Engaging Latino Immigrants in Seattle Food Activism through Urban Agriculture

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Introduction: This Country Is Full of Farmers!

Just days before the tenth anniversary of the World Trade Organization protests that shut down Seattle’s streets in late 1999, Eric Holt-Giménez, executive director of Food First,1 addressed a captivated audience at the University of Washington. Holt-Giménez had been invited by organizers from the Community Alliance for Global Justice, and his talk opened a series of events organized to commemorate the protests and discuss the lessons learned over the preceding ten years. While completing my graduate studies in cultural anthropology, I had become deeply involved with the alliance’s Food Justice Project and was thrilled to see the large crowd that turned out for the event. A decade after the “Battle of Seattle,” Holt-Giménez spoke eloquently about the global food crisis, the devastating impacts of policies like the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) for farmers in the Global South, and the inspiring ways that grassroots groups around the world were challenging corporate-controlled food systems through organizing for food sovereignty.

Having finished a series of interviews with Latino/a day laborers earlier that week, one vignette that Holt-Giménez shared was especially poignant for me that night. He stated:

You know, there’s a sick joke amongst older farmers here because the average age of a farmer in the United States is approaching sixty right now… in ten years the average age of the American farmer is going to be dead. Nonetheless, this country is full of farmers! They are standing on the street corners looking for work. They come from Mexico, Honduras, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Colombia, Panama. They’ve been displaced! They mow our lawns, they pump our gas, they cook our food in the fancy restaurants, those are farmers. We’re surrounded by farmers. They’re out of work.

In these brief lines, Holt-Giménez synthesized a complex contradiction that persists in our agricultural and service sectors—connecting the movement of people from Mexico to the United States in search of work with the devastation of rural
livelhoods in Latin America. Seattle is just one of many U.S. cities where this movement is touching down into local communities, with Latino/a farmers experiencing radical changes in their foodways and overall well-being as they build new lives in the United States (Mares 2012, 2013). Holt-Giménez’s analysis came at an especially opportune time for me, as I grappled with the challenge of connecting what I was learning through my ethnographic study with on-the-ground actions for food justice.

Three months after this event, newly appointed Seattle mayor Mike McGinn and the city council announced that 2010 would be the “Year of Urban Agriculture.” This announcement dovetailed with a highly publicized visit from Will Allen, chief executive officer of Growing Power, who has earned international recognition for his innovative efforts in rebuilding urban food systems. He came to Seattle to network with food justice activists and offer his guidance to several community projects. Along with many of my fellow urban agriculture enthusiasts, I was deeply inspired by Allen’s call for a “good food revolution” and his commitment to making local and healthy foods accessible to communities of color and the poor. Nevertheless, the strategic timing of the city’s declaration to coincide with his visit gave me reason to pause and reflect. After several years of research, I had become all too aware of how urban agricultural projects did not always translate into concrete steps toward food justice, especially for the Latino/a community. Would 2010, the “Year of Urban Agriculture,” really be any different?

This chapter traces the trajectory of food activism in Seattle to connect the discourses of food sovereignty and food justice with an analysis of the city’s urban agricultural landscape. Despite Seattle’s exciting developments in building more localized food systems, I argue that Latino/a immigrants, especially those who are undocumented, remain marginalized from these efforts. I focus specifically on urban agriculture to analyze both the barriers that marginalize the food and agricultural knowledge of Latino/a immigrants living in the city and also the broader consequences of this marginalization. My analysis draws on my own shifting positionality in the field cultivated through deep and sustained ethnographic fieldwork on urban agriculture and food access for Latino/a immigrants in the Seattle area. Working with the land became synonymous with doing ethnography, and the tangible reminders of my fieldwork—dirt beneath my fingernails, a farmer’s tan, and oddly shaped vegetables—regularly found their way into my home and into my research. The less tangible reminders—new friendships, growing commitments, and a need to make my findings accessible and useful—shaped my project in an even deeper and more sustained manner.

I begin this chapter by outlining the main historical trends in urban agriculture over the past 100 years to demonstrate how these trends are linked to political changes and social movements at both the national and grassroots level. I then connect these historical trends to more recent discussions concerning food justice and food sovereignty that advocate for urban agriculture as a promising alternative. After describing the urban agricultural landscape of Seattle, I turn to an analysis of the barriers that prevent broader and more meaningful Latino/a participation in urban agriculture. I draw on interviews with organizational staff and my own experiences working in and observing the local food system, and I suggest some potential solutions. I conclude by outlining how the movements for sustainable food systems in Seattle could be strengthened through a more concerted effort to engage the knowledge and experiences of Latino/a residents.

A Brief History of Growing Food in Cities and the Movements That Inspire It

Urban agriculture in the United States extends back to the end of the nineteenth century and is linked to similar histories in the United Kingdom, where the Allotment Act of 1887 was passed as a strategy to pacify farmers whose common lands had been enclosed by large landowners. Largely responding to national crises such as the Great Depression and World Wars I and II, allotment gardening was also utilized as a means to feed and control the poor in U.S. cities (Warner 1987). Not unlike the current politics over the sites of community gardens, allotment gardens during this period were located on vacant lots, where the security of tenure depended on the owner’s financial interests and the development value of the land. Alternately known as war gardens, liberty gardens, victory gardens, and relief gardens, these spaces were intimately tied to larger processes of human migration, militarization, and economic transformation. World War I marked a major wave of allotment gardening and brought with it an explicit connection to American patriotism and the obligations of citizenship. Those who contributed to the war effort as food producers, who were “formerly thought of as poor people in want of food and instruction,...became full-fledged patriotic citizens” (Warner 1987: 17). The National War Garden Commission worked at the federal level to promote patriotism through gardening, and following the end of World War I, war gardens were triumphantly renamed victory gardens, a rebranding that continued through World War II. At one point in 1944, “victory gardens produced 44 percent of the fresh vegetables eaten in the United States” (Hynes 1996: xii).

Some historians claim that community gardens declined in both number and political significance following World War II, a change linked to “the transition to large-scale agriculture and the expansion of the food distribution system” (Saldivar-Tanaka and Krasny 2004: 399). In another piece, Devon Peña and I (2010) challenge this telling of history, arguing that it overlooks an alternative history of “home kitchen gardens” among working-class and immigrant families. Nevertheless, scholars agree that urban agriculture took on new political and social forms in the late 1960s and 1970s. Rather than responding to national food shortages, this wave of urban gardening was motivated by the emergence of the civil rights movement, the environmental movement, and community reactions to increasing urban decline (Saldivar-Tanaka...
and Krasny 2004; Schmelzkoepf 1995; Warner 1987). These movements produced a new set of politics within urban gardens, and these physical spaces became symbolic of broader struggles against social, economic, and racial injustices. This generation of urban gardeners, many of whom called themselves “guerrilla gardeners,” worked at the grassroots level, often in opposition to local policies and land-use plans.

Researchers have demonstrated the multiple benefits of urban agriculture, in terms of fostering community development, alleviating food insecurity, and renewing connections between people and place (Armstrong 2000; Blair, Giesecke, and Sherman 1991; K. Brown and Jameton 2000; Glover 2003, 2004; Hynes 1996; Landman 1993; Peña 2005; Pinderhughes 2003; Saldivar-Tanaka and Krasny 2004). More recently, there has been a lively debate about the viability of urban agriculture in ensuring food security for U.S. city dwellers. In July 2012 Maurice Hladik penned an opinion piece citing a previous article about the viability of urban agriculture, claiming that “the author got carried away and used this as yet another example of how the urban farming movement has a meaningful impact on the nation’s overall food supply. As if four heads of lettuce were really going to have an impact on feeding the world!” What is particularly problematic in Hladik’s argument—in addition to his dramatic underestimation of the production value of urban farming—is his valuation of urban agricultural projects in narrow quantitative terms of dollars and pounds, rather than more holistic measures. Advocates for local food and urban agriculture often point to the ways that more localized supply chains can better support the availability of foods that are “culturally appropriate,” more nutritious, and less polluting. These measures are not addressed by Hladik and are all worthy of further consideration and scientific inquiry.

In the face of climate change, dwindling fossil fuels, and sustained economic crises, urban dwellers around the globe are seeking more sustainable and socially just ways to feed the world. The renewed attention to the potentials of urban agriculture has become intimately linked with social movements that challenge the global industrialized food system and find promise in more localized alternatives (Allen and Wilson 2008; Holt-Giménez 2009; Patel 2008; Schiavoni 2009). Urban agricultural projects in cities across the United States continue to draw inspiration from the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s (especially the environmental and civil rights movements) but are now also inspired by contemporary movements for “good food,” following the work of leaders like Will Allen. Multiple discourses (including local food, community food security, food justice, and food sovereignty) comprise what is more broadly conceived as the “food movement” but differ in terms of their motivations, strategies, and critiques (Mares and Alkon 2011). Significantly, this food movement is not limited to the United States, and innovations in urban agriculture have transformed cities in Brazil (WinklerPrins and de Sousa 2005), Cuba (Altieri et al. 1999; Buchmann 2009), Tanzania (Owens 2010), and Uganda (Maxwell 1995). Indeed, many researchers have argued that urban agriculture is a central piece of building sustainable, resilient cities around the world (Despommier 2010; Mougeot 2006; Nordahl 2009).

Despite these innovative transformations, scholars have questioned whether and how the strategies endorsed by community food advocates perpetuate the reach of neoliberal logic in addition to race- and class-based inequalities (Alkon 2008; Allen 2004; Allen and Guthman 2006; S. Brown and Getz 2008; Guthman 2008; Pudup 2008). The need for a deeper, transnational analysis of the food system and more radical visions of transformation is met in part by the discourses of food justice and food sovereignty. The discourse of food justice is inspired by the movements for local food and community food security but argues that access to healthy and culturally appropriate food and the land on which it is produced is marked by structural racism and classism. The discourse of food sovereignty, inspired by the international peasant movement La Via Campesina, argues that food and trade policies must be defined by and for the benefit of food producers, not by the large agrifood corporations that benefit most from neoliberal market arrangements. These two discourses (and the movements they inspire) transcend geophysical boundaries to challenge the political and market-based structures that are responsible for food injustices. When studying urban agricultural projects, these discourses also help to center critiques on the problematic ways that food systems—both local and global—are marked by class- and race-based inequalities that shape how food and the resources required to produce it are both unevenly distributed.

Drawing on Arjun Appadurai and Arturo Escobar’s concept of the “translocal,” Gerda Wekerle (2004) argues that the food justice movement is best understood as translocal. This translocality transforms relationships between community members, civil society institutions, and the state, but it also opens up new opportunities to form institutional alliances and coalitions across geographic boundaries. An acknowledgment of translocal relationships is especially relevant when seeking to understand the shifting foodways of Latino/a immigrants who have been displaced and forced to migrate in search of work. From a planning perspective, Wekerle argues, “food justice movements, as place-based movements engaged in local organizing and community development, represent an engaged citizenship that should be of interest to urban planners focused on various forms of citizen planning” (2004: 378). Noteworthy in her analysis are the assumptions embedded within the term citizen. Although she raises questions about the role of the state in translocal and transnational movements, Wekerle does not specifically engage with the multiple meanings of citizenship or the reality that political citizenship is often foreclosed to those who might be part of an otherwise “engaged citizenship.”

Charles Levyke (2006) also sees promise in the food justice movement’s potential to facilitate more democratic food systems through transforming “consumers” into “citizens” by modeling a “healthy democracy” at the grassroots level. He states, “Through food justice movements, a vision of food democracy has been adopted.
which directly challenges anti-democratic forces of control, exploitation, and oppression. Food democracy refers to the idea of public decision-making and increased access and collective benefit from the food system as a whole” (2006: 91). Levkoe claims that the benefits of developing civic virtues and critical perspectives through food justice organizing expand beyond the food system to build an overall stronger community. However, like Wekerle, Levkoe also does not complicate the notion of citizenship, merely representing citizenry as a level of engagement to which mere consumers should aspire.

On the other hand, the international farmers’ movement La Via Campesina has developed the concept of food sovereignty, elevated the struggles and rights of third world peasant farmers (especially women), challenged the impacts of neoliberal trade and agricultural policies, and emphasized the importance of working in solidarity across international borders (see Thivet, this volume). Food sovereignty demands consideration of fundamental inequalities in land distribution, resource management, and corporate control. Holt-Giménez argues that “food sovereignty is a much deeper concept than food security because it proposes not just guaranteed access to food, but democratic control over the food system—from production to processing, to distribution, marketing, and consumption” (2009: 146).

Although the food sovereignty movement has largely developed through the mobilization of rural peasant farmers, agrifood scholars and activists see great potential in furthering the movement in urban contexts. Raj Patel, a development sociologist who is himself an active participant in food movements, argues that the vision of 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... as it... aims to redress the abuse of the powerless by the powerful, wherever in the food system that abuse may happen. (2008: 302)

Also active in global and national food movements, Christina Schiavoni (2009) agrees with Patel and finds potential in connecting the framework of food sovereignty to the food justice activism within urban centers across the country.

Ethnography with Muddy Hands: Cultivating Methodology from the Ground Up

Between 2005 and 2009 I conducted fieldwork in the Seattle area on the multiple ways that Latino/a immigrants interacted with the local food system, focusing specifically on food access and provisioning. The broader research questions guiding this study were (1) What networks, strategies, and resources do Latino/a immigrant households utilize to define and act on their food needs? (2) How do state and civil society institutions respond to the food needs of Latino/a immigrants through their policies, practices, and discourses? (3) What do these strategies, practices, and policies and their underlying motivations tell us about the symbolic importance of food and the meanings that people attach to their own sustenance and the broader food system? (4) How do the articulations between people and their food systems complicate the dynamics of agency and social structure?

In addition to archival research, my fieldwork involved participant observation at Marra Farm, a four-and-a-half-acre site in south Seattle; at five Spanish-language gardening classes I helped to coordinate during 2007 and 2008; and at a hot-meals site in 2009 that primarily serves Latino day laborers. My study also included two sets of semistructured interviews. In the first set, I spoke with representatives from thirteen Seattle-area agencies working on food issues, including direct service providers, organizations working in urban agriculture, and institutions doing political advocacy work related to food systems. My main objective was to gather information about what the individual staff members understood about the food needs of the Latino/a immigrant community, and whether and how these organizations sought to address these needs. In the second set, I interviewed forty-six first-generation immigrants who had moved to the United States from various regions of Latin America. The sample included an equal number of men and women, all over the age of eighteen. Thirty-five were from Mexico, three from Peru, two from El Salvador, and one each from Guatemala, Cuba, Nicaragua, and Ecuador. I asked these participants about their experiences growing food, both in their home countries and in the United States; their perspectives on health and eating; and their experiences with different agencies in the Seattle food system. Both sets of interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded for common themes and outlying perspectives. In this chapter, I use pseudonyms when referring to individual intervieewees but have maintained the actual names of the community organizations for which they worked.

My years conducting fieldwork coincided with a particularly transformative period in Seattle’s food activism, and over the course of my study, I was struck by how rapidly the local food system was changing. Built on exceptionally fertile soils and blessed with abundant rainfall, Seattle has become a model for national efforts in building food movements. The city has experienced a growing number of neighborhood farmers’ markets (currently fourteen), the 2008 passage of the Local Foods Action Initiative, the formation of the Puget Sound Regional Food Policy Council, and the cultivation of seventy-five community gardens coordinated by Seattle’s P-Patch Program. Current urban agriculture projects take various forms, including community gardens, community-supported agriculture (CSA) programs, farmers’ markets, and school gardens. In these urban agriculture projects, governmental institutions and grassroots activism meet, with official support from the municipal P-Patch program and the Puget Sound Regional Food Policy Council, contrasting with the active bulldozing of the guerrilla gardens that have sprouted along city bike trails.
Barriers in Expanding Latino/a Involvement in Urban Agriculture in Seattle

While I was excited by the changes I witnessed in Seattle’s food system and took great delight in choosing from the heirloom varieties of tomatoes and apples that appeared each weekend at my neighborhood farmers’ market, I could not shake my observations that access to these spaces was clearly limited for the working class and communities of color. The narratives that Latino/a research participants shared with me about their food practices only reinforced these observations (Mares 2013). While there is no doubt that the various institutions in the city are producing many changes in the local food system, it is also clear that this change is happening unevenly and is marginalizing Latino/a immigrants, particularly those without U.S. citizenship.

Out of the forty-six interview participants from Latin America, only four were growing food in the city, with an additional three growing herbs. Only eight mentioned shopping at the farmers’ markets, even while many shared memories of doing their daily shopping at open-air markets in Latin America. None of the Latino/a participants mentioned CSA programs. However, interviews also revealed that the majority had grown food in their home countries, and the memories of the gardens and farms they cultivated often brought smiles to their faces and prompted stories of time spent with their families and the sharing of recipes. Of the forty-six,
and staff, a challenge that had become especially pressing with the general economic downturn. However, just as important, she also acknowledged a more fundamental (and potentially more solvable) problem of allocating the resources that the organization already possessed. I asked Paula about the current level of Latino/a participation, and after wryly joking that she could count all of the Latino/a gardeners on one hand, she told me that it had actually decreased in recent years. I asked her if she knew the reason for this decline, and she responded:

Yes! It basically comes down to our outreach, our outreach ability. I think that at the base level, probably once we were able to get more people in the gardens there might be other things that would need to change to meet people’s needs better. But, right now, just even getting people to participate in the program is about outreach, I don’t think the outreach itself would be that difficult. I mean, based on other times when we had people that were able to do that.

Although P-Patch had identified the Latino community as “underserved” by their program, Paula did not feel that this had translated into specific actions.

Other participants admitted that they had questions about the most appropriate form of outreach or program delivery within the Latino/a community. During my interview with Melissa, a woman with whom I worked extensively at Marra Farm throughout the duration of my fieldwork, we talked about the challenges that Lettuce Link (a program working at Marra Farm) faced in trying to work with Spanish-speaking individuals. She reflected on their bilingual gardening classes, held in collaboration with Seattle Tilth, and admitted, “I don’t think that classes are perhaps the right format. And is that unique for Spanish-speaking immigrants? I don’t know.”

Another institutional barrier was the lack of information about the needs and desires of Latino/a immigrants with respect to food and its production, a problem noted by Leslie, who was central to the passage of the Local Foods Action Initiative through her position within the city council. Although Leslie’s office identified the promotion of urban agriculture as one priority within the Local Foods Action Initiative, she acknowledged that they needed more information about community needs, telling me:

For example, people will say, “well, low-income people don’t have time to garden” and we’ll come back and say, “well, what we are hearing from the Somali community, for example, or from the southeast Asian refugee community, for example” we haven’t heard as much from the Hispanic community, or Latino communities, but in fact, this gardening opportunity is really what they want.

In my interviews with Latino/a community members, I learned that becoming engaged in community gardens was indeed something that people desired. However, the primary reason people did not become involved was that they had little access to information about how to sign up for a plot, what the fees were, or whether they had access to the program without providing citizenship documents. One solution would be a more sustained and informed effort to disseminate this information in a bilingual format.

The differences in the information available to diverse immigrant and refugee communities living in Seattle is connected, at least in part, to the fact that many refugees are able to access services not available to Latino/a immigrants who have arrived through unofficial channels. Paula described this as an additional challenge that her organization faced in doing outreach within the Latino community:

I think the whole issue around documentation is really big, it’s sort of why and how people are here is a really big difference, at least with P-Patch and the other immigrant communities we are working with. Most of them are here with some level of support from a public agency. Either they’re refugees that are involved in resettlement programs…they’re enrolled, they may be connected with churches that have sponsors for them, or a lot of the communities are in public housing so they have all of the resources that come with being in a public housing community and they have addresses that we can record and there are often community workers, community outreach workers that we can partner with. And with the Latino community, the immigrant community, I think people are living their lives here and making their own way and there certainly are associations and ways that if we were doing a planned outreach, we could connect with people through but it’s not the same level of official support.

In fact, several of the public housing communities that Paula referred to have large gardening areas that residents are able to access in addition to ongoing educational programs designed to increase involvement in food cultivation or build awareness of the crops that grow well in Seattle’s climate. However, the Seattle Housing Authority, the largest provider of public housing in the city, requires that all residents provide proof of U.S. citizenship or “eligible immigration status.” This forecloses the possibility of undocumented workers and their families accessing these housing options and the gardening opportunities that go along with them.

These interrelated barriers demonstrate not only the structural and systemic challenges that are responsible for low rates of Latino/a participation in Seattle’s urban agriculture projects but also the collective will on the part of institutional staff to make their programs and services more effective and inclusive. As important, they point to a need to envision more creative opportunities for Latino/a immigrants to engage in growing their own food, which many of my interviewees indeed desired and had the experience and knowledge required to do. In order for this vision to become actualized it is essential that a stronger connection is forged between the Latino/a community and the institutions central to pushing the food movement forward.

Significantly, these kinds of barriers are not only endemic to Latino/a participation in Seattle’s urban agriculture efforts but have been observed with respect to the participation of diverse communities of color in the alternative food movement more generally. Activists and scholars guided by the framework of food justice have drawn attention both to the barriers and to the grassroots efforts to overcome them.
that have been led by and for communities of color around the United States (Alkon and Aygeman 2011; Gottlieb and Joshi 2010). In other areas of the country, there are noteworthy examples of Latino/a-led efforts in urban agriculture, among them the Nuestras Raíces program in Holyoke, Massachusetts, and the South Central Farm in Los Angeles, California (whose original site was bulldozed in 2006; Lawson 2007). What makes these two examples especially significant is their attention to culturally appropriate forms of organizing and governance that stemmed from the Latino/a founders and their visions for change.

While the Latino/a individuals whom I interviewed did not offer any specific solutions to the barriers outlined above, their narratives about gardening and farming at home and my broader ethnographic findings both illuminate some potential directions forward (Mares 2012). Moreover, it is important that institutions working on food issues build stronger connections with Latino/a-led community-based organizations (including those not working specifically on food issues) to consider the most culturally appropriate forms of urban agriculture for Latino/a residents, which may very well resemble kitchen gardens located near the home rather than allotment-style gardening. Engaging in this work has tremendous potential to improve the overall food security of Latino/a residents in Seattle while further democratizing Seattle’s food activism.

Conclusion: Urban Agriculture as a Matter of National Importance

Nearly one hundred years after the first war gardens were built, urban agriculture once again became an official matter of national importance with the rebuilding of the White House garden in 2009. Shortly after President Barack Obama took office, First Lady Michelle Obama and a team of local schoolchildren dug up a section of the first family’s lawn, the first time it had been used for growing food since Eleanor Roosevelt grew her own victory garden during World War II. The building of this garden seemed to signal at least the possibility of a more progressive food and agriculture policy in the Obama administration. Although the realization of this possibility remains uncertain at the beginning of Obama’s second term, the significance of the White House garden goes beyond the vegetables it produces for the first family. This garden, as a clear national symbol, grants both legitimacy and visibility to the practices, possibilities, and values that are linked to a shift toward more sustainable food systems in urban areas. However, through its very location at the epicenter of the nation, this garden also represents a significant mainstreaming of attitudes toward alternative food systems in the United States. The city of Seattle is no exception to this mainstreaming trend, and as I have shown in this chapter, there are real consequences for individuals and families who are consistently excluded from the mainstream alternative food movements because of their race/ethnicity and citizenship status.

Over the five years that I was involved in food-related fieldwork and activism in Seattle, I witnessed the movements around food change in response to both on-the-ground mobilization and changes at the regional and national level. When I first started this project in 2005, food justice was rarely used to describe what was happening all around us. However, these conversations have changed over the past several years, and food justice is now a term that Seattle’s food activists use with great frequency. This transition is a hopeful one as it allows food activists to center their critiques on the ways race- and class-based inequalities have shaped access to food and the means to produce it. It seems as though the time is, quite literally, ripe for substantive efforts to engage all Seattle residents in declaring a “good food revolution” and building a food system that serves everyone’s needs.

What is key in promoting an inclusive and representative food movement in Seattle, or in any city for that matter, is a critical awareness of how local food activism is necessarily conditioned by relations of power. As I have balanced my academic and activist commitments (not always with the greatest of ease), I have navigated these relations of power and have attempted to illuminate the diversity of perspectives present in my field site both in my academic writing and in public reports I have shared with community members and research participants (Mares 2011). This chapter is just one small effort to share my research findings in a way that draws attention to the types of local knowledge that community-based ethnographic research is uniquely capable of providing.

However, I maintain that the movement forward should be informed not only by a local discourse and movement for food justice but also by a vision of local democracy guided by the global movement for food sovereignty. As a movement and set of principles, food sovereignty prioritizes the knowledge and experience of farmers and is especially important when considering the needs of farmers who have been displaced from their original lands. Indeed, their lack of food security while living in the United States is bound to a denial of sovereignty in their homelands. To return to Holt-Giménez’s point raised at the beginning of this chapter, displaced farmers from the Global South often hold tremendous knowledge about local food systems, and integrating this knowledge has the potential to democratize contemporary efforts in food activism. Given the complexity of the challenges we face in building food systems that are both just and sustainable, it is imperative that the vision guiding us forward is likewise capable of addressing this complexity and that we, as scholar-activists, recognize expertise and knowledge wherever it may be found.

Notes

1. Food First/Institute for Food and Development Policy is a think tank based in Oakland, California, that engages in research, policy analysis, education, and advocacy on issues connected to hunger, poverty, and the environment.
2. Growing Power is a nonprofit organization that provides training, outreach, and technical assistance on issues connected to urban agriculture and land trusts. With operations based in Milwaukee and Chicago, Growing Power is active nationally through their Regional Outreach Training Centers.

3. According to the "Sound Food Report," in 2005 the Neighborhood Farmers Market Alliance markets housed 129 vendors, grossed $3,958,742 in vendor sales, and had $62,292 in WIC checks and $31,006 in senior FMNP checks redeemed (Garrett et al. 2006: 98). This report also notes that none of the markets in Seattle except for the Pike Place Market has a permanent site and that the locations of two of the most popular markets, those in Columbia City and the University District, are the most threatened.

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Resistance and Household Food Consumption in Santiago de Cuba

Hanna Garth

Introduction

On a hot summer afternoon in Santiago de Cuba, Yaicel, the granddaughter of a local farmer, reflected on Cuba’s domestic agriculture system:

What they do here, the majority of the farmers, the State gives them [supplies] like seeds so that they grow crops and raise animals, the State gives them a percentage and the rest goes to the population…. But everything comes from the State, the farmers grow, they get to keep very little and the rest goes to the State. (interview, Santiago de Cuba, 2008)

A growing number of food activists and food researchers are using La Via Campesina’s notion of “food sovereignty” as the standard for better food systems that advocate for the interests of farmers, the poor, and a variety of environmental and social movements. This idea of food sovereignty, defined as “people’s right to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems” (Via Campesina 1996), is fundamentally based on democratic control of the food system by the citizenry and agricultural workers. In socialist Cuba decisions about food imports, agriculture, and development are made centrally by the national government without voter input. There is no corporate or other business influence on the Cuban agriculture system; it is entirely decided by the state. Part of the rationale behind state control over the food system is precisely the need to maintain equitable distribution of food and to prevent people from exploiting scarcities and profiting by producing and selling directly to the public.

After outlining the contemporary Cuban food system, this chapter details how consumers experience it. The data presented here reveal nostalgia for previous periods of abundant cheap imported foods as well as consumers’ struggle to deal with their dissatisfaction with the current food system. I focus on three ways consumers in Santiago de Cuba resist unfavorable aspects of the food system and consequently