

## Language and Power in Social Movements: Hearing All the Voices in Food System Advocacy Narratives

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*“We need only turn to the past, for there, in the unfolding dramas of history, can be found a remarkable range of voices striving to make the world over again.”*  
*(Morris and Browne 1)*

Everyone must eat. It is this immediate and personal connection to food which drives public and scholarly interest in the complex narratives emerging in what is becoming known as the “food movement”—activism on a global scale that is challenging how the industrialized production, distribution and consumption of food is affecting environmental conditions, food sovereignty and security, human health and wellness, and cultural identities. As the number of food advocacy groups promoting different, yet overlapping, public concerns continues to increase, so does the flow of language used by these groups to shape collective identities and political stances, which motivate social, economic and political change. These multiple intersecting narratives promote action: how we talk about food and food systems matters because it defines and delimits the actions that we take. It is this combination of words and action that scholars in Rhetoric and Composition, and specifically those studying the rhetorics of social movements, use to define what social movements are and do.

Rhetorical scholars Morris and Browne suggest that “movements are by their nature rhetorical . . . they organize symbols to persuasive ends; they address unsettled issues of public

importance; and they seek change not through violence or coercion but through force of argument and appeal” (1). H.W. Simons importantly adds to Morris and Browne by proposing that social movements are more specifically “un-institutionalized collectivities that mobilize for action to implement a program for the reconstitution of social norms or values” (36). Using the lens of rhetorical analysis—looking at what discourse in particular situations for particular audiences *does*—helps identify how language shapes any movement. Advocacy groups addressing a variety of ideological and material conditions of food production, distribution and consumption work with “symbols”—words and images—and combine these with symbolic actions to focus public views and initiate change to produce a food system that is just and sustainable.

Currently, “the” food movement being written and talked about across all public mediums is comprised of many movements and cultures with goals that do, and sometimes don’t, align. Understanding the way currently circulating narratives across these multiple advocacy groups work with and against each other highlights characteristics of their discourses that both promote and limit the realization of democratic, inclusive, and environmentally sustainable notions of food and food systems. Invoking a mix of J.L. Austin’s speech acts theory and Judith Butler’s performativity, I suggest that how we all talk about food and food systems will define what alternatives replace the present socially unjust and ecologically unsustainable agro-industrial food complex. If food system changes are to benefit all, the rhetoric of “the” food movement writ large must reflect this by placing the postcolonial voices of communities of color and indigenous populations side by side with the largely white, middle-class dominant narratives currently in circulation.

### Who's Telling the Story Matters

*"If it came from a plant, eat it; if it was made in a plant, don't."*  
Michael Pollan, *Food Rules*

Some of the most privileged and widely mediated stories about food and change come from a Eurocentric stance. Eric Schlosser (*Fast Food Nation*), Marion Nestle (*Food Politics; What to Eat*), Michael Pollan (*Omnivore's Dilemma; In Defense of Food*), and Barbara Kingsolver (*Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*), among other high profile food writers, have been raising public awareness of food in terms of safety, purity, nutritional value, labor practices, agrarian and rural values, taste and aesthetics. With the ongoing production of books and films on the topic of food, it seems that we are publically, and quite literally, writing, reading and viewing our way into an understanding of the food system. Popular public literature and film cited by mainstream food advocacy groups and individual citizens, offer insight into where the concerns of these various reformation/transformation attempts lie. Some of the most prominent public voices from the past decade forwarded by these advocacy groups are telling, in that they shape the message that then gets circulated by mainstream media.

Eric Schlosser's investigative journalism in 2001 with the publication of *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal* still makes the top ten list of food advocacy groups focused on health and nutritional eating, like community supported agriculture (CSA) and local food advocates. Eric Schlosser's critical narrative linked the national concern about obesity directly to the abundance of high fructose corn syrup and other cheap, unhealthy additives in fast food, while simultaneously exposing the local and global impact of the American fast food industry's system of production, processing, and distribution, including its labor practices. Schlosser's calling out of the state of the fast food industry helped American and international

publics begin to see how this ubiquitous part of the U.S. food system works, and to whose detriment (eaters, workers and natural environments) and benefit (large corporations). In 2002, nutritionist and public health specialist Marion Nestle published *Food Politics: How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health*, tracing national obesity and bad health to farm policies and stock market profiteering. Again, abundant simple sugars, hydrolyzed fats and salt in fast food and “junk” food marketed to young children are exposed as food industry staples, creating a “business environment [where] childhood obesity is just collateral damage” (“One Thing” [Nestle]). Her later book, *What to Eat* (2006), is a guide for the conscious eater to navigate the marketing maze of supermarket super stores. In the process, she continues to expose the business practices and power of the American industrial food system. Both authors weave stories of duped publics being abused by corporations at the cost of their health and the health of future generations of eaters.

Michael Pollan and Barbara Kingsolver each enter the public food conversation with well-received books that complicate consumer responsibility, raise thoughtful questions about conscientious farmers and farming methods, and fold in awareness of environmental sustainability and post-peak oil in food production and distribution. In addition to exposing aspects of the U.S. food industry and what food is bad for health, the narratives of these authors turn on an appeal to aesthetics and taste in the pursuit of choosing, or in Kingsolver’s case, growing, food that is good for health—human health as well as the health of nonhuman nature and environmental systems. Insights from these authors made important contributions to the thinking of middle class eaters, primarily white, who had the relative privilege of not having had to think of where their food came from, or at what cost to whom.

Yet while reports of middle-class uptake of farmers' market food shopping, local community supported agriculture share purchases and food miles calculation have become normalized and celebrated in the media, other important public voices have been building equally important narratives about and arguments for social justice oriented changes to an impoverished food system. These authors and speakers, too, bring health and wellness of people and environment to the fore, provide well-researched exposes of systemic abuses of indigenous peoples and people of color, lands and waterways, and the wholesale silencing of food cultures that do not fit dominant Euro-American models. But they also bring something more: their narratives are infused with personal journeys and lived realities of whole communities of underrepresented peoples that go beyond mere outrage of a "duped" public. They expose the long histories of the oppression and abuse of a capitalist American food system that started with slavery and has continued to profit primarily at the expense of non-white lives and cultures, disrupting deep relationships with land and nonhuman nature. Importantly, these voices share alternative lifeways and traditions that can bring humans back into resonance and collaboration with the nonhuman natural world. There are many, and prominent among these voices are Vandana Shiva, Will Allen, and Winona LaDuke.

Physicist, philosopher, ecofeminist and environmental activist Vandana Shiva has spoken out extensively in public forums and in her more than twenty books about sustainability, agriculture, and biopiracy, critiquing the aggressive global application of industrial agricultural practices in developing nations. In her book *Earth Democracy: Justice, Sustainability, and Peace*, Shiva weaves an alternative ecological narrative that encourages the formation of local living economies based on the intrinsic value of all life on earth, rather than "the rhetoric of the 'ownership society' in which everything—water, biodiversity, cell, genes, animals, plants—is

property” (3). Ultimately, fully realized Earth Democracy wrests control of land, water, and living biodiversity from corporate globalization, and places it in the hands of local living cultures, economies and democracies “organized on the principles of inclusion, diversity, and ecological and social responsibility” through self-governance (10-11).

In an interview with journalist Scott London, Shiva says, “I believe Gandhi is the only person who knew about real democracy—not democracy as the right to go and buy what you want, but democracy as the responsibility to be accountable to everyone around you” (Interview). Shiva is fighting for the equitable apportioning of local and global resources so that local economies can sustain themselves, their cultures and their freedoms. She calls for “living economies” that reframe global resources as a shared “commons,” which “embodies social relations based on interdependence and cooperation” (21), and push back against the domination of the industrial global market economy—an economy that disregards the health and well-being of the many, including nonhuman nature, for the profits of a very few. Shiva connects the lines between sustainable food systems, health, and democratic economic well-being to make a powerful case for cultures’ control of their food sources.

Will Allen’s story, which he tells in his book *Good Food Revolution: Growing Healthy Food, People, and Communities*, is a story of creating an inner-city farm for the urban populations of disenfranchised African Americans living in the city of Milwaukee. It is also a tale of how Allen’s efforts to address the food deserts and malnutrition in young Black lives evolved into an interconnected community, created jobs and improved livelihoods, increased food self-sufficiency and security, and spread to other urban areas in other parts of the country. Allen’s narrative traces his personal family history with food and farming during colonial slavery and exploitative 20<sup>th</sup> century sharecropping, and their move north from rural to urban living with millions of other

African Americans during the Great Migration of the 1940s and 1950s. He writes about trying to make sense of his urban life rooted in a rural past, and the desire to reclaim “the agricultural skills that had once been our birthright” (4).

What makes Allen’s narrative so profound is the depth of his identification with the people with which he is building community food security—disenfranchised urban African Americans with similar cultural histories and losses. He is able to accomplish much more than food security: community-building, cultural reclamation, empowerment in the midst of systemic conditions that deny access to food and resources. These are all forms of social capital that commodified industrial food production cannot inspire. As Allen states, “Good food is at the foundation, but it’s really about life” (*Growing Power*).

Winona LaDuke parallels Allen’s words in her TEDx Minnesota talk, “Seeds of Our Ancestors, Seeds of Life.” LaDuke, a Native American with Anishinaabe (Ojibwe) ancestry and a Harvard graduate, has spent her life as an activist, writer and speaker, advocating for the recovery of native lands and the preservation of indigenous ways of life. She is the founder and executive director of the White Earth Land Recovery Project, which promotes the return of lands to the reservation, and makes visible interconnected nature of Anishinaabe cosmology, land, culture, and native foods (*White Earth*). To separate one from the others destroys the whole: “Food for us comes from our relatives, whether they have wings or fins or roots. That is how we consider food. Food has a culture. It has a history. It has a story. It has relationships” (LaDuke *Seeds*). LaDuke weaves history and story and relationships into her powerful advocacy narratives, using Native American storytelling traditions to inspire identification among the Anishinaabeg and connect interculturally with other indigenous people and Native American advocates. Her ability to intertwine these narratives with facts, statistics, and politics from the

environmental and nutritional sciences extends her political reach and effectiveness, and has powered her many foundations and projects.

LaDuke is a leader in the recovery and preservation of indigenous foods, particularly manoomin, a native North American wild rice that grows abundantly in the northwestern Minnesota lakes region, where LaDuke's band of Anishinaabe live on the White Earth Reservation. Bear Island Flint corn, Sugar Bush maples, and Lakota squash are other indigenous foods that LaDuke and the Anishinaabeg are returning to their tribal lands and farms (LaDuke *Seeds*). The preservation and cultivation of corn and rice grown by their ancestors reanimates cultural narratives and passes down ancestral stories. It makes visible Native American environmental issues that are destroying their ability to do this growing and reclaiming. It lays the groundwork (quite literally) for the (re)development of sustainable Native cultures that have control over their food and seeds. This addresses the Anishinaabeg need for locally grown organic fresh food with high nutritional value, as LaDuke states, "Our plan on this is to grow as much corn as our ancestors did, and the foods our ancestors grew. It turns out, these foods are roughly twice as high in protein, and two to three times more nutritious than anything you can get at the store" (qtd. in Platt). Seed saving, land and cultural preservation, all of this increases and maintains the diversity needed to assure food sovereignty as a part of Anishinaabe ways of life. As LaDuke writes, "Food sovereignty is an affirmation of who we are as indigenous peoples, and a way, one of the most surefooted ways, to restore our relationship with the world around us" (qtd. in Platt).

It is the stories these writer-speakers tell that place alternative food system advocacy in a human scale. Eating includes *people* caring for the land that produces the food, *people* having control over the future of that land, *people* saving the seeds for the next crops. People, not

multinational food corporations, empower communities of eaters to grow food, which in turn produces the pride and cultural renewal that arises from this food knowledge and practice. These non-Anglo voices speak to the intimate connection between culture and use, control and care of the land upon which a community depends. They expose practices that unfairly determine who has the right and agency to use the land in what ways. Their voices also create the narrative diversity that the largely white, middle-class mid-20<sup>th</sup> century environmental movement never quite achieved until many of the same non-white populations made themselves heard twenty years into the movement. These voices are essential to for the radical reimagination of a sustainable and just food system, but their ability to be heard is complicated by loud and ubiquitous Euro-American ideologies about land ownership and use.

How the dominant Euro-American voices of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century spoke out for the development or preservation of land and nonhuman nature shaped the eventual mechanization of agricultural practices in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, overwriting pre-contact indigenous cultural narratives of subsistence and coexistence with nonhuman nature and environments. Food and land use have an ingrained relationship to the Eurocentric cultures that colonized North America and sought to “claim and conquer” the land, and any existing culture that got in the way of that rampant colonialism. The desires of early colonists to “tame” the “unruly” wilderness eclipsed indigenous voices, wisdom, and practices (practices which likely kept the earliest of colonists alive). It was early Transcendentalists and late-19<sup>th</sup> century preservationist and conservationist conversations that brought into question the wisdom of the “conqueror mentality” in ways that began to build resonance with indigenous cultural values. Mid-20<sup>th</sup> century environmentalists would later use these Euro-American narratives, blended with Anglo-American constructions of the traditional, environmentally sensitive Native American that suited the purposes of the Environmental

Movement. In turn, Native Americans appropriated these invented and imagined stories about their cultures to elevate Anglo-American perceptions of Native Americans (Benton and Short 23). This rhetorically savvy uptake and retelling of the indigenous land use beliefs and practices by Native American activists has allowed indigenous and many other non-dominant narratives to emerge into popular discourse about food, land and nonhuman nature.

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**The “Victor’s” Tale: Food and Land from the Colonizer’s Perspective**

*“Agriculture is the great business of this country.”*  
Benjamin Franklin

From the beginning of United States nationhood, “transforming the wilderness into something productive has been an overriding theme in the settlement of the United States” (Benton and Short 4). Alexis de Tocqueville remarked on this with his observation that “the American people see themselves marching through the wilderness . . . subduing nature” (qtd. in Benton and Short 4). This “relentless marching” started prior to de Tocqueville’s American 19<sup>th</sup> century tour, but what he saw was the result of the previous 200 years of European colonial subjugation of pre-contact societies and cultures, suppressing the use-value practices of these societies and replacing them with commodification practices driven by beliefs in wilderness as “moral chaos” and a threat to basic survival (Benton and Short 28).

With the Euro-American economic and moral agenda thus set early on for the “taming” of nature, the use of open lands became a strong focus of late-19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Opinions about the human relationship with the land, including who had the right and agency to claim it, use it, and profit from it, placed contestation between pro-wilderness and pro-agricultural development proponents at the center of the Euro-American agro-environmental

story. Early land use conversations centered on the vast “wilderness” of the continent, and the tensions over whether to conquer and exploit it, or to preserve it “as is”—as a wilderness that, once gone, would never return. Food production and politics, set within an historical context of environmental narratives about land use and land preservation, are a complex weave of overlapping and recurring themes and motives that continue to drive present day land use practices and policies. The underlying motivations, ethics and values about human/nature/land relationships and inter-culture relationships exhibited in the following pro-con wilderness stories form the basis of the dominant voices in current alternative food system advocacy.

As an early Euro-American observer of nineteenth-century human/nature activities, Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) was concerned about the unfortunate American desire to “tame and own” nature and natural systems. He writes of the “irreverent haste and heedlessness” of an American populace “to have large farms and large crops merely” (148). He stingingly protests that it is “by avarice and selfishness . . . of regarding the soil as property, or the means of acquiring property chiefly, [that] the landscape is deformed, [and] husbandry is degraded with us” (148). He develops an idea that echoes in 20<sup>th</sup>- and 21<sup>st</sup>-century radical environmentalism that human beings no more “own” the land than any other inhabitant of the ecosystem. Thoreau developed respectful awareness of the degradation that human land use practices cause to nonhuman nature, and contributed to evolving thought about human/nature ethics seen later in agrarian and environmental sustainability narratives.

These themes continue in the late 1800s and early 1900s in the era of John Muir (1838-1914) and Gifford Pinchot (1865-1946), both of whom were responding to the overuse and overconsumption of land—land being primarily settled to farm—and marking the beginning of the modern Eurocentric environmental movement. Through the 1930s and 1940s,

environmental advocates debated preserving versus conserving, with devoted supporters of the departed Muir in the vanguard for preservation, and an aging Pinchot heading up the development of “wise use” conservation (Oravec). Aldo Leopold (1886-1948) is a unique figure in this era, most noted for the last chapter of his posthumously published *A Sand County Almanac*, “The Land Ethic.” In this chapter, Leopold articulates his proactive stance on conservation, which depends on a view of humans being part of, not independent from, nonhuman nature: “All ethics . . . rest upon a single premise: that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts . . . the land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, water, plants and animals” (203-204). Leopold understood “wise use” and “preservation” exist on a continuum of “restraint” in the “struggle for existence” (*Sand County* 202). His culminating work in “The Land Ethic” theorizes a way to realize “the more complex task of mixing a degree of wilderness with utility” (*For the Health* 7). The success of this endeavor for Leopold always returns to the ability of humans to evolve ecologically informed philosophical ethics that sustain human and nonhuman nature.

Like Leopold, Wendell Berry used his storied writings to frame the human-food-land relationship as an ethical way of life that works with nature and within natural systems. At eighty-two years of age, Berry has spent the last fifty-plus years of his life advocating for a whole and environmentally sound relationship between humans and nature, and nature and agriculture. In his 1977 polemic, *The Unsettling of America*, Berry comes out of his agrarian poetics and moves his ideas directly into the fray of environmental activism and concern for the values that instantiate such abuse of nonhuman nature’s communities. He is writing in direct response to growing industrialized agriculture and its negative impact on rural culture, economics, nonhuman nature, food quality and human and environmental health. Berry places agriculture

and environmental concerns in the same frame, simultaneously championing agrarian values inherent in small family farms and local economies: “A healthy farm culture can be based only upon familiarity and can grow only among people soundly established on the land; it nourishes and safeguards a human intelligence of the Earth that no amount of technology can satisfactorily replace” (*Unsettling* 43). His writings and values infuse contemporary alternative food system advocacy arguments for the support of local and regional food systems.

A last prominent Euro-American voice for food and land to add here, that, in many ways, led directly to the modern environmental movement, is Rachel Carson (1907-1964). She was driven by her work as scientist and zoologist to speak out about the ecological consequences of industrial agriculture. Her first attempt to write about environmental degradation in relation to industrial farming’s development and use of the synthetic pesticide DDT in 1945 was met with skepticism and dismissal backed by a chemical industry intent on keeping the big business of chemical production going at all costs. Refusing to be silenced, her thorough research and her use of an array of expert and public voices on the deleterious effects of chemical pesticides became the book *Silent Spring* in 1962. The publication of Carson’s *Silent Spring* was a pivotal moment for public awareness and “marked a new shift in environmental concern” from the “need to protect the earth” to the mobilization against the “threat of human and animal extinction” (Benton and Short 82-83). Carson’s book was bitterly criticized by the food and farm industry, but an astounding popular success: in less than six months it had sold half a million copies. It is Carson’s ability to tell the tale, and to elicit identification with her ideas, that allowed her “Fable for Tomorrow” to add fuel to the modern environmental movement. Carson’s *Silent Spring* has forged a strong and consistent link between food systems and local and global environmental health that also likely encouraged the 1960s organic food movement.

This turn away from conquering the land to coexisting in necessary symbiosis continues in the various discourses of alternative food system advocacy. These Euro-American voices came to the coexistence narrative through their respective worldviews—Thoreau through Transcendentalist philosophy, Berry through his fierce belief in and defense of Agrarian culture, Carson through empirical science. The irony is the time it has taken for dominant white culture to come to know what indigenous and subjugated cultures never forgot. Pre-colonial cultures and wisdoms were silenced, relocated, and eclipsed, but not wiped out, and the message of these cultures is clear: interdependency, collaboration, and respect and care for humans and nonhuman nature and lands is what will sustain human life. All of the dominant themes that run through different food advocacy groups, like health and wellness, cultural preservation, and social justice, depend on new or renewed relationships to the land, other people and food—that of collaboration and coexistence, rather than conquest.

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### Collaborating with the Land—and Each Other

*“Mother Earth needs us to keep our covenant . . .  
And we will commit to our descendants to work hard  
to protect this land and water for them.  
Whether you have feet, wings, fins, or roots,  
we are all in it together.”*  
Winona LaDuke

Current alternative food system advocates are, in many cases, trying to eschew the vestiges of early Euro-American narratives about “domination over” nonhuman nature in the human-land relationship to one in which all humans are in “collaboration with” nonhuman nature. This effort shows up in the philosophical and social commitments of loosely related networks of alternative food advocacy groups and the range of the discourses used by these,

nearly all of which involve the promotion of ecological sustainability and social equity. Whether coming from a cultural, scientific, nutritional or environmental stance, current prevalent arguments in food advocacy narratives make appeals to one or more of the following four categories:

- Environmental sustainability
- Food sovereignty and food security
- Human health and wellness
- Regional and cultural identities

All of these “separate” categories, and the narratives told that focus on combinations of them, work with and against each other in interesting ways, depending on the stance and viewpoint of the story teller.

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### **Environmental Sustainability**

Alternative food system advocacy focused on environmental concerns turns on the intimate relationship of food production and environmental use and abuse, as Patricia Allen states in her book *Together at the Table: Sustainability and Sustenance in the American Agrifood System*:

No other commodity is as “natural” as food . . . since agriculture depends on the primary appropriation of nature; it is a special case of the . . . a highly visible, intensive relation between people and the environment. Agriculture’s direct dependence upon natural resources makes it impossible to obscure environmental destruction in the agrifood system. (Allen 24–25)

Sustainable agriculture proponents maintain that sustainable alternatives to the current industrialized food system are needed and available—in part found in the practices of small, diversified family farms, small and medium scale organic agriculture, and local, community supported production and distribution. This collection of practices, optimally, helps ensure that food is produced and will continue to be produced by balancing food production against the recovery of the resources needed to keep food growing. It is also founded on building local economic relationships that create strong community awareness of human dependency on local lands and healthy soils.

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### **Food Sovereignty and Food Security**

Food sovereignty is the right for people—all people—to participate in shaping and enforcing their own food systems and food policies so that they benefit human communities and sustain environmental resources. Shiva's books and lectures on *Earth Democracy* and "living economies" focus on local economies that decentralize global economies and are as diverse as the cultures that create them. Food sovereignty is also the means to disrupt current cultural hierarchies, creating a social environment for pre-colonial wisdom and lifeways to become visible again and thrive. As LaDuke's work with the White Earth Land Recovery Project reveals, at its core food sovereignty supports the social, cultural and ecological diversity needed to create sustainable food systems, as well as sustainable, life-supporting ecologies. Food sovereignty necessarily includes food security as one of the outcomes ideally achieved when people are able to control their food production and sustain and preserve their cultural connection to their food. Food security, in the absence of food sovereignty, is more complicated, and political.

Food security advocacy centers on equitable access to healthy food. It highlights health and nutrition for all, over the commoditization of food and bottom line dollar profits for some. Food security advocates are attempting to redraw the poverty-food security-hunger triangle, including addressing obesity and other processed food related health issues which particularly plague poor urban populations. Food security advocates point out the two main sources for these food-related health problems: 1) the unavailability of quality fresh food in poor inner city neighborhoods that only have access to high priced food stuffs sold in convenience markets, and 2) the overabundance of processed food devoid of nutritional value that often philanthropically finds its way into food banks and homeless shelters (Winne 28). In his book *Closing the Food Gap: Resetting the Table in the Land of Plenty*, Mark Winne attests to some of these systemic forces as he writes of his work to alleviate food insecurity:

As in the case of supermarket abandonment of urban (and rural) areas, the food gap can be understood as a failure of our market economy to serve the basic human needs of those who are impoverished . . . .poverty contributes to this gap, creating a situation in which a person or household simply doesn't have enough money to purchase a sufficient supply of nutritious food . . . [this] form of food insufficiency is known as food insecurity. To move forward in our understanding of the food gap, we must also understand the role poverty has played in giving hunger and food insecurity such a strong foothold in the United States . . .

(Winne xviii)

As Winne's book chronicles, and as local experience confirms, urban community gardens to produce food and teach food production are emerging in the city landscape. Community supported agriculture organizations (CSAs) with altruistic aims provide portions of food to food

shelters and soup kitchens. Programs like Syracuse, New York's "Urban Delights" connect local farmers with inner city kids so that they learn the basics of being entrepreneurial distributors for farm fresh produce in their own neighborhoods. Additionally, farmer's market vendors are honoring food stamps and some market associations attempt to limit participation to local producers.

While these efforts are important, it is the work on food policy that food security advocates use to effect lasting change, such as the development of Food Policy Councils at local and state levels starting in the late-1990s. Food Policy Councils ideally appoint members from all local or state governmental or non-governmental agencies and organizations involved with food systems—departments of agriculture, health, education, transportation, parks and land use, social welfare and direct services (e.g., WIC or school lunches), business development, and alternative food advocacy organizations. National organizations like the Food Security Coalition based in the Pacific Northwest orchestrate advocacy groups and offer training in policy reform effectiveness. As Winne suggests, "When it comes to hunger, food insecurity, nutrition, or agriculture, I can say with categorical certainty that not a single significant social or economic gain has been made in the last fifty years without the instigation and participation of an active and vociferous body of citizens" (149).

Will Allen, his twenty-two-year-old organization, Growing Power, and his original urban farm in Milwaukee, are all examples of food security in action. Allen and a home-grown team of community farmers grow fruits and vegetables and fish on three city acres, providing fresh healthy and local food to inner-city poor, teaching and employing his customers as he goes, and sharing his vast knowledge and experience. This successful concept has now spread, with Growing Power urban farm networks crossing seven states. *The New York Times* calls him "the

go-to expert on urban farming,” conducting workshops and pressing for the productive use of vacant city lots across the nation. Involving hundreds of inner city residents, Allen’s project is also an example of food justice and food sovereignty by virtue of creating ownership of the process, the creation of the urban farm, and the rebuilding and reinventing of a cultural ground for this work to take place. Others across the country are now following suit and evolving the concept with creative and dynamic results.

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### **Human Health and Wellness**

“Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants” (1). This is the first line of Michael Pollan’s book *In Defense of Food: An Eater’s Manifesto*. His book, as the title infers, is making the case for whole, simple foods, and reclaiming both “eating” and “food” from a food industry whose aim is to sell cheap, sugary “food-like” products to make more money, regardless of the consequences to individuals’ health and well-being. Health, if not the primary focus, is often a strong focus of alternative food groups, particularly community supported agriculture (CSA) collectives and cooperatively owned health food stores. Pollan makes many of the claims that CSA members make when explaining their choice to buy food directly from a local, and often organic, farmer. They, and Pollan, advocate for debunking the myths of nutritional science and the food industry that it takes experts to tell us what it is we need to eat when tradition and common sense would serve us far better (Pollan 7-8). They want the freshest, most nutritious, chemical-free, and delicious produce they can find, because this makes “sense.” One thing nutritional scientists and alternative food system advocates focused on health agree on is that the industrialized American diet of highly processed foods is the cause of sick and overweight people, with rampant obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and cancer (Nestle 3).

Pollan is advocating a health and wellness approach to food system reform, encouraging people to “vote with their forks” and “join the movement that is renovating our food system in the name of health” (14). He is suggesting strategies and guidelines for choosing food more consciously, what he calls “eating algorithms, mental devices for thinking through our food choices” (12). The project of the alternative food advocates that approach food system reformation in this way, is to educate the public about the health risks incurred by the industrialized food system and encourage change, individual by healthy individual.

The critique often leveled at this approach is that it tends to disregard the real concerns of food sovereignty and food security advocates. Focus on health and wellness becomes entangled with middle- and upper middle-class Eurocentric notions of taste and food pleasure—something that the non-white populations of inner-city poor may not have the economic luxury of participating in. It is not simply a matter of “educating” the unknowledgeable: a vast portion of American urban and rural populations lack available sources for healthy food and the resources to buy it, while being well aware that the cheap food alternatives they must eat contribute to their health problems. In a word, health and wellness narratives are often, perhaps unconsciously, elitist, as when Pollan says that raising the cost of fast food and unsustainably grown food will “level the [economic] playing field for sustainable food that doesn’t rely on fossil fuel” (qtd. in Severson). Level the playing field for whom? Certainly not for the families whose only option is cheap fast food.

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### **Regional and Cultural Identities**

Food as a bond between families, regions and cultures is perennial. Almost everyone has stories of special family recipes passed down from a parent, aunt, uncle, or grandparent.

Heirloom fruits and vegetables evoke regional ties to certain varieties of greens, tomatoes, or cherries. Even when the tie is not to one's own family, these preserved specialized plants carry the weight of regional, cultural, and agricultural traditions. Again, Shiva and LaDuke speak out powerfully for the preservation and ownership of cultural food and lifeways. In dominant narratives of alternative food advocacy, regional and cultural preservation of food is often monopolized by Slow Food participants.

The Slow Food Movement is a regional food system advocacy group that places cultural preservation alongside anti-industrial, environmentally sustainable and socially just aims. The international movement's founder Carlo Petrini uses the term "gastronomy" to describe this "complex and profound . . . science, the science of 'all that relates to man as a feeding animal,' as Brillat-Savarin wrote in *The Physiology of Taste* (1825)" ("One Thing" [Petrini]). The Slow Food website states, "Our movement is founded upon this concept of eco-gastronomy – a recognition of the strong connections between plate and planet" (*Slow Food*). The Slow Food story started in Italy as a response to the opening of a U.S. McDonald's corporation fast food restaurant near the *Piazza di Spagna* in Rome. In the midst of intense protest about the industrialization and bastardization of the art and culture of food and eating, the Slow Food Movement was born. It now has over 100,000 members in 132 countries (*Slow Food*). Starting as a "purely wine and food association" (Petrini, *Slow Food: Collected Thoughts*, xii), Slow Food has addressed many topics over the last twenty years, including biodiversity, food education, defense of local cultures, the importance of local food, animal well-being, environmentally responsible production, and worker safety with fair compensation. The organization's website articulates these goals:

Slow Food is a non-profit, eco-gastronomic member-supported organization that was founded in 1989 to counteract fast food and fast life, the disappearance of local food traditions and people's dwindling interest in the food they eat, where it comes from, how it tastes and how our food choices affect the rest of the world. To do that, Slow Food brings together pleasure and responsibility, and makes them inseparable. (*Slow Food*)

Critics have questioned the ability of Slow Food *convivia* to “save the world... by producing, distributing, choosing, and eating food of real quality” (“One Thing” [Petrini]). There is an aura of elitism that surrounds the group's membership; their demographics alone—primarily older, wealthy, Eurocentric professionals in urban areas—support this view. Yet many parts of the Slow Food narrative are in alignment with indigenous cultures, which coexisted with, and predated, white privileged rhetorics about food. The International Ark of Taste is a Slow Food program that works with eaters, farmers, ranchers and other food-oriented workers and advocates to identify endangered species and varieties of food in order to protect, and celebrate, global biological diversity and cultural and culinary heritage (*Slow Food*). Anishinaabeg Manoomin (Ojibwe wild rice) is cataloged and preserved in the Ark of Taste and listed with nearly 3,000 other endangered global food species noted by the Slow Food Foundation for Biodiversity (*Slow Food Foundation*). This Slow Food effort, although not specifically aligned with the exigencies and politics of indigenous cultural food preservation, nonetheless compliments the efforts of LaDuke, Shiva, and others to create rich biodiversity and cultural diversity for sustainable human and nonhuman environmental futures.

### Keeping All the Pieces

All of these approaches to alternative food system advocacy, with their strengths, weaknesses, and mixed results, address the need for changing the industrial food system. For some activists and scholars, like Patricia Allen, what must be included in a food system overhaul is clear. Allen promotes alternative food movements that are "moving the food system in the direction of environmental soundness and social equity" (16) and states clearly her belief that "whether the future . . . is better or worse than present will depend largely on the evolving alternative food movements' simultaneously prioritizing issues of environmental and human degradation" (19). Some, but not all, alternative food advocacy groups make this their primary narrative; others emphasize the different foci elaborated above and still come around, intentionally or not, to the issue of environmental sustainability through those pathways.

Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* necessarily set up a binary opposition between the concerns of environmentalism and business-oriented agricultural production. The message of alternative food system advocates at the end of the 20th century and beginning of the 21st is that the binary is no longer farming or healthy ecosystems, but farming *and* healthy ecosystems. Additionally, what alternative voices to the dominant Eurocentric food advocacy voices are saying is that we can own this process as one of recognizing the wisdom of peoples and cultures that have always known this to be true, and return to them the right and dignity to take a major role in bringing this about.

Alternative food system advocacy groups from varying stances are finding wider audiences for their messages, and also more cohesion across groups with different primary missions. It is likely that differently focused groups have members who participate in multiple organizations, bringing their multiple, persuasive rhetorics with them. These intersectional identities speak to

and listen to each other's narratives and rhetorical claims, and build on each other's efforts. Intersectionality needs to be brought to bear on this discussion of food group rhetorics and identities—all are needed, and all inform and change how the narratives are shaped. It's not enough to tell the white privileged narrative about the environment or about local farm-to-table food. All voices need to be heard and valued, and connections across advocacy groups become more than possible with democratized social media and internet connectivity.

This effort is not conflict-free, of course. Alternative food advocacy groups who struggle to get food to inner-city areas do not always have the luxury of local fresh food as a first choice. Groups focused on health and environmental issues can remain adamant in their support of local sustainable agriculture without fully understanding the systemic barriers to supplying inner-city poor with fresh local produce and healthful foodstuffs. These tensions that develop have productive potential, and we have the opportunity to moderate them through the different disciplinary lenses of the Humanities. We as scholars and public intellectuals have the opportunity to document, disseminate and teach critical food knowledge where we find a niche to do it—in classrooms and in public forums. As we write and teach and talk publically about the rich and varied ways food advocacy groups seek solutions to food system problems, we shape and support their public awareness efforts. It is at this confluence of concerns, ideas and rhetorical approaches that a public pedagogical moment arises—one that is full of potential for developing widespread critical food literacy. Developing such a set of critical knowledge and skills is the cornerstone for owning our share of eco-agricultural responsibility, and taking part in the implementation of alternative forms of food production, distribution and consumption that are sustainable and just.

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