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9

Environmental and Food Justice

Toward Local, Slow, and Deep Food Systems

Teresa M. Mares and Devon G. Peña

Recently, the second author had a fascinating conversation with an acquaintance who identifies as a vegan activist. Living in the Pacific Northwest, she is highly committed to the Slow Food Movement and explained her philosophy of the connections between slow and local food:

If you go slow that means you also go local. Slow leads to local. I only eat local grains, veggies, fruits, and nuts. Every meal is slow-cooked from organic ingredients grown slowly by farmers that I know personally. Many are close friends and I often work on their farms for the food I need. I have become self-reliant and I have helped the local farmers become self-reliant. This unites slow and local food ethics. Together with my vegan diet, I am reducing my own carbon footprint. . . . The vegan philosophy means I am not guilty of inflicting pain on others including animals or the people who go hungry because so many of us still eat dead animal protein.

The second author then asked this vegan friend to explain more about the communities where her farmer friends live and work. All are white farmers who live in the Skagit watershed north of Seattle or the Chehalis watershed south. When asked if the vegan activist knew the names of the Native American first nations inhabiting these watersheds, her response was a disappointing surprise:

Well, in the Skagit, you know, there are a lot of multigenerational farmers who are not Native American. They have been here a long time and have as much stake in this watershed as any one else. But I don't remember the names of, you know, any tribes. I haven't met any Indians myself, so I really can't tell you much about the cultural history of the area. . . . It is also a problem with, or because of the conflicts over salmon recovery. The Indians and the farmers are fighting it out but I am not that well read on the matter.

This response came as a surprise because we naively expected that anyone with the values and ethics to become an advocate for local and slow food would also be concerned with the foodways of Native

communities in a given locality. Surely, one *must* be aware of the deep history of places to practice a politics of consuming local and slow food. Is it not essential in supporting local food systems to consider the severely crippled state of local Native food systems and the forced disappearance of heritage cuisines, resulting from the impact that even the most organic, vegan-friendly settler-farmers might be exerting on indigenous resource rights?

Our vegan friend lacked knowledge of Native ethnobotany, the rich traditions related to the collection and use of wild plants recognized and valued for their nutritional, medicinal, and spiritual properties. She did not know any of the wild mushrooms in the Skagit or Chehalis watersheds that are still harvested by Native people. Camus bulbs and huckleberries? Not aware. Further, she did not seem to fully realize the impacts of modern forestry, agribusiness (including organics), and urban sprawl on the habitat of native species in the area. By only considering the direct impacts of her food consumption practices, she drastically overestimated and simplified the degree of reducing her personal ecological footprint. Lacking depth about the environmental history of the lands of the Skagit and Chehalis, she assumed that organic farmers were necessarily sustainable and equitable. Lacking deep local knowledge, she could not estimate a more accurate rendition of the “ecological footprint” she partakes in by being a beneficiary of generations of structural violence and intergenerational historical trauma experienced by Native peoples and their floral and faunal kin in the Puget Sound bioregion.

While we both respect the commitment and self-reliant ethics that often accompany attempts to eat locally and slowly, and embrace the critique of corporate globalization that originally spurred the slow food movement abroad;¹ this exchange leaves us with many questions. First, is it *deep* enough merely to consider our carbon footprints, or must we consider the broader societal and cultural footprints that we leave behind? Second, should we not also consider how a call to eat locally invokes spaces that have been settled, colonized, ruptured, and remade through complex processes of human movement and environmental history making? And finally, is it not necessary to stand in solidarity with those communities that are disallowed from celebrating *their* local food because of forced displacement at the hands of multinational trade agreements like the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) or settler-led or corporate-engineered takeover of rural lands, seeds, and livelihoods?

This introductory vignette, while indeed provocative, is only one indication of the incompleteness and imperfection of alternative food

movements and the need for transformative work and critical thought in developing more just food systems. In this chapter, we seek to advance both the concept of and the movement for food justice by exploring how diasporic and immigrant gardeners mobilize deep senses of personal and collective identity while employing place-based agroecological knowledge in urban spaces. We begin with a brief critique of mainstream movements for alternative and local foods and their adherence to a food security discourse in order to problematize discussions of the local and the global. We then turn to the principles and history of the environmental justice (EJ) movement to consider how the food justice movement would be well served to integrate frameworks of sovereignty and autonomy developed by EJ activists and scholars. Through an analysis of our ethnographic data from field sites in Los Angeles and Seattle, we demonstrate how Mesoamerican diasporic and migratory peoples engage in a phenomenon we describe as *autotopography* or the grounding of self and communal identities through place making. In these cases, we consider the cultivation and celebration of meaningful food to be central to place making. We also consider how those with whom we work see food as more than a mere commodity, instead envisioning it as a relationship that forces us to stretch our understanding of what it means to grow and eat food justly.

Local Food in a Global World?

Vegans and other enthusiasts of what has often been termed *alternative food systems* do not necessarily embrace concepts of social justice or food sovereignty in their discourse and practice. Instead, the dominant constructs that direct and constrain the practices of many alternative farmers that produce for local food enthusiasts are tightly bound with the governmentalized USDA concept of “food security” and “organic certification.”² Most relevant to our immediate concerns in this paper is the dominant concept of food security and its inability to account for an understanding of food as more than just a nutritional commodity but rather, a set of social relations and cultural practices, including foodways and heritage cuisines that constitute a larger whole (Allen 2004; DeLind 2006; Esteva and Prakash 1998; Mares and Peña 2010).

The Community Food Security (CFS) movement in the United States has answered some of the critiques raised about the concept of food security developed at the international scale, elevating concerns over the cultural appropriateness and relevance of foods and the need for systems

thinking. Prominent food researcher Patricia Allen finds promise in the movement, but also raises concerns about the effects of alternative economic strategies that are found in community supported agriculture (CSA) and farmers market models and the possibility that these types of “designer” food production schemes may create a two-tiered food system built upon class differences.³ She also critiques the movement’s view that using food assistance programs is “dependence,” pointing out that in antihunger perspectives food is viewed as a *right* to be fulfilled by the state if the market, or for us the self-reliant community, fails. We commend Allen’s contributions in pushing the CFS movement to take into better account class inequalities and the material realities of those who are unlikely to benefit from the alternative economic arrangements most common in today’s urban food landscapes.

Other researchers have contributed thoughtful critiques and reflections on the CFS movement. In her article “Whiteness, Space, and Alternative Food Practice,” Rachel Slocum discusses how whiteness is produced and embodied in U.S. alternative food practices, focusing specifically on those practices that are framed within a discourse of CFS. She rejects the notion that whiteness is inherently negative, but rather questions how the ethics and politics embedded within alternative food practices might move “the US, collective, toward joy through food” (Slocum 2007, 521). While we echo Slocum’s desire to imagine new possibilities and go “beyond oppositional politics” (522), we question the ways that her argument serves to reify mainstream alternative food systems as the center by which all other practices might be judged. We propose that it is essential to open an inquiry into sustainable food practices that do not operate in opposition to, but rather *autonomously* from the mainstream alternative foods movement.⁴

Slocum outlines four broad types of alternative food projects, among them efforts that seek to “protect heirloom seed stock, native plants and soil fertility in addition to advocating in-season-eating and the promotion of groups’ food heritage” and those that “advocate for social justice for oppressed groups, bifurcated into producer/worker rights on the one hand and hunger and food insecurity on the other” (2007, 522). Slocum, in her much-needed interrogation into whiteness, argues, “The desire for good and sufficient food and jobs and thriving economies is not white. It becomes white through what white bodies do in this effort” (521). In reducing power dynamics to what “white bodies do,” Slocum fails to provide an analysis of structural violence and its relationship with state power and its practices and technologies of governmentality. Slocum

overlooks the fact that many of the practices she sees as “alternative”—including the preservation of heirloom seeds stock and native plants, regeneration of soil fertility, seasonally-oriented diet, and promotion of heritage cuisines—are precisely the traditional place-based practices of Native, Chicana/o, and other marginalized communities that we have borne witness to through our fieldwork or direct lived experiences. These are the same practices that are consistently celebrated in the discourse on local food, and claimed as “alternative,” but this involves the articulation of a broader social movement based primarily on “what white bodies do.” In the process, Slocum and other advocates apparently forget that these practices are already fully “alterNative”—in the sense of the deeply rooted practices of Native peoples that *alter* and challenge the dominant food system. Failing to acknowledge this alterNative source, white advocates of local food assert their privileged positionality and marginalize those who are most vulnerable to the enduring and cumulative effects of the structural violence and intergenerational historical trauma that have undermined local food systems.

Engaging communities that have been historically excluded from the mainstream alternative foods movement is critical in the movement for food justice. Within food justice, it is simply not enough to examine the ethics of going slow to go local. One *has to go deep*, and this means respecting local knowledge, wherever and whenever it is found. As discussed in our opening vignette, there is a wealth of multigenerational place-based agroecological, ethnobotanical, and gastronomical knowledge within Native communities in the United States. However, there is also a wealth of this knowledge in diasporic and immigrant communities that have faced parallel histories of colonization, displacement, and environmental racism.

We live in a time of neoliberal globalization and the mass displacement of rural place-based peoples who have been shoved away into what has been aptly described as a “planet of slums” (Davis 2006). This is a world that invokes the “end of the local and place-based” (cf. Appadurai 1996). The “end of the local” is said to be a result of the perpetual process of structural violence experienced by peoples and communities displaced from the land and into the migratory streams that bring, in our case, Mesoamerican native farmers into every major metropolitan center from Los Angeles to Seattle. A central component of this violent process derives from the effects of international trade agreements including NAFTA that have prompted massive increases in the prices of food staples, devalued local currency, opened up avenues for the dumping of

genetically modified and heavily subsidized food commodities, and devastated local communities (Patel 2007). Indeed, as a result of NAFTA, it is estimated that anywhere from 1.3 million to more than 2 million Mexican farmers were forced off their lands since the agreement went into effect on January 1, 1994 (Campbell and Hendricks 2006; Patel 2007).

While trade agreements are not the only contributing factor to transnational migration and movement, they exacerbate an appalling set of inequalities that transect the U.S.-Mexico border. These structural inequalities continue to threaten the wellbeing of working-class, poor, and laboring communities on both sides of the border through repeated attacks on their natural resources, access to food, and cultural traditions. The resurgence of far-right groups and ideologies seeking to “criminalize” transnational workers further cements the precarious and vulnerable position of people in the new Mesoamerican diaspora (see Chacon and Davis 2006); but it is also now leading to a mass mobilization of Mexican-origin and other Latina/o people in direct-action protests and legal challenges recently spurred by the draconian “Show Me Your Papers Law” (SB1070) in Arizona.⁵ Despite this, through our fieldwork we have been fortunate to witness amazing examples of resiliency, autonomy, and strength in the food practices of diasporic Mesoamerican peoples. Learning from these experiences, we believe that the food justice movement should adopt an organizing frame of food sovereignty—including the notion that food is not just about nutrition, it is also about culture. Food sovereignty implies a radical ethics that derives from a commitment to the defense and resurgence of already existing local, slow, and deep food practices in marginalized communities. This would allow activists, scholars, and cultivators to depart from focusing on issues of access (as dictated by a food security approach), to a more comprehensive focus on entitlements to land, decision making, and control over natural assets, structural conditions that would allow for the process of developing autotopographies that tie individual and collective identities to deep senses of place and healthy, culturally appropriate food practices.

Environmental Justice Principles and Food Justice: A Necessary Connection

The Principles of Environmental Justice (PEJ) were drafted and adopted in 1991 by delegates to the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit that took place in Washington, D.C. These principles

do not explicitly address issues related to environmental racism in our food systems. Nonetheless, movement activists have been involved in struggles for access to adequate and safe food since the earliest days of this movement through struggles against hunger and for food security. However, a more holistic understanding of urban agriculture has been a major concern of some EJ activists who have worked to connect issues of racism, food, and urban spaces since at least the 1980s (Pinderhughes 2003). Despite its exclusion from the PEJ, the theme of sustainable agriculture did appear as an area of concentration at the Second National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in 2002. This conference featured three separate agriculture and food-related “expert” panels and the publication of at least one preconference resource paper (Peña 2002). Prior to EJ Summit II there had been little systematic reflection and analysis of these issues within the movement’s itinerary of conferences, organizational meetings, and workshops.

The main points raised by the EJ Summit II discussions on sustainable agriculture were mainly related to the loss of local food security in low-income communities of color. However, at these discussions, Peña argued for a broader framework that also addressed how policies favoring globalization and concentration of agriculture create uncertainty for local food sovereignty:

[The EJ movement] can support local struggles to establish frameworks for local participation and control of the management of these [agricultural] lands. It is important to promote a movement that focuses not just on the restoration of land rights but, equally important, the recovery of traditional systems of local natural resource management . . . To support sustainable agriculture in indigenous [and diasporic] communities, the EJM must continue to support campaigns that link policies for the restoration of indigenous land and traditional resource rights with the theory and *practice of sovereignty* (i.e., self-governance according to customary law). From the vantage of indigenous [and diasporic communities] . . . there can be no sustainable agriculture without cultural survival and political autonomy. (Peña 2002, 24; italics and brackets added)

Peña’s vision of indigenous autonomous food systems moves the EJ movement beyond a narrow definition of *food security*, which treats food as a nutritional commodity, and toward a broad ideal of *food sovereignty* that encompasses the deeper social and cultural meanings indigenous and diasporic communities assign to food.

On the global stage, food sovereignty is a vision developed through and inspired by the work of La Via Campesina, an international peasant [sic] movement with members around the world. Rather than regarding food as a mere nutritional commodity, as the food security approach

does, food sovereignty posits food as a fundamental human right. In doing so, the movement places food systems in the contexts of a critique of and direct resistance against neoliberalism, the processes of displacement, and the inequitable distribution of land and other resources (see Brown and Getz, chapter 6, this volume; Holt-Giménez, chapter 14, this volume). In discussing the contributions of La Via Campesina, *Stuffed and Starved* author Raj Patel argues that food sovereignty is “important not only because it has been authored by those most directly hurt by the way contemporary agriculture is set up, but also because it offers a profound agenda for change for everyone [and that it] aims to redress the abuse of the powerless by the powerful, wherever in the food system that abuse may happen” (Patel 2007, 302; brackets added). The concept of food sovereignty is closely aligned with the broad vision put forth at EJ Summit II. We believe food sovereignty’s attention to power inequalities makes it the best starting place for re-envisioning food justice rooted in the practices of diasporic and immigrant communities in the United States, and a motivating challenge for food justice activists. The central rallying point of food justice should be to identify power dynamics in the food system with the goal of restoring self-determination, control, and autonomy to eaters and growers alike.

Our work with immigrant and diasporic indigenous communities in Los Angeles and Seattle revealed that practices of food sovereignty provide opportunities for the creation of autotopographies, the creation of deep senses of place. Those with whom we have worked use the cultivation of food to recreate their place-based cultural identities in the context of new landscapes. In doing so, they regard food not as a nutritional commodity but as that which encompasses a set of deep social and cultural relationships that foster community, cultural, and place-based identities.

Decommodifying Food in Autonomous Spaces: Lessons from the (Corn)field

The spaces of autonomy dedicated to building local food sovereignty are opening in thousands of local places across the world. The alterNative institutions that grassroots social movements are creating can bridge the divide separating producer from consumer while relying on collective intellectual, material, and cultural assets in order to decommodify food. As anthropologists and just food advocates, we have located our recent research on food systems within diasporic and migratory communities along the West Coast of the United States, with people who share

common stories of displacement and struggles to build community and maintain place-based identities amid structural violence and oppression. Employing community-based ethnographic techniques has proven useful to understand, learn from, and participate in these communities. Recognizing and engaging local knowledge has been instrumental in struggles by EJ activists who often *contest* the superiority of Western scientific expertise to engage local and indigenous knowledge as science in its own right. As anthropologists who choose to support and make connections between these movements, it is necessary that we do precisely what we would encourage the vegan activist whose words begin this chapter to do: de-center and question our own expertise, and critically engage the expertise and knowledge systems of immigrant, Native, and diasporic communities.

In this section we present ethnographies we have generated in collaboration with Mesoamerican and Latina/o farmers in two urban locales on the West Coast of the United States. These cases illustrate the role of autotopographical practices in sustaining vigorous and culturally appropriate local food systems that address underlying issues of violence, resilience, and autonomy. In a sense, the process of crafting place-based identities determines the “depth” of local food systems. The “thicker” a sense of place, the deeper the food-related practices that a community sustains. The cases—both in urban settings—involve diasporic Mesoamerican and *mestizo/a* peoples who have had to adapt to massive displacements from their origin communities. In each case, communities have established autonomous spaces in which the cultivation of food becomes a way for displaced farmers to weave their place-based identities into new landscapes and to negotiate their “social citizenship” in a “safe” and “self-made” space that can offer a buffer against elements of a nation that are increasingly hostile or ambivalent about their presence. Here, we focus on the possibility that autonomous food cultivation practices enable the families and communities working in these landscapes to create and sustain decommodified relationships to food. Thus, these examples have much to teach those whose food activism is limited to their own individual consumption.

The South Central Farmers

The South Central Farm (SCF) in Los Angeles was established following the Rodney King trial and subsequent uprising in 1992 and demolished in 2006 after a three-year campaign by the farmers and a global coalition to prevent eviction and enclosure by a private land developer. At fourteen

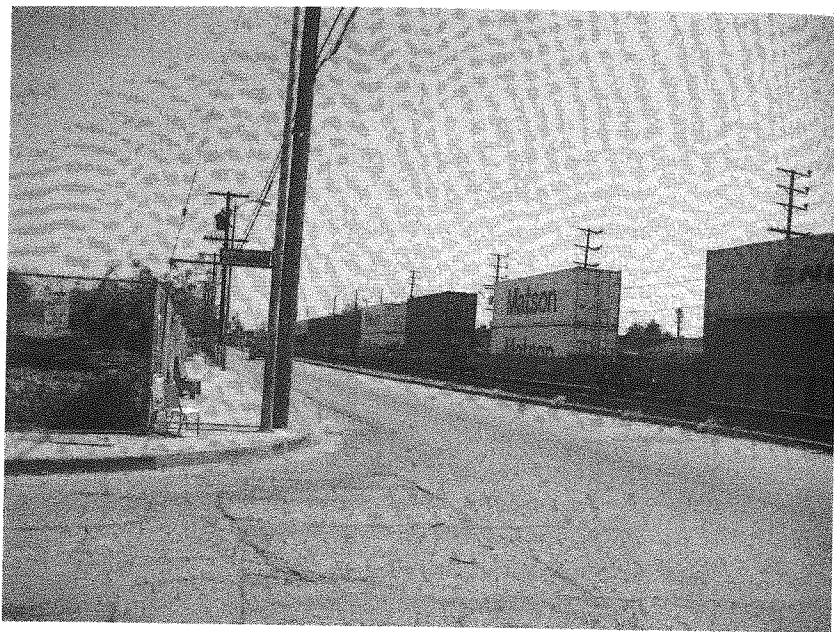


Figure 9.1 Alameda transit corridor connecting Port of Los Angeles/Long Beach with Island Empire intermodal hub

acres, ten of them intensively cultivated, it was one of the largest urban farms in a core inner city in the United States. The former farm site is located in an area of South Central L.A. zoned for industrial and residential uses; however, the site is presently surrounded by warehouses and wrecking yards. The site is framed on its west and east sides by one of the nation's principal railroad lines that links the Port of Los Angeles in Long Beach to regional freight transit hubs and a six-lane arterial viaduct (see figure 9.1).

Originally comprised of 360 families, the SCF included U.S.-born Chicana/os and people from indigenous diaspora communities originating in communities across Mesoamerica. For thirteen years, the farmers—including families of Mixtec, Nahua, Tojolobal, Triqui, Tzeltal, Seri, Yaqui, and Zapotec descent—relied on a unique piece of urban space to grow food as they worked toward self-reliance and conviviality. In the process of creating a Mesoamerican agroecological landscape in a U.S. inner city, they developed a collective system for local food sovereignty that fostered a strong sense of place for community mobilization.

Los Angeles is a dynamic city where ancient heirloom seeds of land race *maíz*, *calabacita*, and *frijol* (corn, squash, and beans) have found their way north from Mexico along with farmers from the southern Mexican states of Oaxaca or Chiapas. These seeds trace back five thousand years to the heart of Mesoamerica and have come to grow amid the hot pavement of the urban United States, thriving in vibrant inner-city cultural landscapes across North America.⁶ Family plots at the South Central Farm are perhaps best understood as the efforts of diasporic people to replicate the *huerto familiar* or hometown kitchen gardens in Mexico, Central America, Puerto Rico, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic. A comparison of the Maya kitchen garden and the typical modern family plot at the SCF reveals that Mexican gardeners continued to grow the sacred trinity of maize (*Zea mays* L.), beans (*Phaseolus vulgaris* L.), and squash (*Cucurbita pepo* L.). They also grew avocados (*Persea americana*), bananas (*Musa sapientum* L.), and traditional aromatic and medicinal herbs that are central to the classic Mexican *hortaliza* or herb patch (see figure 9.2).

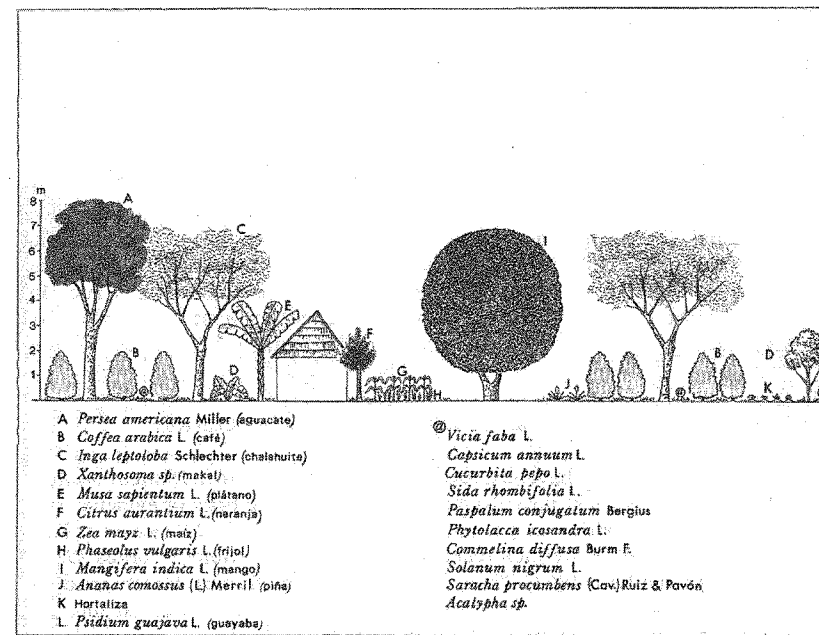


Figure 9.2 Classic Maya home kitchen garden (*huerto familiar*)

Repeatedly, farmers explained to the second author that many of the plants they have used for generations in Mexico are now only grown in urban farms and kitchen gardens in the United States. Indigenous diaspora families that were involved at the South Central Farm described how they no longer have relatives farming in Mexico and that these heirloom land race cultigens are therefore being preserved only through seed saving, planting, and cultivation practices in the United States and Canada (see Mares and Peña 2010). By asserting autonomy over their own food systems through cultivating foods they ate in Mexico, the South Central Farmers preserved both heirloom crop varieties and their own cultural identities.

The struggle of the South Central Farmers was an important example of an emerging, grassroots restoration ecology that produced formidable resistance to neoliberal enclosure and privatization of potential urban common spaces. As such, it represents an important turning point in the history, organizational forms, and terrains of struggle of the U.S. environmental justice movement. The South Central Farmers represent an example of a grassroots ecological democracy based on the integration and use of both material practices and biotic baggage (heirloom seeds and other plant germplasm) from point-of-origin communities and the reproduction of village-based forms of community self-organization. The SCF represents transnational diasporic people who were not only reshaping urban landscapes but also challenging the politics of urban planning and policy through the autonomous cultivation of food.

The vernacular foodscapes created at the South Central Farm are results of communities appropriating spaces to support urban agriculture, a pattern that is particularly important for low-income immigrant communities.⁷ *El jardín* (garden) is a space for the charting of individual autotopographies—self-telling through place shaping. This is certainly true of the classic home-based kitchen gardens that were grown at the SCF, and those that continue to spread across the urban United States. These *jardincitos* are spiritual and political symbols of a process involving nothing less than the *re-territorialization* of place as a home by transnational communities.

In the second author's interviews with farmers at the South Central Farm about why they garden, many replied with the same set of reasons: to supplement the family food budget; grow ingredients for traditional recipes; grow organic (meaning to grow one's own food in order to know where it comes from and that it is fresh); visit with friends and family members, learn about traditional foods from elders; feel more at home;

and to grow herbs and vegetables to supply family businesses. These kinds of gardens that are appearing across the West Coast are examples of emergent forms of urban spatial resistance. These struggles emerge through the process of autotopography—and unfold in communal spaces that nurture conviviality. One gardener at the SCF, a thirty-year-old Zapotec woman, described her involvement at the farm in the following way: "I planted this garden because it is a little space like home. I grow the same plants that I had back in my garden in Oaxaca. We can eat like we ate at home and this makes us feel like ourselves. It allows us to keep a part of who we are after coming to the United States."

However, the production of heritage foods and familiar landscapes is only one part of the practice of conviviality in this urban agroecosystem. The SCF illustrates the importance of the "production of meaning." The second author was introduced to Mixtec (and Zapotec) traditions of storytelling underneath one of the urban farm's *pochote* trees (*Chorisia speciosa* or silk floss tree). The *pochote* is considered a sacred tree among the indigenous peoples of the Mixteca bioregion. Every weekend as families gathered, the children sat under the *pochote* to hear stories narrated by elders. Many of the stories were related to deer and deer hunting (deer are also considered sacred beings and spirit guides to other dimensions of reality). When the bulldozers arrived in June 2006, the *pochote* trees were among the first of the profuse vegetation to be protected by protestors. The second author asked a young Nahuatl woman involved in the SCF protests why they were protecting the trees. Her response illustrates our point about the need to connect local and slow food with a deep sense of place, community, and agroecological practices: "This tree is sacred. . . . The sacred tree is where we can gather to pray and share stories. Without our gathering under these trees, the garden cannot be happy. The corn needs the *pochote* tree to be happy so the corn silk will not wither. Our children learn the ways of our people by making this tree part of their place in the world." Again, cultivation is tied to a deep sense of place and community identity.

Local autotopographical spaces like the *huertos familiares* at the South Central Farm are constructed in conscious opposition to the global commodity chains that constitute the dominant food system. But this process is both internally heterogeneous and highly contested. In the case of the SCF, which until its destruction was still officially administered by the regional food bank, one example of the contested nature of a communal space was seen in the challenges of managing a few acres of urban land to support the food production activities of some 360 families. The

result at the SCF was the division of the limited acreage by family plots of fairly uniform size (each approximately 200 to 260 square meters). These were divided from each other by a maze of lower-grade chainlink fencing that has been improvised over time.

One remarkable feature of the South Central Farm was the profusion of cactus corridors or cacti fencing growing alongside the chainlink fencing, representing a transition to a more culturally appropriate division of the space through a permaculture feature similar to the *nopal* (a type of edible cactus) fences that are common traditional fixtures across the rural landscapes of northern Mexico, especially the states of Chihuahua, Sonora, Coahuila, and Tamaulipas. One farmer reported that many involved at the SCF wanted to bring down the chainlink fences altogether and were beginning to replace them not just with cactus but also sugarcane, banana, avocado, and other fruit-bearing trees and shrubs. Other growers were using edible vines to cover the fencing. These efforts allowed for a more natural (vegetation-based) set of boundaries that all gardeners could enjoy and use, in effect, transforming the fence into an element of an edible landscape rather than a set of boundaries. “Edible fences make good neighbors,” one farmer told the second author. These features were not only a means to enhance the edible landscape and challenge an exclusionary understanding of space and boundaries, but also to integrate meaningful and familiar foods into U.S. soil in recognition of their uses beyond mere nutrition (see figure 9.3).

The struggle of the South Central Farmers was at the center of a widening conflict over an urban commons that arose from the political economic context of contested urban land-use politics. The misguided tendency of municipal planning authorities to overvalue urban spaces for commercial/industrial uses over all other uses is the deeper cause of this conflict (see Diaz 2005). The farmers at the SCF faced a crisis embedded in the contested legal status of the land as property, which defined it as a space that should be developed for commercial and industrial uses, discounting the economic, ecological, and cultural value of this place to the community.

Some 360 families from the urban farm were finally evicted in June 2006. This was the second time that many of the South Central Farmers experienced this sort of violent displacement from the land. However, and this is the point of the “resilience” of Mesoamerican diaspora communities, instead of “disappearing” after eviction, the families maintained a weekly vigil and monthly tianguis (farmers market) on a site across from the old garden. More still, the SCF has developed into a new



Figure 9.3
Garden plot at South Central showing plants and features similar to the classic Maya garden in figure 9.2

501(c)(3) organization that includes an agricultural cooperative producing “Food for the Hood” on eighty acres of irrigated land outside Bakersville, California. The resurgence of the farm, while now physically relocated from its original central urban locale, means that the SCF organization is still effectively pursuing food sovereignty for the member families and their urban communities. This farm-to-table connection remains a vital force today in sustaining the heritage cuisine practices of the displaced families.

Puget Sound Urban Farmers

The Seattle area is quickly becoming a vibrant center of alternative food movements. With nearly sixty community gardens coordinated by the city’s Department of Neighborhoods, fourteen farmers markets operating throughout the city, and a city council that approved a Local Foods Action Initiative in 2008, it is clear that there is strong institutional support for transforming the food system into one that is more sustainable and profitable for local food producers. In the Seattle foodshed,

there are also fascinating examples of the de commodification of food operating against and within mainstream alternative market frameworks. Diasporic, migrant, and immigrant communities from Latin America, East Africa, Russia, and all regions of Asia are transforming the urban landscape into spaces that look more like *home* through practices of autotopography and place making. Sometimes these spaces are state- or city-sanctioned spaces for growing food (like Department of Neighborhoods P-Patch community gardens, sometimes they take place in home kitchen gardens, and sometimes they operate as guerrilla gardens—what we have previously described as insurgent uses of public space (Mares and Peña 2010).

This transformative use of these spaces includes cultivating food crops that are “culturally appropriate,” but equally important, cultivating them through practices like intercropping, biointensive gardening, and terracing. These are all agroecological techniques that the permaculture-embracing, mainstream-alternative community yearns to learn and employ. The key challenge that the authors see is the need for clearing a space for celebrating and honoring the rich sets of knowledge that immigrant communities possess without allowing for the possibility of cooptation or appropriation. These growers are scientists and experts in their own right, and if maintaining autonomous spaces is necessary for the continuation of these practices, then standing in solidarity with these growers should be the priority of just food activists and scholars.

Three key ethnographic vignettes will help to demonstrate the ways that autonomous spaces can be sites of de commodification and autotopography. Since 2005, the first author has been involved in ongoing field research that explores both the strategies and networks that Latino families and individuals use to define and meet their food needs, and how nonprofit and governmental institutions and agencies are conceptualizing and responding to or neglecting the needs, or both, of this community. This research involved participant observation and informal interviews with Latino growers who are using community gardens as spaces of food production, conviviality, and community building. In one attempt to ground the field study as an applied project relevant to the local community, the second author volunteered with a local nonprofit organization to coordinate organic gardening classes in Spanish, though with a less than adequate degree of success.

During the first year of research, the first author was chatting with Octavio,⁸ a gardener from Mexico, at a community event. The first author asked him if he had attended any of these gardening classes in

the past, hoping that he might be interested in the upcoming classes. His response was significant, as it reveals a direct example of the need for legitimizing and honoring agricultural knowledge that runs counter to the mainstream alternative foods movement. Coming from a small agricultural town in central Mexico, Octavio’s identity has long been shaped by his relation to the land. When recalling his participation in the gardening classes the previous year, he explained how he was a bit offended that they tried to teach him, *un Mexicano*, how to grow corn. He pointed to a small child around four years old while saying that he had been growing corn all his life, and that his family had done the same before he was born. In fact, the seeds of the corn that he was growing in his garden plot had been sent to him through postal mail by his mother in Mexico. In the class, he was instructed to plant his seeds much deeper than he *knew* was necessary, and with great pride, he took me over to see his corn plants that were taller than any other plants in the garden. It was not just corn that Octavio was growing, but corn that was familiar, necessary, and meaningful. The fact that these plants were thriving in an environment drastically different from the one where they originated not only illustrated his deep knowledge, but also that these seeds were more than food commodities in waiting, but rather, kin to be nurtured. As importantly, his refusal to follow directions, deciding instead to employ his own place-based knowledge demonstrates that autonomous food practices are at work in the Seattle food system. The knowledge systems and autotopographical practices of these autonomous growers must be recognized if the movement for local food is to successfully integrate demands for food justice.

A second vignette closely follows and brings the story full circle. At this same community event, there was a massive table of snacks and refreshments, largely donations from local businesses, but also some foods that were grown in the community garden where we were celebrating. Piles of sugar cookies, hot dogs, salmon burgers, and prepackaged chips and salsa dominated the table, but it was the homemade offerings that were the most celebrated and valuable. Nearby, a cider press was cranking apples to mush and a grill was being fired with the sporadic help of neighbors. After roasting a few ears of his much-prized corn on the grill and sharing them with me and his young daughter, my newfound friend Octavio revealed how proud he was that his daughter preferred the corn, *his corn*, over the highly sweetened and processed “American” foods available. He looked at her with joy as she skipped away to join the other children, cob clutched tightly in hand. This exchange reveals

the importance of shaping and passing down heritage cuisines that are tightly bound to cultural identity. It is this deep connection with food that we must cultivate if food justice, as a movement, is destined to succeed.

The third vignette connects our field sites in a deep and inspiring way. In the winter of 2006, deep in the midst of the struggle at the South Central Farm, Tezozomoc, a central organizer with the South Central Farmers, was invited as an honored guest to speak at several engagements at the University of Washington. After these events were over, all parties involved were aching to get out of the academic confines of the university and visit gardens in the Seattle area. The two authors of this piece coordinated a visit to an urban farm in Seattle so that Tezozomoc could see the work of his colleagues in Seattle. During a particularly rainy day, we were guided through the farm by Mauricio, a young father who had moved to Seattle from Mexico several years prior, along with his two children. While the children raced through the damp beds and made plans for what they would plant the next spring, Tezozomoc told Mauricio about the events that were coming to pass at the South Central Farm, urging him to do whatever he needed to do to protect this parallel space in Seattle in the event that the farm ever faced similar pressures to those of the South Central Farmers. Mauricio responded that he would do so, and with great seriousness, asked Tezozomoc if he had been growing any *papalo* in his garden in Los Angeles. Mauricio, while struck by the events taking place in Los Angeles, was equally concerned that he was having a hard time getting hold of any seed for this plant in Seattle. Tezozomoc laughed, saying that he was growing acres and acres of *papalo*,⁹ and that he would be sure to send some seeds up north for Mauricio and his compadres to grow.

A few months later, the second author of this piece presented the first author a large bag of *papalo* seeds that Tezozomoc had passed along to him during a recent trip to Los Angeles. It was an impressively heavy bag of seeds, definitely enough for the farmers in Seattle, and then some. The first author couldn't wait to take these seeds to Mauricio, to complete the next step in a long line of seed sharing that had begun in the fields in the South Central Farm, and possibly, to a shared homeland even further back. As she handed this bag of seeds imbued with deep meaning and significance to Mauricio, she realized that her research was about so much more than just food—*alimento*. It was about *comida*. Gustavo Esteva and Madhu Suri Prakash have this to say about *comida*: "There is no English word for *comida*. It is not easy to explain why.

Thinking of that makes us feel sad. While "feast" comes closest in its implication of eating together, it refers only to a special occasion, while *comida* is eating by the "social majorities" in the "normal" course of every day. Perhaps we need to recall that the Anglo-Saxon world was the cultural space in which the industrial mode of production was established first and foremost. There, vernacular activities related to *comida* have been suffocated or suppressed" (Esteva and Prakash 1998, 59).

In some small way, despite the hundreds of miles that separated them, Tezozomoc and Mauricio were sharing *comida*, bound together in a global diaspora that is seeking new homes in faraway places. With their communities, they are struggling for food justice through building networks of food sovereignty.

As with the South Central Farmers, these urban growers in the Seattle area reveal an alterNative and decommodified relationship with food. Interestingly, all three vignettes took place in an urban site that has been formally protected by the city of Seattle for the purpose of growing food in community garden spaces. This space is one of two remaining pieces of farmland remaining in the city, and it has a long history of being cultivated by immigrant gardeners from all ends of the earth. These growers mentioned here are just a few of the many immigrant gardeners across the Puget Sound region that are using urban spaces in deeply autonomous ways to both create and maintain close cultural ties through food.

Conclusion: Rebalancing Power in the Global Food System

Scholars and cultivators need to depart from focusing on issues of equal access as dictated by the food security paradigm. Instead, we must employ a more comprehensive food sovereignty framework that allows us to support autonomous struggles for the exercise of entitlements to land and community-based decision making, along with democratic and participatory control over our local natural assets. Doing so will enable a deep connection with what we eat, learning from the autotopographical practices and deep senses of place like those we have discussed here.

The central claim of a food sovereignty framework is that food is a right, not a commodity. What would it look like if we issued this statement as the first demand of our food justice movement? What if we thought of this not as an individual right, but rather, took an alterNative approach to embrace the self-provisioning of food through locally grounded cooperative union and mutual aid? What if we followed the

path of movements like La Via Campesina, the South Central Farmers, and the actions of Latino growers all over Seattle to reclaim space, identity, and food sovereignty? Perhaps then we wouldn't ask permission from the state to be "free" and instead we would create our own sovereign freedoms through direct organizing and community-based action.

The demands of the food justice movement should necessarily resist further industrialization and globalization of our food system since the emphasis should remain on place-based self-provisioning and demands to restore more autonomous forms of food sovereignty. Reestablishing and reinventing heritage agroecosystems would entail a reduction in the production of exotic crops for cash-export markets and a prioritization of local food self-sufficiency. It would also entail elevating the knowledge and expertise of those growers who have autonomously maintained these heritage agroecosystems to the same level of the "experts" who insist on technological and scientific remedies to food problems in the United States and abroad. The decommodification and relocalization of food systems are two critical elements of any truly just and sustainable agriculture and food policy. Of course, this will also require that we punch deep holes in the arguments of the naysayers who claim we cannot feed the world without a reliance on industrial mass production of food (for an excellent example, see Lappé, Collins, and Rosset 1998).

Perhaps the most enduring way to rebalance power in the global food system is by supporting struggles that move us toward the decommodification of food through support for marginalized peoples' autonomous cultivation practices. Both the farmers at the South Central Farm and the Latino growers in Seattle have demonstrated to us the viability of nurturing sustained and deep connections with all that nourishes us, tying their place-based community identities to new landscapes through processes of autotopography. In following their example, we should shift toward the "local"—in the sense of a spatial reorientation of the food system from global commodity chains toward local, bioregional food systems that both follow and facilitate deeper senses of place. We must also consider how to make resistance against the global systems that commodify food. This will require combining the proactive forces that are already rebuilding local food systems with political pressure for the United States to rebalance global power.

Our proposals for the food justice movement require a more radical set of practices that lead not so much to a restructuring as to an autonomous and reiterative geography of relocalization that supplants the dominant global food system. They require that we collectively strive for

deep connections—with our food, with the places we live, and with each other. Finally, they require that we simultaneously challenge the avarice-driven hunger for profit of transnational agribusiness corporations while consciously rebuilding our place-based local food systems. This must be done in solidarity with others around the world who share our hunger and thirst for justice.

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Notes

1. Here, we refer to the reaction against the opening of a McDonalds restaurant in the Pizza di Spagna in Rome, widely cited as the motivating factor behind the Slow Food movement abroad. For an excellent discussion of Slow Food's more radical beginnings, see Katz 2006.
2. Many writers have offered thoughtful critiques of the limitations of and contradictions within organic certification, including Guthman (2004), Katz (2006), and Patel (2007).
3. In Seattle, one only has to visit the neighborhood farmers markets to see Allen's concern manifested in five-dollar loaves of organic artisan bread.
4. Here, we are following Peña (2003) who first proposed that environmental justice theory and practice need to consider differences between equity-based models of environmental justice and an alternative approach that emphasizes autonomy. This argument suggests that equity-based theories of environmental justice are reformist and integrationist and that they fail to rupture or challenge the dominant system that emphasizes individual rights to equal opportunity. This requires the cooperation and legitimation of the state, and the evidence suggests that this is insufficient as a basis for the attainment of environmental justice. The autonomy model emphasizes cooperative and communal orientations, rather than individualistic ones, and encourages perspectives derived from place-based

knowledge that can promote environmental self-determination as a matter of local practices that emerge from place and are free of the need to gain the acceptance or endorsement of the state. These “alterNative” food systems developed in and continue to exist within the “margins” among those displaced, native and ethnic or working-class, communities that have always valued food self-sufficiency as a matter of heritage or survival or both, and have usually thus of necessity maintained the knowledge, methods, and materials—if not always the land base—to sustain their local, slow, and deep foodways.

5. SB 1070 is an Arizona law that criminalizes the undocumented as felons and imposes requirements for the proof of citizenship or legal status that have been challenged in the courts. For more on the emerging mass-based social movement against SB1070 and for immigrant rights, see the various news and blog entries at <<http://mexmigration.blogspot.com>>.

6. In Vancouver, British Columbia, Mayan diasporic people have created an impressive home kitchen garden project that utilizes unused open space by collaborating with University of British Columbia faculty and students and the city’s elected officials.

7. See Klindienst 2006, Peña 2002, Pinderhughes 2003, and Saldivar-Tanaka and Krasny 2004.

8. All names of the growers in Seattle are pseudonyms.

9. Also called *papaloquelite* or summer cilantro, *porophyllum ruderale* is an herb commonly used in Mexican cooking.

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