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Growing Justice

Portland, for many Americans, is paradise. A green, progressive paradise, and a self-styled metropolis of weird, it's also touted - even caricatured - as a food Mecca, where foodies of all persuasions wax rhapsodic. Many Portlanders, too, espouse the values of the 'alternative food movement,' which encompasses a dizzying array of diets but usually means some version of SOLE, i.e. sustainable, organic, local and ethical. However, lurking within the farmers' market basket is something less wholesome: food injustice. Not everyone shares the bounty grown by local farmers. The less fortunate are captives of another food culture, one which peddles cheap and convenient, fast and processed food (Michael Moss dissects and describes this culture in his book, *Salt Sugar Fat*, and how food companies employ this delectable triumvirate to lure the unsuspecting to their nutritional doom). The divide is stark, a gulf of class and race, and this diet, in addition to causing obesity and its concomitants (diabetes, heart disease, cancer, etc.), has increased health care costs dramatically (CDC 2). To change the alimentary landscape, our relationship with food needs to be radicalized. Education has and will continue to play a large part, but our culture also needs rerooting in the soil. As Ron Finley, a gardener, said in his TED Talk, "Gardening is the most therapeutic and defiant act you can do." Gardening should and can be transformation.

Food injustice plagues much of the United States. An obvious manifestation is hunger: in 2012, fifteen percent of Americans, forty-nine million people, were food insecure. Black, Hispanic, and single-mother headed families constitute a disproportionate number of these households. (Coleman-Jensen, Nord, & Singh 13) Less apparent are food deserts, which the United States Department of Agriculture defines “as urban neighborhoods and rural towns without ready access to fresh, healthy, and affordable food.” (United States) Vast swathes of the urban landscape (for example Chicago, Detroit and others) have been emptied of supermarkets and what our ancestors would have recognized as food. They are, instead, glutted with convenience stores and fast-food restaurants; these and their highly processed, nutrient-poor wares are linked to the epidemic of obesity. (Pereira 36-42) Furthermore, plenty of Americans, particularly the poor, either lack the knowledge to make informed nutritional decisions or the means to buy organic and local fare. They opt for conventionally grown food which may harbor residual pesticides and, increasingly, are genetically modified, although the evidence for health concerns is contradictory.

In the last dozen years a nascent food justice movement has begun to confront these and other food-related social justice problems. The movement’s goals are similar to and informed by those of environmental justice, as Robert Gottlieb and Anupama Joshi show in *Food Justice* (4-6). The book, a history and overview, defines the movement as “equity and fairness in relation to food system impacts and...a different, more just, and sustainable” relationship with our food (223). Gottlieb and Joshi analyze “how food is grown, produced, transported, accessed, and eaten” (5), discuss the efforts growers,

workers, eaters, and various levels of government have made to combat food injustice, and address a variety of solutions, as well as propose their own.

Despite Portland's reputation as one of the alternative food capitals, it isn't immune to this food injustice. The city is blessed with numerous local sustainable growers, CSAs (community-supported agriculture), farmers' markets, grocers, and co-ops offering organic and artisanal foods and foodstuffs, and with a political and social climate that fosters alternative food practices and beliefs. It is also home to those who are excluded from this abundance - lower-income residents, ethnic minorities, single mothers and their children. They can't afford to eat the same food as the more fortunate, whiter, better-educated, and affluent Portlanders.

A further complication is gentrification, described by the Centers for Disease Control as "the transformation of neighborhoods from low value to high value" with "the potential to cause displacement of long-time residents and businesses" (CDC). Neighborhoods that were predominantly low-income and/or nonwhite have been absorbed and annexed in recent years, forcing poorer residents into more affordable, less desirable areas of the city, such as East Portland, which has become a landing zone for the poor, less-educated and nonwhite (Friesen). East Portland, as well as Gresham and Rockwood (Griffin), suffers from the previously mentioned phenomenon of food desertification. As Portland's Bureau of Planning and Sustainability showed with a series of maps in 2009, neighborhoods in East Portland suffer from a dearth of nearby grocery stores, SNAP (the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or food stamps) usage has surged since the recession began, and there are fewer community and school gardens. It's

a nutritional ghetto.

While this disparity is troubling, the city of Portland and many concerned groups and organizations have made impressive efforts to combat these injustices. A not-so-short list includes Portland's community garden program, the Portland Multnomah Food Policy Council, the County Digs program, the Food Works CSA, Outgrowing Hunger, Hunger in Oregon, Golden Harvesters, Sisters of the Road, the Oregon Food Bank, the Portland Fruit Tree Project, Growing Gardens, Produce for People, Grow Portland, and the Urban Farm Collective. It's heartening that so much effort is made on behalf of the disadvantaged, yet hunger and other food injustices persist.

Julie Guthman, a professor of community studies at UC Santa Cruz, has written extensively about the alternative food movement and its fundamental elitism, what she characterizes as its white-coded practices and missionary efforts, i.e., "bringing... good food to others" (434-436). She argues that the kinds of projects popular in Portland and elsewhere (CSAs, education programs, farmers' markets) reflect the desire of white, idealistic, educated, middle-class people and aren't always what the recipients want or welcome (her research focuses primarily on African-Americans). Often they "want the opportunity of shopping with anonymity, convenience, and normality at conventional supermarkets, despite what advocates of alternative food might want for them," (443) and have a complicated relationship with farming and the soil, with "getting their hands dirty" (438). Guthman suggests addressing structural inequalities may be effective, such as "eliminating redlining, investing in urban renewal, expanding entitlement programs, obtaining living wages, along with eliminating toxins from and improving the quality of

the mainstream food supply” (443).

Guthman’s accusations ring uncomfortably true. Farmers’ markets don’t have an appreciable minority presence, even in Portland neighborhoods with sizable minority populations, such as St. Johns. Whole Foods and New Seasons don’t have very many low-income, African-American or Hispanic customers because, as noted, they’re unaffordable to many Portlanders. However, the city’s community gardens have lengthy wait-lists, especially in poorer neighborhoods (City of Portland), and immigrant community gardeners are well-represented in Portland (Anderson). African-American and Hispanic youths are active in various gardening organizations, including Grow Portland and the Food Works CSA; not all African-Americans are averse to growing food.

A celebrated guerrilla gardener may also prove Guthman wrong. Guerrilla, or subversive, gardening began in the 1960s, and is the (generally illegal) reclamation of abandoned or unused urban land. It has experienced a resurgence of sorts recently, possibly an effect of the recession (Wax). An especially inspiring guerrilla gardener is Ron Finley, who recently gave a TED talk to discuss his determination to transform his South L.A. neighborhood. He was tired of living in a food desert, observing the food-related ill-health of his community and experiencing the government’s unconcern. He planted fruits and vegetables in the parkway outside of his house, making it available to anyone in need (TED Talk). He incurred a citation from the municipal government, certainly not an idle threat considering the fate of the South Central Farm (an urban farm bulldozed by the city), but successfully resisted and won Los Angeles the right to plant

edibles in parkways without permits (Federman). With his organization, LA Green Grounds, he plants gardens around the city. His civil disobedience is a legacy of Martin Luther King and the civil rights movement, and may inspire more attempts at righting food injustice.

Turning our city, all our cities, into edible forest gardens informed by permaculture principles will do much to alleviate food injustice. A simplified definition of permaculture is the “design of ecologically sound, economically prosperous human communities” (Hemenway 5). It means working with nature rather than against it, being inspired by it, mimicking its methods. Philip Ackerman-Leist, a professor and director of the Green Mountain College Farm & Food Project, in his book *Rebuilding the Foodshed*, offers valuable ideas for achieving food justice, many grounded in permaculture philosophy. Some of his suggestions include rooftop gardening (58), food forests (170), and perennial crops (171-172). Imagine a cityscape glowing greenly in the summer light and respiring nightly. Imagine fruit trees instead of parking meters, and tomatoes and beans where empty brownfields languished, reclaimed by mycology. These may be dismissed as flights-of-fancy, but visionaries like Finley and Ackerman-Leist are necessary to feed people and restore the environment.

Education is, of course, an essential component in changing the food perspective, and is also part of Finley’s mission. Half of Portland’s schools have gardens, admittedly impressive, but only one high school and fewer than ten mixed and middle schools are so served (Portland Public Schools). These are crucial years in forming perceptions of food and farming. Every school needs a garden; if it’s impractical or impossible on the school

grounds, then somewhere nearby. Rooftop gardens, too, can be designed, and classrooms can be converted into temporary or permanent greenhouses. Farms and CSAs can also partner with schools or, as the National Gardening Association encourages, “adopt a school garden” (Ackerman-Leist 252), helping to educate the next generation. To respect and appreciate food, one must know and understand how food is grown and who does the growing. Pace Guthman, plenty of kids, of all races, are unafraid of dirtying their hands. As Finley said, “Kids grow kale, they eat kale.” It’s also an opportunity to discover and learn about the different food heritages of students, by growing traditional vegetables and fruits and using them to feed students and the community.

Food injustice won’t disappear easily or as quickly as sixty-four ounces of soda. Until every American can get an apple that isn’t “impregnated with pesticides” (Finley) without traveling ten times the distance it would take to find high-calorie, cheap, ultimately unsatisfying fast-food, work remains. Of course food needs to be cheap - real food, however, not the stuff that is slowly poisoning Americans. Subsidies for agribusiness, which artificially permits cheap and unwholesome food, need to be eliminated. They’re responsible for a great deal of environmental and labor injustice, and rampant diet-related illness. Subsidies could, instead, be given to growers and purveyors of healthy food (Smirl 3).

Evolutionaries, Finley’s neologism, are the evolution of Martin Luther King’s and Cesar Chavez’s activists. Gardening as transformation is Ron Finley’s mantra and needs to be embraced by all Portlanders and all Americans. What is needed are more Ron Finleys, more ‘sneaky gardeners,’ taking back the streets and lawns. Finley describes

himself as an artist. He “[uses] the garden, the soil like it’s a piece of cloth” (TED Talk).

When he harvests his food, the table can be laid: the tablecloth, the dishes, the cutlery, and the food. Until then, like Neruda, he “[asks] no more / than the justice of eating” (lines 48-49).

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