiatives sell the food that they grow to food deserts at discount prices and rely on sales to wealthier patrons to subsidize their food production. Such a method promotes the ideology that individual consumption is preferable to social change, and implies a market-based solution to food availability. In their book *Cultivating Food Justice*, Alice Hope Alkon and Julian Agyeman describe how this process is contrary to the structural analysis of food Justice:

> Market-based solution are inherently undemocratic... and food justice programs are therefore uncomfortably split between the
communities they seek to serve and the wealthier patrons who enable the financial success of their projects (Alkon and Agyeman 2011).

Alkon and Agyeman contend that this wedges food justice between justice and sustainability. Because the prices of those foods still remain unaffordable compared to cheaper processed foods, these programs have to convince low-income citizens that healthier options are preferable. Instead of providing these temporary solutions that capitulate to the same injustices created by market-based solutions, Alkon and Agyeman urge food justice activists and scholars to think beyond the current strategies of the local food movement and pursue a more policy-oriented approach (Alkon and Agyeman 2011).

To act in the local food systems is to act in a sort of “participatory democracy” (Alkon and Agyeman 2011). Yet this political process fails it’s stated goals if the voices of those with the lowest income cannot advocate for themselves. A liberal democracy is one in which all have equal access to a political voice. This self-determination and advocacy is critical to the food justice position. But the only established alternative for such social action in the neoliberal city is through local organizations and non-profits that would work on their behalf. As I am suggesting here, these efforts may unintentionally align more with the urban agenda of business elites in the era of professional non-profit money. “Political sociologists who study elites have described in detail the power of local elites and the defeat of democratic power in U.S. cities and localities” (DuPruis; Alkon and Agyeman, 2011; Smith, 2013).
Alkon and Agyeman further argue that the position of non-profits and social issue driven organizations extend rather than resist this dominance (Arena, 2012; Alkon and Agyeman, 2011). As a detour from legislative avenues, some organizations have diffused political power. They reduce social action by localizing social inequality within underserved communities, and leaving the burden of self-reliance to individuals that have no other alternative than non-profits that have assumed the role of providing necessary services (Mele, 2013; Mayer, 2013; Arena, 2012; Alkon and Agyeman, 2011).

Federal and state governments have yet been able to effectively legislate on the issue of food access for those residents that occupy these communities in need. Most of the federal government’s participation in food access thus far has been through emergency food programs. While there have been studies issued by the USDA on the existence of food deserts and the disproportionate availability between different communities in relation to income, action has only begun to take place on the issues of chemical usage in agriculture and adverse worker conditions (Farmworkerjustice.org; Mazzarino, 2013).

However, in an effort to reduce food insecurity, the USDA has funded a competitive grant to help low-income communities that are food insecure. Since 1996, The Community Food Projects Competitive Grant Program’s (CFPCGP) mission was to boost self-sufficiency in these food insecure areas. Since its inception, the program has funded more than 240 projects around the country. Their mission states that they strive to “create systems that improve the self-reliance of community members over their food needs.” While this seems like the
federal government stepping up to address the issue of food access, it is important to bear in mind the neoliberal rhetoric of ‘self-reliance,’ and ‘competition’ in its mission (Alkon and Agyeman, 2011).

As governmental programs attempt to engage the issues presented by social activism the language of neoliberal urban practices come into alignment. However, many organizations and non-profits can prevent civil action from influencing policy—reshaping definitions in the process. While they appear to address social disparity they also muddle any political agenda through bureaucracy. As noted earlier, Mayer points to the ways that such political action and civil disobedience becomes absorbed in the larger neoliberal process. Activist organizations, in order to secure funding, wrap their mission into the notions of ‘individualism’ and ‘self reliance’ that are hallmarks of austere and conservative policy.

The capitalist underpinning of neoliberalism in these instances works through the non-profit system as a ‘competition’ in the ways that government funds are not given on the basis of direct need. Organizations are subject to the government purse; if they don’t follow a certain development agenda they could potentially lose funding. Further, the onus is on the non-profit organization to find those most in need and competitively establish themselves as a viable solution in the arena of public funding. This reifies the capitalist structure by not providing on a need basis, but rather who can write the best grant. The organizations that get federal grants are those that are experts at navigating the federal contract system, and are not necessarily those that are experts at facilitating and executing the services they have been granted money to provide. This could be viewed as social
injustice becoming a new market in the process of issuing federal and state funds. If so, then in some ways non-profits and organizations promoting social activism have become intermediaries of the capitalist system of government that suppresses radical action by acting on behalf of recipients of injustice (Allen, 2010; Arena 2012; Mayer, 2013).

We should also ask the question of whether or not the local politics of these community-based organizations function as harbingers of change in food politics if “local politics prioritize local landowning elites” (DuPuis; Alkon and Agyeman, 2011). Not all local projects are concerned with equality (DuPuis; Alkon and Agyeman, 2011). Many within the local food movement that align with local elites act on the basis of pursuing certain health goals out of a class-based desire to help those in need while maintaining local interests. Likewise, these initiatives may not be concerned with, or have any real impact on what DuPruis calls, “egalitarian distribution of healthy foods” (Arena, 2012; DuPuis; Alkon and Agyeman, 2011).

It should be evaluated whether some organizations promoting food justice are truly effective. They may be working on behalf of low-income communities to insert some perceived version of the good life that may not necessarily be shared by all. Communities, through local, state and federal governments have been able to get money for food access initiatives as non-profit entities, but how do we know that this money is affecting food access for these communities. Many studies so far have shown that they do not (Hinrichs and Kremer, 2002; NPR, 2012). A conscientious activist practice would work politically through collective action to secure food justice by legislating food access for underserved communities. Therefore, there is a
continuing need for more quantifiable evidence on the impact and best practices of organizations promoting local food justice.

Grow Dat Youth Farm

Grow Dat Youth Farm is a non-profit organization, and a flagship program of the Tulane City Center that supports social innovation in the city of New Orleans. The mission is to nurture a diverse group of young leaders through the meaningful work of growing food. Youth are chosen from partner schools in the area and employed on a farm site located in City Park. Student workers sell 60% of the produce that they grow at farmers markets, and 40% they donate to local residents in the community. The program is a paid internship and job-training program for students in New Orleans.
During their employment, students participate in educational activities that address a range of social issues, focusing on food access and nutrition. The design of the Grow Dat program incorporates a multidisciplinary approach that imbues students with necessary communication skills and job training, empowering them to be leaders in their community. In the spring of 2013, Grow Dat will have completed its 3rd programmatic year, graduated over 56 students and harvested 20,000 lbs. of fresh food. Of the food grown by students, over 12,000 lbs. were sold and over 8000 lbs. have been donated to residents of New Orleans (Grow Dat, 2013).

**Structured for Sustainability**

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina many local institutions were working to restore New Orleans, and in keeping with its dedication to community based projects Tulane University created the Tulane City Center. This new entity would be the outreach arm of the school of architecture and would focus on improving the city through urban strategies and environmentally and culturally informed principles. The Tulane City Center worked in collaboration with many organizations, including the New Orleans Food and Farm Network (NOFFN), to bring this new energy into the development of New Orleans city spaces. Together they provided design and technical support on small urban farm projects around the city.
In 2009, the Tulane City Center began talks of expanding the landscape of food education in the city of New Orleans. In the fall of that same year, President Scott Cowen of Tulane University approached City Center director Scott Bernhard and associate director Dan Etheridge with the prospect of adding a youth engaged, urban farm program to it's initiatives. Similar to the Edible Schoolyard model, they imagined a program that would focus on students after the K-8th grade level.

A few years prior, Tulane graduate Johanna Gilligan had been developing an idea for a youth leadership program that would employ students. During her work as an ACT prep teacher in New Orleans school system, she noticed some of the issues undermining the health and education of her students. Many were employed in the fast food industry, receiving most of their meals on the job and working long hours. In school they displayed fatigue, a lack of focus and poor communication skills. The challenges the students faced, and the deteriorated food landscape in New Orleans, motivated Johanna to envision a farm program that hired teenagers to grow organic food.

After several years away, Johanna Gilligan returned to New Orleans where she began working as the educational programs manager at NOFFN. Aware of the work that Johanna wanted to do with youth and farming, Dan Etheridge approached Johanna with the opportunity to bring her ideas to life. The City Center's goal was to support a youth farm education project that could eventually run independently. Together Johanna, Dan Etheridge and Scott Bernhard, along with Stephanie Barksdale of the Tulane School of Social Entrepreneurship, began talks of assembling such a program.
The group began researching best practices and other youth farm programs, which led them to Urban Roots in Austin, TX. Urban Roots is a youth development program that brings access to healthy food through sustainable agriculture. Their methods of pairing agricultural work with intensive skill building exercises for students matched closely to the model that Johanna and the team envisioned. After visiting the program in Austin, they spent several months documenting structural elements of all the youth farms they researched resulting in a Look Book. The Look Book became the document that modeled existing youth farms, and allowed them to present components of the program they wanted to create. It was out of this research and the drafting of the white paper that the youth farm would be born.

Generating the White Paper was pivotal; it laid out how the program would run, and how it would need to be funded. The document also solidified the partnership with Tulane University as the entity incubating the program and serving as its initial fiscal agent. With a green light, Johanna left NOFFN to develop the new program. Johanna worked with the Tulane team to fully articulate the details of the plan before launching the pilot. Through this incubation process, the program was able to effectively launch in a way that strengthened its mission and ensured its longevity. This provided a head start that most urban farm and community garden projects don’t have. It has allowed for Grow Dat to become fully structured and actualized by giving the program time to refine methods, purpose and strategy.

In February of 2011, the Grow Dat staff launched the pilot year at HollyGrove Market Farm in New Orleans. With the help of Macon Fry the Garden Guy, a
consulting Louisiana farmer; and volunteers Tony Lee and Lanette Williams, two local community members; they ran the program with 13 students. The growing momentum and success of the program enabled them to hire Co-director and farm manager Leo Gorman, as well as education and program specialists Jabari Brown and Jeanne Firth. The name “Grow Dat,” derived from the “Who Dat” nation, a phrase associated with the New Orleans Saints football team. Because of the popularity of the phrase and its significance for New Orleans, students and staff believed that “Grow Dat” would be an appropriate moniker for an Urban Farm program located in the city.

**The Work They Do**

“More than one out of every five Louisiana young people ages 16-24 is considered ‘disconnected,’ meaning that they are not in school and not working” (Agenda for Children, 2010; Flagoust, 2012). “Only 37% of African Americans graduate college within six years” (politics365.com).

Students that are hired at Grow Dat spend half of their time on the farm in the work of growing food. 40% of harvested produce is donated to Shared Harvest partners, individuals and organizations that have limited access to locally grown, fresh food. Donated produce is distributed several times a month during the growing season to a combination of partners including area hunger relief agencies,
member-based social organizations, social aid and pleasure clubs, non-profits, families and individuals. The other 60% of produce that is grown is sold directly to consumers at the Crescent City Farmers Market, farm stand at the St. Bernhard housing project and an on-site Saturday farm stand in City Park. They also sell wholesale to restaurants and fresh market produce stores such as Hollygrove Market and Farm (Gorman, 2013).

When the students aren’t working on the farm, they are engaged in critical education in the Grow Dat outdoor classroom. This multiuse space, designed by the Tulane City Center team, contains a full kitchen and a large area for group lectures and other programming. Engineered to be eco-friendly, this space facilitates learning, production and class discussions. In classes, students learn the four main components of the Grow Dat curriculum. The first is agricultural skill and learning how to grow sustainably. The second is food justice and anti oppression training that includes inequity within society, as well as in food access. The third is food preparation and nutrition, and the fourth is leadership training (Firth, 2013).

The movements surrounding food justice are heavily tied to environmental movements in New Orleans (Roberts, 2011). Students are taught how to farm sustainably and in accordance with the environment. Issues on the impact of chemicals, pesticides and the negative effects of industrial agriculture are discussed and reflected upon. They participate in intensive cooking classes with local chefs and nutritionists. Here, students learn the fundamentals of cooking and how to prepare meals that will ensure them the healthiest lives. Students also take home the food that they grow and are encouraged to share it and cook with their families.
During other program hours students participate in LOOP, an advanced outdoor leadership training. LOOP creates outdoor activities where youth take emotional risks through personal skill building training. Students also participate at the Crescent City Café in connection with several partner organizations that address hunger and poverty throughout New Orleans. Crescent City Café unites young adults around the common purpose of serving the community. There, they serve the homeless with food they have grown with the goal of eradicating the stigma of homelessness while advancing the praxis of food justice. This is done by serving citizens with dignity and treating them as guests worthy of dignity rather than as people in need of charity. Students are encouraged to sit and speak openly with guests and share meals (CCC, 2013).

In order to ensure student engagement, Grow Dat groups students at different achievement levels to inspire peer-based learning. This method is paired with the fundamental skill-building tool, “Real Talk.” “Real Talk” is a highly effective youth engagement technique created by the Food Project in Boston, that has been proven to enhance communication and collaborative work skills, teaching youth and staff how to give praise and constructive criticism.

**Addressing Structural Inequality**

It is important to note that Grow Dat Youth Farm is a collaborative local effort. They sponsor luncheons that are driven by the issue of food access, health and youth leadership. Through this work Grow Dat is able to bring together donors and local leaders with members of the community and the families of their students around
these issues. This community engagement compliments their work of inspiring youth from different backgrounds and allows for the community to “come together in research and practice to support public health, the local economy and sustainable food systems in South Louisiana” (GrowDat.org). Through diversity and a structural understanding of racism and inequality, Grow Dat has been able to address many issues within the context of youth in New Orleans.

As of 2013, the program has graduated over 60 students, and instead of simply growing and providing food, Grow Dat has created jobs for these young people. Receiving this training gives them transportable skills and has enabled them to contribute to their communities. While pairing this work with an education on poverty, homelessness, and nutrition, students have learned how class, gender, and racial inequality inform food access. These lessons are taught in a classroom style setting, but are also learned as situations arise in their daily lives. This occurs internally first, as students are encouraged to make changes at home and at work through food purchase changes and healthy dietary habits. Then the work happens externally, as students run mobile farm stands in underserved areas, acting within their communities, and directly addressing the availability of fresh food for residents and neighbors.

Sections of New Orleans can be neighborhood-centric and the placement of the Grow Dat farm in City Park was an important part in thinking about how to perform food access inspired work in a racially neutral space. The farm and the park are located right in the middle of the city. Grow Dat saw that the placement of the farm
here would allow the students to come together and learn outside of their racially
codified neighborhoods (Gilligan, 2013).

Many youth in New Orleans, especially those that aren’t in school, are confined
to their urban neighborhoods. Some of Grow Dat’s students have never swam in
local creeks, lakes and riverbeds, or even experienced the outdoors. The high ropes
course and canoeing through LOOP acts as more than just an outdoor activity, it
provides them with an opportunities that are sometimes not afforded to urban
youth. Having real spaces to exercise and experience the natural environment may
not be possible with dilapidated and potentially unsafe localities. By bringing
students to LOOP, Grow Dat allows them to participate in physical outdoor activities
within a safe space outside of the limited confines of their neighborhoods. Students
are granted opportunities to see themselves as participants in such activities and
understand the environment in a way that might never have been possible (Lee,
2013; Gilligan, 2013).

The program has worked to expand to engage graduates in the future work of
the organization. Although it is still a relatively young program, Grow Dat has
created an alum system where graduated students come back and help to run the
program. Other outreach keeps graduated students connected to new development
opportunities as well as providing jobs, networking and scholarships (Gilligan,
2013).

One recent graduate was nominated out of 700 area students for a Posse
Scholarship, a competitive scholarship provided to first generation college students.
The drop out rate for these students is very high and the purpose is to ensure
supports so that they can graduate college. With the help from Grow Dat, this young student was challenged to express themselves in knew ways and establish new connections to build solid future relationships. That year she became one of 20 that received the Posse Scholarship (Gilligan, 2013).

While Grow Dat is a new and growing non-profit, they have been able build strategies to address some of the structural problems within New Orleans. Along with the educational components they have created new ways to support students within the program. Some of these opportunities arose while I was working with them.

As one example, a former student was arrested in the midst of programming season. He had given a ride to a friend to pick up some personal items that were later found to be stolen. The student, having not directly committed any crime was arrested as an accessory to burglary. We learned that the New Orleans District Attorney has a 90-day waiting period to determine the charges in such cases. As policy, if the accused is unable to make bail, they have to wait in jail. The student’s bail was set at $3,000 and his family was unable to get him out. The period of time that the student would have to wait in jail would have prevented him from graduating high school. If he had missed this opportunity, he would have aged out, meaning that he would be too old to participate in the New Orleans school system (Gilligan, 2013).

It is a continuing held fact that the prison and criminal justice system in New Orleans is especially hard on young African American males as it is throughout the U.S. Once in, most find themselves trapped for life. Many are poor, and without any
access to networks it can be hard for them to legally advocate for themselves. Even after being released, most are branded as criminals making it extremely difficult to find any access to jobs. Some that are not found guilty of any crime will still find themselves ensnared by the criminal justice system, and the presence of any record increases the probability of future arrests and harsher sentencing (Alexander, 2010; Tonry, 2011).

Grow Dat was able to connect with a series of partners to coordinate within the court system and get the student’s docket moved. A new judge to the case allowed the student to be released on a Surety Bond with the obligation that he would finish school. Because of his involvement with Grow Dat the student had support in navigating the system; this lowered his bail to $200 dollars, allowed him to graduate, and provided dismissal upon completion. The student is now in a job-training program partnered with Grow Dat that will place him into a job. The program will follow him for a year to make sure that he is doing well. He is currently working with both programs to get into college.

During my time with the program there was also a shooting at a second line parade. Much of the staff and myself were present at the event. The tragedy became part of national news and some of the staff and their community partners were directly affected. After the event Grow Dat conducted a weeklong trauma training and nonviolence summit. During this training they screened the film “Shell Shocked” and had an open discussion forum where students were able to talk about their personal experiences with violence. Together with students, the team imagined possible solutions to address the violence within their communities. The response
to the post trauma training spurred some discussions within the greater New Orleans community. These discussions led to some policy initiatives that were pursued by community leaders and local partners.

**Conclusion**

Grow Dat is one of many organizations thinking of creative, sustainable ways to bring change to communities hard hit by limited food access and disconnected youth. Their approach seems particularly well suited for addressing the issue of health and community leadership in New Orleans and could be seen as a valuable model. The goal in this study is not to condemn other alternative food institutions. Many have done admirable work to better our understanding of health and ecologically sound methods for agriculture, and it is in no way unethical to promote healthy diets and support environmentally friendly practices. Rather, the aim is to analyze the ways that alternative food movements that rely on farmer’s markets, CSA’s, farm-to-school programs and other hands-on agricultural programs may not be acknowledging the inequality within our food system. The central problem with the various approaches to food access programs, especially ones that are conceived to educate from a privileged position, is the lack of a deep structural analysis of racism and the ways in which certain race/ethnic groups have been historically
disadvantaged, leaving them unable to make the same choices as white, affluent participants.

Notions of dietary purity that reflect privilege only serve to reproduce historical inequality. As a starting point, food justice discourse should address the racial inequality within the food system. Again, referring to Alkon and Agyeman: “‘Food deserts’ landscapes were created through a combination of industrial location, urban planning, and racist mortgage lending practices...the food movements failure to incorporate the histories and experiences of people of color into its narrative leads to the creation of ostensibly colorblind alternatives that subtly reflect white cultural histories” (Alkon and Agyeman, 2011).

Those who are receiving privileges, and those who are being disadvantaged needs to be the first consideration when encouraging people to buy and consume certain foods. According to DuPruis, the politics of who is “good” determined by the food that they consume can “both hide and perpetuate hegemony” (DuPruis; Alkon and Agyeman, 2011). This study urges that food discourse be practiced politically in a way that questions rather than extends that inequality. Therefore, the discussion of food justice can start with equal food access before telling people how to cook and how to eat.

The historical measures by which black and other ethnic group neighborhoods have become entrenched in a cycle of urban renewal and development by typically white-led government and business is central to the study of food access. Much more research has gone into the relationship of food and cultural identity than “the structural context in which these relationships occur”
Further, the ways that CSA’s and local farms require dedicated buy-in to maintain operation and practice cannot be disregarded. “The vast majority of local food initiatives operate on the capitalist principles, stressing profit, growth, and efficiency” (Allen, 2010; Alkon and Agyeman, 2011). The type of financial requirements and time commitments required to participate in urban farming may be asking too much of communities that are struggling with unemployment, distressed living conditions, and community safety.

We can compare this to the dilemma surrounding public housing issues discussed in the first half of this essay. Speaking about public housing, Goetz commented:

> The overestimation of the impact of neighborhood is compounded by an incomplete understanding of the neighborhood dynamics themselves... [and] though there is a compelling body of evidence that neighborhood context affects poverty, it is less clear which factors matter most and which, if addressed, will improve community and individual outcomes most effectively” (Goetz, 2013).

Therefore, it is necessary to have an appropriate approach to food access that includes the social and economic obstacles and one that continues to adopt to new pressures of climates. Distancing ourselves from charity and embracing a more substantive action through solidarity can be the beginning of this process.

As stated in an article by Amara Foster, one federal policy solution for food access in New Orleans could come from First Lady Michelle Obama’s “Let’s Move” initiative. It included child nutrition spending and different measures to address
hunger as part of the Presidents fiscal budget in 2011. (americanprogress.org). The purpose of the initiative was to promote healthy eating, fitness, and food access in low-income neighborhoods. Included in the spending was $400 million a year to help bodegas and small corner stores carry healthy food options in underserved communities. Helping communities to receive these funds and increase food access could be a positive move for local non-profits and community organization.

Local food initiatives that attempt to promote a more just distribution of food may need to rely on larger political powers than local movements to achieve equitable pursuits. While recognizing the differences between all of its dispersed machinations, food justice should come together under a more comprehensive mission that politically addresses food access inequality as it moves alongside the local food agenda. The potential is there, and as DuPruis puts forward, “the ‘moral economy’ of local food systems embedded in communities with shared values may therefore be more of a pragmatic alliance between substantially different political interests with substantially different ideas about the meaning of social justice” (Alkon and Agyeman, 2011).

The strongest way to affect change for the future of food justice may come by addressing the issues at the youth level. This can happen by educating youth, and providing a structural context of the current state of urban communities as a way to reimagine, refashion, and reestablish them equitably. Community organizations must come together with true food justice to create a stronger political push towards more just food solutions for all.
Reflection

Some of the most robust learning moments at Grow Dat happened during the work I did as a representative of the Grow Dat program at City Hall in New Orleans. There I worked to procure licenses, and certificates for many of the projects that the program was engaged in for the 2013 spring growing/educational season. The process really demonstrated the amount of bureaucracy and red tape that is involved with even the smallest projects. It put into perspective the obstacles facing food justice movements, and social activists who are trying to engage the city in their work.

I was also able to lend expertise to the program in some previously learned areas in data entry and payroll. Working with local credit unions, we made opportunites to lend time to instruct students how to start bank accounts and manage money. I was trusted with the task of putting in student and faculty payroll information into the database. It was in this work, that I learned the effort it takes to run a non-profit. I imagined the difficulties that could come from a lack of human resources, and human capital.

My involvement with the program increased when I was asked to procure donated items that were used at a fundraiser and help design and facilitate a journalism apprenticeship. Here I saw the creative ways in which Grow Dat brought members of the New Orleans community together and talk about the work that they do and its importance for the youth and community. The journalism apprenticeship allowed me to work one-on-one with students to craft a story of their personal experiences. By showing them basic camera, audio recording and interviewing
techniques, the journalism apprenticeship gave Grow Dat students the ability to work creatively in the program, develop new skills, and show their personal progress.

I was able to learn many aspects of a small non-profit at Grow Dat and understand the difficulties of food justice programs that are trying to address the topic of food access. Trying to run a small business, and a farm, while educating youth takes a considerable amount of time and resources, and all of this comes before the work of trying to keep the program funded. Working alongside employees that make this work a part of their everyday lives revealed the power of change that can be actualized through inspiration, creativity and a willingness to do good work for the right reasons.

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