A hunger for justice: everyday forms of Latinx resistance in New York State's Capital Region

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A HUNGER FOR JUSTICE: EVERYDAY FORMS OF LATINX RESISTANCE
IN NEW YORK STATE’S CAPITAL REGION

By

Cassandra Andrusz-Ho Ching

A Dissertation
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Abstract

Low-income racialized communities have always disproportionately struggled with food system inequities. However, after the 2008 financial crisis, conditions have become more precarious, especially in Latinx communities. This context has resulted in intensified food system inequities, manifesting as food insecurity, high food pricing, inconsistent and partial food programming, diet related diseases, low wages, worker and environmental rights abuses. This dissertation examines how low-income Latinx communities, respond to these intensified inequities in the New York State Capital Region from 2008-2018. Through qualitative research, interviews and observations, I assess the nature and context of everyday practices that undermine or resist food system inequities, efforts that promote Food Justice. I seek to identify and examine the varied repertoire of practices in play to deepen our understanding of Latinx resistance under austerity. I argue everyday forms of Latinx resistance are uniquely equipped to address food system inequities because of the sociocultural and historical legacy and firsthand accounts connected to land, farmworkers, food production. Moreover, that Latinxs are not just producers or consumers but active agents within attempts to resist food system inequities and achieve food justice. My work provides a sociocultural and economic analysis to how low-income Latinx individuals and communities under austerity promote food justice through every acts of resistance.
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Chapter 1: Introduction: A Hunger for Justice

Crises are an essential piece to the reproduction of capitalism. But they are also part of the terrain in which the instabilities of capitalism are confronted and reshaped as communities work to survive, undermine, resist and or create new versions of capitalism (Harvey, 2005; Klein, 2007). In this process institutions, social relations, politics, and ideologies are reevaluated. A local activist, student and summer program teacher at the Radix Center in Albany NY, Justina Thompson emphasized this resistance in an interview after a food collection and composting activity with her students. She stated,

I am resisting corporations and capitalism. I am fighting to redefine wealth in terms of relationships and experiences not material things and accumulation. I resist so we can all thrive and prosper together. When your happiness is not tied to your accumulation you can live a different life and that’s not something being promoted by our culture. I am fighting for community, to connect and reconnect with people. My dream is to walk down a street in Albany to a community garden and pick what you want for dinner. Pick your tomatoes, your cilantro, a cucumber whatever, maybe add a little chicken for flavor. I am done complaining about things I don’t like. I can change the things I don’t like about the world. I am done waiting, done complaining, it is time to take action.

Social resistance is an ever-changing and dynamic process full of possibilities for societal transformation in a multitude of ways. This dissertation examines everyday forms of Latinx resistance that promote food justice after the 2008 financial crisis in New York State’s Capital Region.

Between 2008 and 2019, the socioeconomic constraints under austerity have added pressure to overburdened poor and working-class racialized communities. In this work, I examine low-income Latinx responses to these amplified strains, how those most affected under austerity have sought to adapt, undermine and resist daily experiences of food system inequities. I analyze everyday practices, both individual and communal, that promote justice in daily lives and communities. Efforts by those with and a part of the Latinx communities in the Capital
Region that promote culture, dignity, and solidarity, often influencing the ideologies of participants, changing the discourse about the food system and or leading to shifts in behaviors and actions within these communities.

Social resistance has been conceptualized in varying ways, most commonly as direct action, social movements, protest or revolution. However, resistance is not just about direct action and systemic change; even the smallest and seemingly insignificant intentional every day act can represent resistance (Williams, 2009). Williams continues, resistance is a continuum rather than distinct dichotomies or boxes into which one form can be labeled as resistance. Dan Irizarry, a local state worker, community organizer and board member of Capital District LATINOS explains,

Each person, each community, each organization has their own strategies of resistance. Many things can be resistance, especially under authoritarianism. No matter how small, kindness, assistance, food, culture, even representation is empowering (Irizarry, 2018).

Everyday forms of Latinx resistance in this dissertation make up a diverse and dynamic array of variability, whereby those most affected by food system inequities respond to austere circumstances. These practices seek to ensure more equitable food practices, alleviate physical and psychological suffering, participate in alternative food system models, and generate momentum for possible changes in the food system.

The food system is steeped in racism and individualism, which normalizes and justifies the disproportionate suffering experienced by people of color related to the production and consumption of food. Over time, sustained food system inequities have resulted in structural violence in the food system. This violence encompasses violations of communities’ rights to produce their own food, food insecurity, or the state of unreliable and inconsistent access to healthy food. In addition to flawed government and nonprofit food programs, precarious and/or
low wage food service jobs and the promotion of prepackaged, poor quality, cheap “food” that often leads to diet-related diseases such as obesity and diabetes, environmental degradation, and even premature death (Farmer, 2003; Escarce, et al. 2006, Holt-Giménez & Harper, 2016). Though seemingly mundane, cyclical inequities, structural violence in the food system, manifests in federal, state, and local governance as well as in the solutions offered by nonprofit and charitable responses.

However, these injustices within the food system are not without contestation. Everyday forms of Latinx resistance expose structural violence as an inherent component in the creation and function of the food system (Holt-Gimenez & Harper, 2016). Latinxs in the Capital District are not just producers or consumers, but active agents organizing to resist food system inequities and achieve food justice. These practices depart from conditions set by austerity and normative roles of food production and consumption, in favor of alternatives or attempts that seek more equitable food system approaches.

Austerity measures include reductions in government spending, increases in tax revenues, or both, to lower budget deficits and reduce debt. They have been at work in federal, state, and local governments since the Reagan era and have left many governments today with few choices for financial self-sufficiency (Peck, 2013, p. 32), in addition to limited access for individuals and communities to health, food, water, work, social security, and education. Austerity is a mechanism of the neoliberal agenda, implemented in multiple ways and levels to redistribute wealth upwards (Andua & Lobao, 2011; Peck and Brenner, 2010). In New York State, common measures of austerity include reductions in state wages, pensions, social spending and programs in its state budget, corporate tax breaks granted by the state, and implementation of regressive tax reforms that privatize state-owned businesses from social services, basic utilities and
transportation to telecommunications. These measures, especially after the 2008 financial crisis, have intensified economic pressures on low-income and racialized communities.

As the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR, 2015) explains, under austerity spending critical social programs are reduced, weakening safety nets and undercutting human rights norms. The 2008 financial crisis led to the worst economic recession since the Great Depression, a period of decline that existed not just in the U.S. but around the globe. It has been defined by economic crisis, stagnation and austerity budgets whereby low-income and racialized communities are often forced to cut back on basic necessities, such as food, undermining their basic human rights. Riad (2015) explains, austerity measures politically and economically marginalize already vulnerable communities, worsening socioeconomic inequality. Wacquant (2009) and Eubanks (2018) continue, low-income and poor communities become targets not only for further exploitation but also punitive state tactics, such as increased policing, punishing the poor, repressing these communities.

Neoliberal capitalism has been perpetuating socio-economic disparities for decades. However, it is important to acknowledge the 2008 financial crisis and its aftermath as a rupture, in which socio-economic conditions are intensified and made more precarious, especially at the local level (Moragues-Faus & Marsden, 2017). They continue, after the 2008 financial crisis inequality has accelerated, fueled by the politics of austerity, devaluing the concept of public good and community. The 2008 financial crisis illustrated the inability of the current economic system to guarantee inclusive, sustainable growth. It also revealed the extent of corporate power, control and private interests have on markets and policy, emphasizing the failure of the benefits of economic growth to “trickle down” to the lower classes.
These points of intensification after the 2008 financial crisis have greatly influenced all sectors of U.S. political economy. This dissertation investigates one: the food system. The food system encompasses the cultivation, production, processing, transport, sale and consumption of food (Chase & Grubinger, 2014). The contemporary food system, like the larger economy, has always been inequitable, disproportionately exploiting, inconveniencing and excluding marginalized communities. However, with the increased application of austerity after the 2008 financial crisis, these conditions have intensified existing food system inequities, adversely affecting the well-being of low-income and racialized communities.

This dissertation centers on a portion of that population, the low-income Latinx community, persons within the U.S. of Latin American origin or descent, in the Capital Region of New York. Though the Latinx community shares experiences, struggles, and successes with other poor, low-income and racialized communities, I focus on Latinxs specifically. The Latinx population in the U.S. has been on the rise, increasing from 6.3 million in the 1960s to 56.5 million in 2015 (Pew, 2017). In New York State, Latinxs are the largest population of color, accounting for 15% of the total population, making it the fourth-largest Latinx population in the country (American Community Survey, 2014). In the Capital Region, the Latinx community has mirrored national trends, rising from 19,777 in 2000 to 35,103 in 2010, an increase of nearly 80%, according to the 2010 census data (Crowe, 2011). Latinxs have been and are an essential

1 The letter “x” in Latinx is used as a non-binary alternative to Latino or Latina. I have chosen to use Latinx because the majority of people in the communities I have researched are U.S.-based Latinos/as under 35 and prefer this term. I have also chosen to use it for its inclusivity, challenge to dominant language, and the homage it pays to indigenous languages of the Americas, where “x” is a common letter (Vidal-Ortiz & Martinez, 2018). A local Latinx community member, Taina Asili (2018), states, “language isn’t perfect, it is always changing but if we can change it, even if its temporary, to be more inclusive or representative for everyone we should try it.” Though the term Latinx has been critiqued as too academic, Americanized, difficult to pronounce in Spanish, and trendy, many of the participants I interviewed felt it brings a renewed focus to language, gender norms and inclusion/exclusion.
and growing piece of the U.S. population. What happens to and within their community reverberates throughout the larger population, particularly with regard to the food system.

For decades, low-income Latinx communities have made up a large portion of food system workers who are exposed to unjust and inequitable working conditions. Today, they are also an increasing base of consumers who experience a disproportionate lack of food access, high food prices, diet-related disease, inconsistent and flawed state, nonprofit, and charitable food programming, and food insecurity, the lack of consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy life. All these issues have become touchstones of public discourse after the 2008 financial crisis and were exacerbated by deepening austerity. From 2007 – 2012, food insecurity affected 26.2% of low-income Latinx households, more than all other racial groups (Coleman-Jensen 2012, Hipple 2010). Presently, 18.5% of Latinxs are food insecure, making Latinxs 150% as likely to be food insecure than the national average of 12.3% (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2017).

![Trends in food insecurity by race and ethnicity, 2001-17](https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/)

(USDA, 2017)
While overall employment in the food system has recovered after the 2008 financial crisis, food system workers have not seen positive changes. Wages remain stagnant, food workers are pushed to rely on food stamps at higher levels, health and safety problems have increased, and membership in unions has declined (Food Chain Workers Alliance, 2016; 5). Nearly 2.8 million workers relied on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), or food stamps, to feed their households in 2016. This was 2.2 times the rate of workers in all other industries – ironic, as 4.3 million food system workers, who make it possible for the rest of us to eat, were food insecure (Food Chain Workers Alliance, 2016; Occupation Employment Statistics, 2015). Though food insecurity rates vary greatly within the low-income Latinx population,² high levels of diet-related diseases, their associated consequences, and death are almost one-and-a-half times higher than they are among whites (Escarce, Morales, & Rumbaut, 2006). The authors continue to write that rates of obesity have also increased, with strong risk factors for cardiovascular disease, elevated blood pressure, diabetes, and elevated levels of cholesterol.

Access to food, health, and nutrition are inextricably linked to the economy, finances, and personal wealth (Gunn, 2016). A 2010 census report finds the 2008 financial crisis widened the wealth gap between the rich and poor, but also exacerbated the gap between different racial and ethnic groups. Between 2007 and 2010, low-income Latinx communities experienced the highest levels of home equity loss of all racial groups, at a rate of 48.3% (Landy, 2013; Fligstein & Rucks-Ahidianna, 2015). In the early 2000s, banking institutions began to target low-income neighborhoods with risky subprime loans. As a result, the number low-income Latinx-owned

² This chart, by the USDA, does not specify by subgroups based on social identifiers such as ethnicity, race, citizenship status, or language within low-income Latinx communities. It is important to note that these factors do play a role in the type, intensity, or frequency of food system inequities faced, such as health (Dixon, L., Sundquist, J., & Winkleby, M. (2000).
homes increased, but when home prices dropped, more Latinx families than any other group, lost their homes, a key contributor to food insecurity.

After the 2008 financial crisis, low-income racialized communities experienced greater losses in wealth and home equity. Today they have yet to recover that wealth, unlike the top 10% of wealth earners (Wolff, 2012; Bricker, 2012). With the cumulative effects of the 2008 financial crisis and recession, in addition to prior socio-economic inequities, Cox, Navarro-Rivera and Jones (2016) finds that Latinxs have lost ground in terms of upward social and economic mobility, with increased poverty rates, educational achievement gaps, and racial segregation. The intersection of economic inequality, homelessness, poverty, hunger, and health is a relational cycle that can be entered at any stage; however, once entered, it can be increasingly difficult to escape it.

To aid in the increasing demand for social services, nonprofit and charitable organizations in the U.S. have experienced rapid growth since the 1980s, working to fill the gap left by reduced or stagnating government services (Ben-Ner and Hoomissen, 1990). However, with the high levels of food system inequities, financial insecurity, and homelessness after the 2008 financial crisis, many organizations have been overwhelmed and left with few resources. In addition to excessive demand and a lack of funding, many organizations also struggle with inherent contradictions, individualism, competition and racism within their structures. These flaws include alleviating hunger, not solving it; fixing or feeding the individual rather than addressing systemic causes; holding assumptions that the poor lack the competence to eat healthy food; and relying on volunteers to “educate” or “save” them (Shannon, 2014; Guthman, 2011). These flaws are problematic because in the very solutions proffered to address food
system inequities, further violence and inequities are being perpetuated against low-income racialized communities.

Everyday forms of Latinx resistance expose the inconsistencies among nonprofit and charitable food programming. They highlight how some organizations, though they may be helpful, only provide short-term hunger relief in the form of temporary programming or one-time budget measures, food pantries or soup kitchens, managing poor populations struggling with hunger (Eubanks, 2018). These neoliberal and white-dominated approaches turn some organizations and programs into corporate business models, professionalized, expanding into new markets (Lambi-Mumford, 2016) while prioritizing white Euro-American food and health norms. These approaches, unknowingly embedded or presumed neutral, can lead to the retrenchment of neoliberal practices and racism, perpetuating marginalization and even undoing justice gains, furthering food system inequities veiled in best practices, charity, and good intentions.

The connection between conditions of austerity after the 2008 financial crisis and disproportionate rates of food system inequity for low-income and racialized communities is not an accident, or even the result of a broken system. Over the last four decades, the food system has continued to make more money and gain more power than ever before, contributing $1.053 trillion to the U.S. gross domestic product in 2017 (USDA, 2017). The neoliberal agenda continually shifts control across all sectors of the economy to a more concentrated grouping of influential corporations, transferring control from the government to private food and agricultural multinationals who work to change policies and write laws that work for them (Crouch, 2011). This has resulted in a collection of powerful corporate entities with state influence that control the functioning of the U.S. food system, among other sectors, threatening the democratic process.
It also concentrates food production in the hands of a few, redistributing resources upward, away from government services and food programs, food system workers, consumers, and people in need. These unjust conditions are foundational to the capitalist food system. They conceal the complexity of structural violence in the food system and obscure policies and programs that contribute to food injustice.

**Methods**

Positionality, behavior, and background make up a critical part of ethnographic research, from research design and data collection to constructing theories and writing the ethnography (Chiseri-Strater, 1996; Chavez, 2008). Criticism and challenge to the food system has always existed; however, I didn’t begin to question it until I was diagnosed with Irritated Bowel Syndrome, a common disorder that affects the large intestine. I assumed I was a healthy, balanced eater, even buying products that were low in fat. Yet the doctor who treated me said I needed to cut out “healthy” food products labeled as diet, low fat, fat free, or sugar free, explaining these products can cause more harm than good. I took his advice, excluding “healthy” food from my diet. After three years of struggling with IBS, I was symptom-free 6 months later. This diagnosis drastically altered my understanding of food and “health” food marketing, making me take a closer look at what I eat, where food comes from, and how it’s made.

Over the next decade, my diagnosis and recovery led me to constantly reconsider my food choices, as a flood of food-oriented books, documentaries, blogs, and social media platforms criticized and exposed unjust food system dynamics. These included themes like the global and local food sourcing, food safety, factory farming, farmworker rights, and overall food quality that extends to larger issues of protecting the environment and animal welfare (Roembke,
2018; Guthman, 2009, 2011; Pollan, 2006, 2008; Striffler, 2007; Holmes, 2013; Patel, 2007; Holt-Gimenez, 2010; 2017). With access to these resources and personal health experience I attempted to change my everyday habits, to rework and challenge the lack of access to affordable healthy food, the corporatization of the food system, the mistreatment of animals, the over use of agro chemicals, and the abuse of workers and the natural environment.

The increase in scholarly and public discourse about health and the food system ushered in contrasting and even competing efforts to promote food justice (Brent, Schiavoni, & Alonso-Fradejas, 2015). Some of these contradictory efforts include The Slow Food, Alternative, Local, and Organic Food Movements, all of them largely consisting of white middle-class conscious consumerism, emphasizing individual choice and change through the marketplace (Guthman, 2011). I myself took part in these market-oriented practices to “fix” or “eat outside” of the neoliberal food system and for a time, these practices made me feel good about myself and what I was doing, but eventually they became unsustainable. As a college student, I did not make enough money to shop at specialty health food stores, and the socially conscious food I was used to buying quickly disappeared from my diet. I realized these individual, consumer and market-based approaches to address food system inequities were only achievable for a select group of society that could pay, while the rest were excluded and unable to participate.

Though it was my personal health that awakened me to food system inequities, it has been the injustice in food system labor, food access and even in the very attempts and proposed solutions to correct the food system that has led me to this research. The research, like the above mentioned solutions, are also dominated by middle-class white voices. So, as a white, English-speaking, able-bodied, working-class, cisgendered woman and U.S. citizen, my goal in this dissertation is to work towards dismantling injustice in the food system by using my privileges
and to learn from those most affected and emphasize *their* voices, experiences, and knowledge. Between 2016 and 2018, I conducted research with multiple Latinx communities in the Capital region, giving my research on everyday forms of Latinx resistance a plurality, manifesting in diverse perspectives, approaches, and understandings. I initially struggled to locate and establish trust and connections in each community, which led to my partnership with Latinx community organizations such as Centro Cívico, the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, and Capital District LATINOS, as well as other leaders, advocates, and community members.

Other helpful resources, organizations, and groups key to this project that focused on food, farming, and nutrition, included Soul Fire Farm, Saratoga Economic Opportunity Center (EOC), the Cornell Cooperative Extension, Troy Commission on Economic Opportunity (CEO) and Unity House, 2nd Street Farm, the Sanctuary for Independent Media, the Radix Center, Albany Free School, Albany Victory Gardens, A Village, the South End Market, the Children’s Café, Food Pantries of the Capital District, and Capital Roots. Additionally, I reached out to individuals, business owners, artists, performers, chefs, musicians, state workers, advocates, and politicians. These group were selected by practices I observed in the community or were made aware of through social media platforms or when in attendance at another event. In my time with these individuals and groups I began to compile a list of strategies and practices that I identified as Latinx resistance, acts that challenged food system inequities in various ways. These strategies include growing one’s own food, community gardening, taking educational classes and workshops, constructing alternative narratives, visiting food pantries, using and or advocating for food programming, community cooking, and community meals and the arts.

These everyday strategies and attempts are representative of resistance because they rethink, address, adapt to, and challenge food system inequities. They criticize and resist the
promotion of over-processed food and corporatization or the centralization of power and wealth in food system. In addition, they expose workers’ rights abuses, low wages, environmental degradation, and unsafe policy or agricultural practices. They also build solidarity, empathy, and well-being, all key factors in resilience and sustainability. I observed these characteristics in one of the many manifestations of everyday Latinx resistance: poetry. Poetry can be used to expose and de-normalize injustices in the food system, to begin conversations about why and how they exist, and to strengthen community, contribute to self-care and survival.

Through observation I have learned how everyday Latinx resistance practices work to ensure better mental and emotional health, furthering social networks and participants’ confidence to learn and take action against food injustice. Poetry provides a different narrative or language to more accurately describe and share these injustices while defying the abuse of power. It can convey hidden meanings, linguistic tricks and metaphors, sometimes hard to detect but packed within symbolic gestures and multiple meanings, resonating with low-income racialized groups. This can be seen in lyrics by a local Latinx singer named Taina Asili. Her songs include statements like “And We Walk,” or “Plant the Seed,” highlighting the resilience and strength of people, valuing the environment, and planting seeds of hope and resistance that under the current circumstances might not be considered a serious threat to power, but directly challenge the food system and its neoliberal agenda.

Participant observation has allowed me to better understand and experience Latinx resistance. It has cultivated a closer familiarity with groups, individuals, and their practices through involvement with people in their cultural environment. The application of participant observation helps to ensure a more ethical approach, exchanging knowledge not simply extracting it. The practice encourages face-to-face engagement, looking and listening before
speaking, generosity, cautiousness, respect for the people’s knowledge and humility (Tuhiai-Smith, 1999). The use of participant observation in this research highlights the lives and experiences of diverse groups that have traditionally been marginalized, illuminating the ways in which their lives have been constrained by socioeconomic and political oppression and calling attention to the strategies they use to resist and negotiate these constraints.

Over the last three years (2016-2019) I have conducted 59 structured interviews, over 70 unstructured interviews and participant observation, and attended more than 45 events, meetings, markets, trainings, and other communal and individual practices related to food, land, environment, equity and injustice within and as part of the Latinx community of the larger Capital Region. In this context, I have interviewed people who are positioned differently within the localized food system, governance, education, religious, non-profit and other institutional bodies as well as people those outside of or ignored by them. Interviewees were selected by their connections to local anti-hunger organizations and programs, as employees, volunteers, or clients. I met about 85 interviewees by word of mouth at community talks, discussions, and lectures on topics of food, food access, gardening, farming, and health in the community. I connected with 22 interviewees through the social media platform of Facebook. I would send messages, ‘like’ certain pages and accounts to be and stay informed about people, upcoming events, and dialogues.

These methods require me to walk a fine line and to be aware of my own subjectivity, reflecting constantly on my positionality, acknowledging my own power, privilege, and biases as I criticize the power structures that influence the communities with whom I conduct research (Madison, 2012). This work also benefits from secondary data collection from sources such as

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3 An area inclusive to Albany, Rensselaer, Schenectady and Saratoga counties and as far East as Amsterdam, as far North as Saratoga, as far West as the Hudson Valley and as far South as Kingston.
the Hunger Action Network, Food Research and Action Center (FRAC), Hunger Solutions NY, Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed (ALICE), U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), and Feeding America, among others. This data provides statistics on food insecurity levels, food insecure populations, policy changes, demographics, and impacts of austerity.

Context

Neoliberalism, a set of economic and political practices, was introduced in the U.S. in the 1970s when the economy was experiencing high inflation, stagnation, and an oil crisis (Kotz, 2003). It also encompasses a philosophy that neoliberal reforms would stimulate business and trade, create jobs, and boost the economy, and that benefits would gradually “trickle down” to the rest of society improving socioeconomic conditions (Harvey 2008, 2012). Neoliberalism centers on the belief that the market is self-correcting and will always balance itself; however, the state still has a role in its creation and consolidation. It has become a pervasive project championed by democrats and republicans.

Neoliberal restructuring is a process that extends competitive markets into all areas of life, including the economy, politics, and society (Brown, 2015; Jessop, 2018) which have “accelerated, and intensified in recent decades” (Brenner, Peck, and Theodore, 2010, p. 329). Key components include privatization, financialization, management, manipulation of crisis, and state redistribution. Those who operationalize neoliberalism, put its tenets into practice, manipulate the public good prioritizing individualism and wealth over democracy, education, the food system and beyond, constraining consumer choice, endangering health, and putting profit over people. Harvey (2005) concludes that the global expansion of capital will continue to expand by dispossessing people of their economic rights and power. Neoliberalism, therefore,
can only continue its process of accumulation by dehumanizing and dispossessing people of what they own, or their human rights.

In order for this restructuring to be implemented, neoliberalism is often accompanied with a certain discourse and set of guidelines, called the neoliberal agenda. The neoliberal agenda allows neoliberalism, as a theory of political economic practices (Harvey, 2005), to be put into practice, carried out by the state, policymakers, and social institutions. It is a set of applicable tenets based on market rule and the application of economic logics to all areas of daily life. It is carried out by way of increasing corporate influence in government, whereby powerful corporations lobby with millions of dollars to make policies work for them (Crouch, 2011). The model also requires state repression of racialized and poor communities through constant surveillance, selective application of violence, increased incarceration, and police brutality. It also has reset relationships between the state, the people and the economy, stressing free market values and the deliberate elimination of funding (Brown, 2015). Lastly, it supports for social programs including unions, housing, healthcare, food, education, and the environment.

After the 2008 financial crisis, global levels of inequality accelerated, fueled by increasing unemployment and the politics of austerity, which have weakened the cushioning effect of redistributive policies (Moragues-Faus & Marsden, 2017). The state is a central agent in the neoliberal food regime, implementing and furthering the neoliberal agenda not only in the agricultural sector, but the larger economy, both of which have reached some institutional and material limits. The 2008 financial crisis revealed not only the inability of markets to address current problems, but the failure of the state to address and solve the unwanted consequences of the neoliberal agenda (Wolf, 2016).
Peck and Brenner (2012, p. 265) characterized this late stage of neoliberalism as a “resurgence,” stating that it has demonstrated a capacity to capitalize on crises conditions, leading to further entrenchment of market disciplinary modes of governance. Crises have repeatedly served as moments of reanimation and renewal for the neoliberal project, mutating and disguising the process and its effects even further.

This identification of a resurgent neoliberalism explored international, national, and localized cases of neoliberalism’s impacts and applications within governance and communities. Moragues-Faus and Marsden (2017, p. 275) add that the period since the 2008 financial crisis represents “a more volatile context for agri-food scholarship, whereby the explosion of interest in food studies which preceded it requires a critical reexamination and the development of new insights.” I find that everyday forms of Latinx resistance to food system inequities carry with them potential new insights for localized people-of-color-led challenges in this more volatile socio-cultural and economic context defined by austerity.

Austerity, part of a class project that shifts blame from those responsible for financial crisis to those most affected, is also a part of a political project that breaks down solidarity and communal action, prioritizing individualism. It is a multi-dimensional project, a seemingly short-term tactical response and long-term strategy (Seymour, 2014) imposed in a differentiating process (Lobao, 2011) from state to state and city to city. Azar Riad (2015) concludes that the increasing application of austerity is the end of democracy, because without democratic control of the economy, there is no democracy. The political economy greatly dictates how policies are created and implemented, policies that also affect quality of life concerns such as food.

The examination of everyday forms of Latinx resistance under austerity, acts as a vehicle for understanding the most recent financial crisis, the consequences of austerity, and food system inequities. Latinx resistance challenges from below, outside, and within the neoliberal food
system, undermining corporate goals of privatization, standardization, and capital accumulation regardless of consequences. These forms of resistance also hold local governments accountable for retreating from social service provision, adapt or rework nonprofit and charitable frameworks, and attempt new alternative food models, opening up potentially transformative spaces and strategies.

**Theoretical Grounding and Literature Review**

Research on resistance and the food system continues to expand with the incorporation of contemporary socio-cultural changes, the increased complexity of identities, cultures, borders, and technology, and the ever-changing volatility of the economic, political, and environmental climates. Meanwhile, studies of austerity have also been on the rise, attempting to educate the public about its impact in and on cities (Peck, 2010) and the way austerity is managed and resisted locally (Davis & Blanco, 2017). This dissertation bridges and builds upon current discussions, themes, and theoretical foundations within the discourses of resistance studies and food studies, under austerity, a context defined by precarious socio-economic conditions. These two fields clarify and contextualize everyday form of Latinx resistance, efforts to promote food justice, emphasizing the power, ingenuity, and resilience of those thought to be subjugated.

Resistance studies is an interdisciplinary field, characterized by contending points of departure, methodologies, methods, and techniques (Bull, 1972). Resistance studies draws on ideas and analysis from gender studies, peace studies, political science, sociology, critical race studies, and anthropology. It is not a homogeneous field, with a prescribed set of commonly defined concepts, methods or consensus, but rather one that moves between established disciplines, using various concepts and methodologies with varying aims (Vinthagen et al, 2017).
This research moves between an analysis of intentional everyday acts of resistance, culture, political economy, and food (in)justice. I seek to better understand, assess, and bring meaning to practices documented among the low-income Latinx community’s efforts to promote food injustice in New York State’s Capital Region.

Resistance studies centers on critical understandings of social resistance strategies, discourses, effects, causes, contexts, and experiences. Researchers seek to advance an understanding of how resistance undermines oppression, injustice, and domination of any kind, as well as how resistance might contribute to a reworking of power, alternative communities, and ways of thinking. Chin and Mittelman (1997;26) argue the “three master theories of resistance include Antonio Gramsci’s concept of counter-hegemony and state apparatus, Karl Polanyi’s notion of counter-movements and market forces and James Scott’s idea of public transcripts and everyday resistance.” Gramsci and Polanyi deal with collective politics and Scott with individual everyday life. They all reflect on how globalization transformed conditions of resistance, how as societies became more complex, so did the targets and modes of resistance, as well as the forms, agents, sites and strategies.

Early studies draw upon social movement research (Gurr, 1993; Tilly, 1990) focused on public, collectively organized, and confrontational forms of resistance to state power and capitalism, including revolutionary groups, massive demonstrations, protests, and riots.

Vinthagen, Lilja, and Baaz (2017) find:

Historically, studies of resistance have gone through the same stages as the studies of power; an early focus on the more obvious and dramatic forms of resistance, and later a recognition of subtle and diffused articulations.
My work rests in this later recognition, examining everyday forms of resistance. This includes practices that can be hidden, disguised, as subtle as a change of daily actions, or driven by a desire for escape or survival, even pre-political (Scott 1985).

However, a clear problem identified in resistance studies is that the concept of “everyday resistance” risks labeling too many other expressions as “resistance” (Bliker,2000; Vinthagen and Johasson, 2013). Vinthagen and Johasson (2013) explain the main weakness of Scott is not incorporating resistance and the relationship with power. Hollander and Einwohner (2004) find with an incorporation of power, must come the analysis of opposition, context and intent. However, Hollander and Einwohner (2004) explain assessing intent is close to impossible; and an actor’s intentions are not central to the understanding of an act or a behavior as resistance. Weitz (2001: 670) continues research on resistance has to move away from the focus on consciousness and intention, and instead “try to assess the nature of the act itself.”

In a sociological definition of social action, the intention of the actor is the key, but Vinthagen and Johansson (2013) state when people act, they always have intentions. Therefore, everyday resistance is done with intent, however, not with one type which may leave it open to critique but also more inclusive to not yet identified or other differently motivated forms of resistance. Which is why in this dissertation I focus on the practices I have observed and taken part in instead of defining resistance according to a particular consciousness. Vinthagen and Johassson (2013) propose we should try to understand and analyze its way of acting; the creativity of resistance, the actual art and practice of resistance.

I also address the weaknesses identified in Scott’s concept by examining everyday forms of resistance as a practice within the dynamics of power. Resistance is not just about the act itself but an act in opposition to power. Power relations are not a binary structure with oppressors on
one side and the oppressed on the other, but rather a relationship, partially susceptible to integration in approach and strategy (Butz & Ripmester, 1999). Power and resistance are related and entangled in an historic and dynamic interaction, in which hybrid forms develop and in which intersectional analysis of this power/resistance relationship is needed. Vinthagen and Johansson (2013) find resistance is not possible to understand or define as an independent category, it has to be analyzed in relation to its ongoing struggle with power.

I employ Foucault’s (1998) analysis of power, which frames power as dispersed and pervasive, existing everywhere and coming from everywhere, so in this sense power is neither an agency nor a structure. He challenges the assumption that power is wielded by people or groups solely through acts of oppression or domination, arguing that power is neither fixed nor belonging to an institution, but always in flux. Systems and institutions play a critical role in our society, influencing and creating conditions that affect our daily lives; however, so do individuals and communities, which also have the power to influence and effect change. Power is relational, constantly circulating with circumstance.

In more contemporary contexts and examinations of resistance, Castells (1990) explains that urban issues have become central to this body of research because of the growing importance of consumption meeting its limits. Practices of resistance are diverse, representing symbolic behavior that includes alternative narratives, redefinition, and meaning-making. They may not be completely economic or material in nature, but instead carry concerns for quality of life, self-reflection, and consciousness of community action and structure (Negri et al., 2000). Buechler (1995) argues that collective action is a response to the state and other dominant forces, political or otherwise, seeking to reorganize social life, redefining urban spaces and populations in line with capitalism. Resistance is triggered, he writes, by new sites of conflict.
and within everyday life, underscoring the importance of community, cultural identity, and autonomous decision-making in opposition to neoliberalism.

Resistance is creative, establishing constructive everyday cultural practices or alternatives to existing institutions and power dynamics (Bleiker, 2000). Bleiker conceptualizes everyday acts resistance as the countless non-heroic practices that make up the realm of the everyday and its multiple connections with contemporary global life. Williams (2002) contends that culture is primarily a form of material production and a symbolic system that creates a set of meanings through literature, music, poetry, and other forms of the creative arts. Culture, and thus everyday acts of Latinx resistance, are deeply political and widely used as an arena of negotiation and contestation between subaltern populations and the dominant power structure.

Resistance is a complex social phenomenon that includes a broad range of behaviors, intentions, actions and outcomes, both at the micro level of individuals to the macro level of large-scale protests. Lilja, Schulz, and Vinthagen (2016) explain that, like all actions, resistance is situated in certain time, space and within certain socio political, cultural and economic sets of relations. It engages with different types of people involved in varying roles, techniques and discourses. Therefore, the practice of resistance presents diverse articulations of oppositional acts. This diversity of articulation is why this dissertation examines everyday forms of Latinx resistance in the New York State Capital Region after the 2008 financial crisis, taking place in a certain time, context, and community. Those who participated in the strategies of resistance under observation may not do so today; similarly, those who chose not to take action in the past might now be struggling for change. Resistance, like power and the targeted issues, are constantly in flux.
In the food system, social control is fabricated through advertisement, a form of culture. It is common to see greasy, fatty burgers eaten by a skinny supermodel or commercials for eggs and meat set in a beautiful countryside setting with a clean red barn. Behind the billboards, burgers can lead to obesity, heart disease, and premature death, while the livestock used for food live in cramped cages or toxic factory farms. Cultural practices then, including poetry, art, and music, as organized activities, challenge power. They are political in nature but not a political activity in themselves (Duncombe, 2002), providing a free, collaborative, and safe space to (re)create language, meaning, and vision for the future.

Cultural resistance is the broad use of arts, literature, and traditional practices to challenge unjust or oppressive systems and/or power holders within the context of nonviolent action (New Tactics in Human Rights, 2012). They are also a possible space for developing tools for political action, a dress rehearsal for the actual political act, or even as political actions in themselves when they redefine politics (Duncombe, 2002). Everyday forms of cultural resistance may not directly challenge political and economic causes of inequity however, they can and do make great strides in ideological and cultural shifts that can lead to action.

This project is a micro-level analysis of local individual and group practices, not social movements, though some are connected to larger national or global struggles. These individual and communal practices involve participants within and a part of the Latinx community that work both to escape the state and to get something from it (Melucci, 1989; Buechler, 2000). They escape the state by attempting to live, eat or work outside of the state, (re)creating identities and asserting a set of interests and meanings apart from oppressive social institutions while also making a claim to the state by seeking grant funding or the use of state-run food programming. These practices challenge the neoliberalization of the food system while working within its
structure to make claims and (re)gain rights, such as access to healthy food through state food programming or funding.

There is a diversity among these strategic attempts of resistance, even in these practices which fail. Not all practices of resistance to food system inequities address the whole food system, but different components of it; everyday resistance includes larger systemic change but focuses on individual and communal practices at the local level. Such practices intentionally promote food system equity, including the creation of alternative narratives, (re)definition of language, music, poetry, art, CSAs, farmers’ markets, education, training, and community gardening. They may not directly challenge systemic power, but they begin a rethinking or broach a conversation about systemic issues, strategies of resistance, adaptation, or alternative food system models.

Food system research rests in food studies, a relatively new interdisciplinary perspective in the social sciences. Researchers in this field study the

historically specific web of social relations, processes, structures, and institutional arrangements that cover human interactions with nature and with other humans involving production, distribution, preparation, and consumption of food (Power & Koc, 2008, p.2).

Food studies differs from agricultural science, nutrition, or culinary arts in that it deals with more than the production, consumption, and appreciation of food. A highly interdisciplinary research area within food studies, food justice, is critical to my research. Food justice is organized around three foci: social movement activism, the development of alternative food practices, and analyses of inequalities in conventional and alternative food systems.

Since 2011, the rate of new scholarship concerning food justice has increased, along with increased attention from policymakers and the public to the issues of inequality in the food system (Glennie & Hope-Alkon, 2018). It is also both a theoretical concept and a social
movement. As a movement, Food Justice gained strength in the early 2000s, though some theorists argue it has roots in the Civil Rights Movement (Alkon, 2007; Slocum & Cadieux, 2015) and links to the Black Panthers, Young Lords, and United Farm Workers. More recent manifestations of the Food Justice movement emerged in response to the Slow Food, Alternative, and Local/Organic Food movements, a patchwork of different and contrasting efforts.

Predominantly white, middle-class organizations, characterized by “vote with your fork” foodie groups, they emphasize individual choice and change through the marketplace, versus working against or outside the neoliberal system (Brent, Schiavoni & Alonso-Fradejas, 2015). These approaches to food system inequities are centered around combating the corporatized food system, but focus on what people eat instead of how food is produced, making it difficult to address systemic inequity (Slocum & Cadieux, 2015).

As a theoretical concept, Food Justice centers on people and systems first. It is the struggle against racism, exploitation, and oppression within the food system, addressing the root causes of inequality within and beyond the food chain (Hislop, 2014). Food Justice encompasses many issues, including growing or purchasing healthy food, diet-related health disparities, access to land, and wages and working conditions in agriculture, food processing, and restaurant work. Because of these principles Food Justice is successful in resisting racism, exploitation and oppression within the U.S. food system and promoting food equity, but it is not perfect.

A shortcoming of Food Justice literature is the lack of evidence-based research or a comprehensive analysis of trends in food justice research. Food Justice scholarship can have a greater impact on policy and public discourse by filling in its methodological and topical gaps (Glennie & Hope-Alkon, 2018). Peña (et al., 2017) identifies a need for qualitative work that examines how participating in Food Justice shapes one’s sense of self or a community’s
understanding of its own well-being. Greater attention should be paid, he writes, to how communities regard their own food histories and food ways, and how these traditions can fuel social movement work. In addition, some Food Justice initiatives are often criticized for propping up neoliberal restructuring (Tornaghi, 2014; Walker, 2016) or for overlooking race, class, and cultural dynamics that tend to limit participation and reinforce existing inequalities (Guthman, 2008; Hoover, 2013; Reynolds, 2015; Alkon & Agyeman, 2011). Critics argue that Food Justice research seldom narrows in on specific solutions, at times focusing on documenting efforts to fight inequality in the food system rather than on the inequalities themselves.

My work contributes to Food Justice studies by narrowing in on a specific time, location, community, and sector of our society. I examine and document Latinx resistance strategies, emphasizing the ingenuity and power of a racialized community, but also exposing the legacy of food system inequities exacerbated by the neoliberal agenda. Through an examination of localized Latinx resistance to food system inequities, I diversify the scope of what counts as resistance, looking beyond social movements and direct actions to more subtle daily acts, such as self-care and well-being. This closer examination reveals how individuals and groups regard their own food histories and systems, while centering my work on culture, race, and ethnicity, not as an afterthought but as an essential factor in exposing the harms of neoliberal restructuring.

These two areas of study, resistance studies and food studies, examined under austerity, locate everyday Latinx practices of resistance within a rupture in the neoliberal food system. These two areas work to provide a sociocultural and economic understanding and context to how low-income Latinx individuals and communities promote food justice through every act of resistance, seeking to pry open the rupture in neoliberal hegemony caused by the financial crisis and fill it with alternative forms of political and social subjectivity. This dissertation exemplifies
the varying inter-cultural, generational, class, and racial practices of solidarity that inhere to everyday forms of Latinx resistance. It illuminates, moreover, that those most affected by food system inequities have a central role in building, fostering, and (re)creating alternative practices and spaces in conflict with the neoliberal agenda, advancing food justice in the process.

Chapter Summaries

In the following chapter, I examine the neoliberal restructuring of the food system, the process by which key tenets of neoliberalism are implemented and justified. I focus on one mechanism, austerity, and its effects on food system inequities among low-income racialized communities in the New York State Capital Region. This chapter demonstrates austerity as a long-term economic strategy to redistribute and conserve wealth, constraining already inequitable government food programming and nonprofit food organizations, and with further consequences for food-insecure, low-income, and racialized communities.

Chapter 3 identifies and examines structural violence in the U.S. food system. I analyze historical and contemporary examples of structural violence experienced by low-income Latinx communities. This chapter demonstrates how past and present strategies of everyday forms of Latinx resistance have presented and continue to present challenges to the neoliberal food system. In chapter 4, with firsthand accounts of community members, teachers, parents, children, SNAP recipients, and state and nonprofit workers, I clarify and illustrate the inequitable experiences of those in the local food system. I demonstrate the way that, in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis and its imposition of austerity measures, government and private food programming, albeit still helpful for some, is for the most part constrained. Here, I emphasize the way government and private food programming is inhibited under austerity when it is needed
most, but also how those within and a part of low-income Latinx communities, endure food system inequities.

In chapter 5, I identify and examine everyday acts of Latinx resistance to food system inequities in the Capital Region after the 2008 financial crisis. Through interviews and observations, I assess the nature and context of those acts while interpreting the actors’ intents and the outcomes of particular forms of resistance. I seek to identify the varied repertoire of practices in play in order to deepen our understanding of Latinx resistance to austerity. In analyzing resistance, it is critical to understand the way it exists relationally with neoliberalism, not only motivated by it but influenced by its logics. I conclude with chapter 6, citing my contributions of this study and its significance, bringing meaning to the way food system inequities are challenged by those within and a part of the Latinx community in the Capital Region.
Chapter 2: Food Programming Under Austerity

This chapter provides historical, political and economic context to the application and ramifications of the neoliberal agenda, in particular, resource redistribution from the poor and working class to the wealthy elite, via the mechanism of austerity from the 1980s till today. I examine how after the 2008 financial crisis, the implementation of austerity measures have carried out new rounds of fiscal discipline, intensifying government spending cuts and budgeting strategies among low-income racialized communities in the New York State Capital Region. I find this has resulted in an ongoing battle between people, the state, and private capital regarding the placement and allocation of resources like food, land, water, and revenue. The data presented here illustrates austerity as a long-term economic strategy to redistribute and conserve wealth, constraining already inequitable government food programming and nonprofit food organizations, and with further consequences for food-insecure, low-income, and racialized communities (Hayes, 2017). This reshaping of social and institutional relationships and wealth redistribution continues today, but its first phases of implementation in U.S. policy took place during the Reagan administration.

In 1981 the Reagan administration passed the largest tax cut to date, the Economic Recovery Tax Act, totaling 2.89% of the national GDP (Kessler, 2018). This offered large tax cuts to the rich, ranging from 28% to 70% and reduced capital gains tax, the tax on a sale of property or investment, to 20%. Meanwhile, Reagan raised taxes on the working class, deregulated the financial sector, and increased the privatization of education and healthcare (Hickel, 2012). The result was the redistribution of power and wealth by increasing corporate influence in the democratic process and the targeted dismantling of unions. It also extracted money from workers by giving the top wealth earners tax breaks resulting in more profit gains.
These cuts were one part of a larger set of policies and ideas under the Reagan administration (1981-1989) coined as the “Washington Consensus” (Williamson, 2004), characterized by free trade, privatization, tariff reduction, deregulation, and minimal government spending and oversight. These economic and political changes reshaped social and institutional relationships, leading to a redistribution of wealth and resource flight from those most vulnerable, resulting in even more dire circumstances without access to basic needs like food. As *The New York Times* reported, the House Subcommittee on Nutrition heard dramatic testimony on the level of and experiences of those struggling with hunger in the U.S. Witnesses, from elected officials to supermarket executives, United Way representatives, and religious leaders, all of whom blamed rising hunger on the recession and cutbacks to social programs. They pleaded with the Reagan Administration to provide more funding to food programs, not to make further cuts; however, cuts to social programs continued (*New York Times*, 1983).

To justify these cuts and the neoliberal agenda in which they embedded, a coded language emerged. The Reagan administration used neoliberal discourse to talk about people on welfare, rationalize the redirection of funds, and justify other characteristics of the neoliberal agenda. The neoliberal discourse promoted individualism, the notion that one succeeds or fails by one’s own hand, not as a result of structural factors, such as, if you are hungry or poor, it must be your fault. This discourse became especially potent when repeated, serving as a logic to divert attention from systemic inequity and the benefits of communal behavior or social services. Bourdieu and Wacquant (2001, p. 4) describe it as a “double” discourse which, “although founded on belief, mimics science by superimposing the appearance of reason.” This set of beliefs imitates logic, becoming a false or misconstrued logic of undoing, based in assumptions and opinions that disengages reason.
Neoliberal discourse recycles stereotypes of “lazy,” “entitled,” and “cheaters” of the system that defend and justify the neoliberal agenda and its inequitable consequences. Duveneck & Petzold, (2018) explain that the neoliberal agenda blames or dumps responsibility on local municipalities and the poor. Neoliberal discourse has shifted the way the general public understands or views poor, low-income, and racialized communities, no longer as victims of an economic system that has no place for them but criminalized. This unjust framing has led to the recasting of access to resources, housing, and healthy food as a privilege, something to be earned, instead of a basic human right.

This unfair framing and implementation of the neoliberal agenda continued under the first Bush administration (1989-1993), which supported policies that benefitted the wealthy at the expense of average U.S. residents. In 1989, Bush bailed out the heavily deregulated Savings and Loan industry with $124.6 billion in taxpayer money (Johnson, 2018). Johnson states,

Bush was a foot soldier for the ruling class who played a substantial role in bringing us to where we are today. His role as a chief architect of U.S. neoliberal trade policy through ushering in NAFTA helped to exacerbate global inequality and fuel the loss of over one million manufacturing jobs in the U.S. (2018, p. 1).

Moreover, Moody (1995) asserts that the Bush administration was backed by various think tanks and private corporations that attempted to mute opposition to NAFTA by producing an expert consensus that it was a win-win for everyone. However, NAFTA wasn’t officially signed into law until the Clinton administration in 1994, “freeing” up trade and the flow of goods and deregulating and minimizing government oversight, all key components of the neoliberal agenda.

NAFTA reset rules on investment within the food and agriculture sector, involving farm exports, food safety, access to seeds, and markets, leading to a greater consolidation of power and wealth among agribusiness firms and the loss of many small farms (Fernandez, 2018; Public Citizen, 2013). Despite promised gains for farmers, NAFTA’s benefits over the last 23 years
have gone primarily to multinational agribusiness firms, affecting how food is grown, bought, sold, and eaten, and controlling the food chain for all involved. Whether Democrat or Republican, both parties perpetuated the neoliberal agenda (Crouch, 2011) and the neoliberal restructuring of the food system. Peck states, “Reagan may have brought us benefit cut backs and the toxic metaphor of the ‘welfare queen’ but it was Clinton who eventually came through on the promise to end welfare as we know it” (Peck 2010, p. 105). Clinton worked to cut government spending, shifting responsibility away from the government to the individual or private sector. He also pursued free trade agreements such as NAFTA and sought to free market forces from government regulation (Kotz, 2003).

At this time, government attempts to address hunger through the Food Stamp Program reached 25.5 million people, costing $38 billion annually as of 1996 (Oliveira, 1997). This cost made the program an easy target for further budget reduction. Food assistance policies in the late 90s were governed by Clinton’s Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act. Nestle (1999) explains that this legislation “completed the work of ending welfare as we know it.” Despite the well-known problems of accountability and equity in government welfare programs, this act transferred responsibility for welfare from the federal government to the states. Pear (1996) explains that it reduced federal spending on assistance programs by $55 billion per year and reformed social services, having an immediate negative impact on food assistance programs while introducing various types of eligibility restrictions, requirements, and limitations (Nestle, 1999).

By 1997, just one year after the legislation passed, cuts made by the Clinton administration reduced USDA food assistance spending by more than $2 billion, eliminating 2.7 million recipients from Food Stamp rolls (Oliveira, 1997). Triece (2016) finds that these cuts
were not neutral with regard to race and class; rather, they worked to obscure the racist dimensions of welfare, housing, and employment policy that systematically excludes people of color from certain jobs, neighborhoods, and public assistance. Without an acknowledgement of the history of racial and class discrimination in public policy and welfare programs, many proponents of the neoliberal agenda are easily justified in blaming unemployment, substandard housing, or reliance on welfare on the individual, rather than circumstances beyond their control. Social spending cuts are imbued with racism and obfuscated by racist policies on low-income racialized communities to justify the neoliberal agenda.

The second Bush administration doubled down on the neoliberal agenda, implementing severe tax cuts in 2001 and 2003, more than 40% of which went to the top five percent of earners. These tax cuts, plus the 2001–2002 recession and increased spending on the military budget, led to increased deficits in 2002, adding over five trillion dollars to the federal debt (Polvika, 2012). Bush’s neoliberal policies carried over into the Iraq war in which the occupation worked to privatize and destroy economic activities dominated by government entities. Tabb (2004) explains that under Bush, dependence on private contractors expanded exponentially as the federal government eliminated 46,000 civil service jobs and added 730,000 contract positions between 1999 and 2002.

Privatization and deregulation made Iraq “a playground for right-wing economic theorists, an employment agency for friends and family, and a source of lucrative contracts for corporate donors, the administration did terrorist recruiters a big favor” (Krugman, 2004, p. 27). The administration rapidly gave up oversight and transparency abroad and at home, where inequality accelerated. Under Bush, wages declined, along with wealth in the bottom 80%, with the collapse of the housing market increasing the numbers of those experiencing food system
inequities. The Center for American Progress (2012) estimated the annual cost of hunger in the U.S. at $90 billion in the early 2000s.

The 2008 financial crisis has roots in the early 2000s, and reached its peak when an economic bubble in the real estate sector, defined by instability, burst in late 2007. By using predatory loans, banks put owners into homes with high-interest mortgages and unaffordable balloon payment structures. These individuals and families would then go into default, unable to pay as home values collapsed, a practice banks and loan companies disproportionately perpetrated against communities of color (White, 2015). Low-income racialized communities experienced socio-cultural and economic inequities before the 2008 financial crisis; however, these inequalities were exacerbated by the crisis and subsequent recession. As Well (2011) explains, economic gaps worsened while employment and homeownership rates fell faster for Black and Latinxs than for whites.

Before the 2008 financial crisis, the Latinx community had climbing rates of employment and homeownership, but they lost most of the ground gained over the last few years (Kochar et al., 2011). After the 2008 financial crisis, home values and ownership rates, both a significant part of one’s overall wealth, were decimated among communities of color. LeeAnn Mandrillo, a representation from Hunger Solutions New York, stated at a 2019 Food Summit in Albany that “health is wealth and wealth is health”: income, wages, and well-being are interconnected. Wealth often determines not only how well families can provide for themselves when it comes to basics like food and shelter, but also provides a safety net for emergencies and helps to set up future generations for opportunities that improve their lives.

To end the 2008 financial crisis and resolve the Great Recession, the Obama administration first applied Keynesian policies that included the Troubled Asset Relief Program
(TARP) and the fiscal stimulus package of nearly $800 million in spring of 2009. The USDA (2010) reports that the federal government spent $94 billion on federal food assistance programs, SNAP helped 42.9 million people, WIC assisted 9.2 million women and children, and the National School Lunch Program reached 31.6 million children. As Polivka (2012) argues, the Keynesian response to the financial crisis did make a difference in alleviating some of the most brutal effects of the crisis; however, Democrats prematurely assumed that the recession was over and switched to an austerity agenda in late 2009, proposing reductions in spending (Gunn, 2016).

Democrats and Republicans debated how to address the debt created by the crisis, and agreed on a compromise to cut the federal budget by $2.3 trillion over the next decade. This solidified austerity, program cuts, and the promise of no tax increases. Polivka (2012) finds that the crisis and recession reduced federal revenues to their lowest level since the 1950s, which in combination with the second era of Bush tax cuts led to the largest annual deficit (over a trillion dollars) and legitimated the turn to austerity. As Pollin (2013) explains, after the 2008 financial crisis, Obama’s austerity agenda was softer than the hard-right approach favored by Republicans, but nonetheless harmed the welfare sector, state workers, and vulnerable populations. Rather than using TARP funding for middle- and working-class homeowners in debt, Obama’s policy response was to trust and bail out the predatory financial institutions that created the crisis to manage the aftermath.

Journalist Mike Konczal (2017) asserts that the bailouts to Wall Street were far too generous and the perpetrators of the crisis minimally punished. Meanwhile the real problem, $750 billion in debt, is left to middle and working class families, driving down spending and investment, defunding programs and local governments and redistributing wealth upwards. He continues that the recession was driven by austerity, which made the recession far worse than it
would have been. Though deemed to be over, recession characteristics still dominate the economy today. U.S. households, in particular low-income racialized groups, are still struggling with precarious economic conditions. Weller (2011) explains that as the economy and the labor market recover, communities of color had to climb out of a deeper hole to regain the same level of economic security as they had before the crisis since they experienced sharper economic security losses.

**Constraints and Faults of Government Food Programming Under Austerity: SNAP**

The U.S. economy lost nine million jobs from 2007-2009 and 11 million homebuyers faced foreclosure from 2008-2013. Tens of millions were made poorer, if not “officially” already poor (Goodwin, et al., 2008). Today the U.S. economy remains stagnant, compared to pre-crisis levels, characterized by low employment and wages, high debt, tax breaks for the wealthy, diminishing incomes and living standards, and increasing rates of poverty, hunger, homelessness, and economic insecurity. Austerity budgets are slowing the economy and preventing necessary public investments that can help support future economic growth (McGahey, 2013). Austerity threatens local governmental functions and basic essential services, ranging from policing, to food stamps, healthcare and public safety (Riad, 2015). It (re)forms institutions, governance, and public service, with extreme consequences for U.S. states and cities.

This reformation can be seen in the food system through increased repression and punishment of food system workers, low pay, precarious work, over-promotion of unhealthy food, lack of food quality or safety, consolidation of food stores, high food prices and, most clearly, in access to food for consumers. After the 2008 financial crisis, food insecurity in the U.S. tripled to 49 million people between 2008-2011 (USDA, 2013). Of all racialized groups,
Latinxs faced the highest levels of both food insecurity and income inequality (USDA, 2010).
The Obama administration may have successfully increased overall SNAP participation levels to 85%, but did not address stagnant wages, poverty, or the increasing costs of food, housing, transportation and healthcare.

Despite the temporary increase in SNAP funding, many families still had to make tough choices between a meal and paying for other basic necessities. Brown (2007) and CAP (2011) find that nearly 40% of food insecure individuals reported having to choose between paying for rent or a mortgage and food, while more than a third reported having to choose between their medical bills and food. Food insecurity, poverty, and race are closely interrelated, as displayed below. Feeding America (2015) finds that most demographic groups saw a decrease in poverty, food insecurity, and unemployment levels after the 2008 financial crisis; however, all three phenomena are still higher than pre-crisis levels.

Over the last decade, with pressure to reduce budget deficits, austerity policies have continued by way of funding cuts in education, health, food, housing, and environmental protections. In addition to the application of regressive tax hikes, pension and other social welfare reforms, and continued deterioration of labor rights protections and unions by anti-union campaigns or discourse and contract renegotiations. Even though the federal government provided emergency benefits after the 2008 financial crisis with increased federal aid to states, another piece of federal legislation, the Budget Control Act of 2011 (BCA), had the opposite effect. The BCA reduced government spending, laid off state workers, decreased workers’ wages or pensions, reduced economic growth, and increased unemployment. It also established budgetary caps on discretionary federal programs, which would reduce aid for social programs even further. The BCA’s caps on spending decrease the number of people able to receive
assistance. These cuts are extensive, additional cuts on top of already rigid spending limits and years of detrimental cuts to social programs that defined the Great Recession.

Food programs like Meals on Wheels, Head Start, and community project grants that support nonprofit and charitable organizations alleviating food insecurity were also cut. In 2013, sequestration directly led to more than 100,000 low-income individuals losing rental assistance, while nearly 70% of Meals on Wheels programs dropped the number of meals they served to poor seniors (Bread for the World, 2014). The Center for Economic and Social Rights (Saiz & Holland, 2016) finds that austerity mounts a widespread and systematic assault on economic and social rights, particularly the rights to decent work and access to resources for an adequate standard of living, as seen in the SNAP program.

SNAP benefits address regional disparities in hunger, poverty, and resources that vary from state to state by ensuring that low-income households have access to resources regardless of where they live. This funding structure works to keep hunger low during recessions, when states’ balanced budget requirements prompt them to cut services for the needy even while more people need help. However, the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (2018) argues states are in no position to absorb more than $100 billion in new costs over the next decade without cutting SNAP benefits and taking other steps that could increase hunger and hardship. This funding shift would impose a significant new cost on states, forcing them to implement extreme austerity measures and exerting further pressure on those in need to find alternative strategies to feed themselves and their families (Dickter, 2009).

After the 2008 financial crisis, the government tried to be proactive with SNAP, increasing the minimum benefit and the standard deduction, eliminating the cap on dependent care deduction, child care, and care for elderly or disabled household members, and excluded
education and retirement accounts from countable resources (USDA, 2010). With those changes the average monthly participation in SNAP grew 70% between 2007 and 2011, as more people claimed benefits to feed themselves and their families. However, SNAP’s barriers were quickly reinstated in 2010 and 2011 (Hanson, Oliveira, 2011), leaving many excluded. Colleen (2018), a staff member at Catholic Charities Food Pantry in Troy, New York, stated:

People think the crisis is over because national numbers have declined or SNAP users declined—but what they don’t tell you is how restrictions are increased so less [sic] people are able to apply.

The Pew Charitable Trust’s Economic Mobility Project found that U.S. families facing unemployment and other financial hardship during the recession turned to government, nonprofit, and private institutional resources as a safety net. They found that more than two of every three families interviewed used one or more resources, receiving help towards income, food, health care, education, housing, or utility assistance. Even though SNAP flexed with the 2008 financial crisis, many were left out and still left out today.

At the time of writing, SNAP is on the chopping block. Donald Trump’s 2017 budget contains 2.5 trillion dollars in cuts over the next decade (Shapiro et al, 2017) and eliminates $23 million from SNAP Nutrition and Education grants which assist low-income individuals in extending their benefits to best provide nutritious meals. It also eliminates the minimum benefit for one- and two-person households, leaving 91,000 people ineligible for SNAP. His budget also caps benefits for larger families, punishing multi-generational families who care for older adult family members (ALICE, 2016; Gustafson, 2009). An initial analysis by the New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance shows that more than 2.3 million New Yorkers would have their monthly food assistance drastically reduced under Trump’s proposed budget, which would also shift $100 billion in SNAP costs over the next decade to states (Governor
Andrew M. Cuomo, 2018, February 23rd). This is problematic as it would force states, for the first time, to pay a share of SNAP benefit costs. It also gives states more flexibility to cut SNAP benefit levels to “manage their costs,” which many states would likely do in a time of crisis (Leachman, Rosenbaum, & Wolkomir, 2017). The result would be more people at risk of hunger and more damaging and longer economic downturns, with a smaller, less-funded social safety net.

SNAP has the potential to help millions of U.S. residents to feed their families. Without public assistance, many households would face even greater hardship and many more would be in poverty, especially in the wake of the recession. However, SNAP is questionable as a long-term social and economic equity tool, as government assistance is not always well-targeted, effective, or timely, primarily focusing on economic standing and family size. Some households even leave SNAP because the procedures to maintain benefits are overly burdensome relative to the value of the benefit (Mills et al., 2001). In addition, SNAP does not address social inequities, or systemic and structural issues such as racism, sexism, and classism; nor do they consider present or past manifestations of systemic oppression.

People are hungry for many different reasons: the loss of a job or a spouse, a recent family or medical emergency, a recent move or loss of housing, or taking care of elderly parents. The list goes on. Other barriers include access issues, stigma, challenges with the application process, problems with the distribution process, and errors in benefit payment. Also, many people lack the social capital, resources through connections, or the requisite knowledge, skills, and education related to status in society (Belyea & Pacheco, 2003; Kaye, Enuju, & Chen, 2013). Lastly, some people are unable to use services because of citizenship barriers, mental or physical
ability, location, or work schedule, leaving many potential recipients out of the conversation altogether.

Anti-hunger advocates argue that a critical fault in SNAP is that the amount of benefits is too low to enable participants to achieve long term food security, and eligibility thresholds are too low to make programs available to all in need (International Human Rights Clinic, 2013; Keith-Jennings, 2015). Insufficient amounts explain why in 2010, 37 million people in the Albany area turned to food pantries (Food Pantries of the Capital District, 2017). Another fault in SNAP is that not all households benefit equally from assistance; public and private assistance helps, but doesn’t provide long-term financial stability (ALICE, 2016). When struggling, households cannot make ends meet; they are forced to make difficult choices such as foregoing health care, daycare, healthy food, higher education, or car insurance. These coping strategies or “savings” threaten their health, safety, and future, and they reduce productivity and raise insurance premiums and taxes for everyone.

According to ALICE (2016), another drawback of SNAP is that struggling households are at times not eligible for assistance because their income is above the federal Poverty Line (FPL). The FPL is the measurement of poverty in the U.S. and is used for statistical measurements of poverty. Created in 1963, the FPL was based primarily on the minimum food budget needed for a family of three (USDA, 2018). Now, household budgets include myriad expenses that have increased relative to food prices, some of which were virtually non-existent when the official poverty measure was created. Although the figures are updated annually to account for inflation, Blank and Greenberg (2008) find that they have otherwise remained unchanged, despite the fact that modern family budgets are divided very differently than they were more than 50 years ago. Though the cost of some foods have declined others remain high
relative to income in addition to new concerns such as rising housing, healthcare, education, childcare and other living costs (Office of the State Comptroller, 2013a).

Even though the threshold has been increased to reflect changes in the cost of living, the same formula is used to calculate today’s FPL. The government does not account for other rising costs of living that income is spent on, including food, housing, transportation, and healthcare. It is also problematic because the poverty threshold does not vary by state, even though the cost of living does. Also, some families struggling to put food on the table do not qualify for programs because they make too much. Feeding America (2014) finds that almost half of Americans who are food insecure don’t qualify for government assistance programs like SNAP. SNAP may provide temporary and limited relief to certain groups, but for many it is inaccessible.

**Consequences for Social Services Under Austerity After the Great Recession: New York State**

At the height of the 2008 financial crisis, David Paterson assumed the governorship of the state of New York, warning New Yorkers that the state faced its worst fiscal crisis since the 1970s. Patterson asked heads of all state agencies to cut their budgets by 3.35% and threatened a hiring freeze (Paybarah, 2018). He also enacted a six percent across-the-board cut in all state agencies, followed by an additional three percent later that year. New York faced a budget deficit of $15 billion, and state debt approached $55 billion (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2009). He recommended a Deficit Reduction Assessment that decreased total state school aid and announced extensive layoffs of state workers to balance the budget. These widespread cuts weakened many anti-poverty programs by eliminating numerous initiatives and severely impairing their abilities to provide services.
Austerity after the 2008 financial crisis is characterized by multiple cycles of cuts, and additional measures within state and local governance, programs, and services. The Center for Budget and Policy Priorities (2017) finds that states and localities are facing new indirect and unforeseen secondary costs as needs have increased throughout the recession and the added financial stress is passed down, leaving governments and communities in challenging circumstances. Before 2008, wealth was already being redirected upwards; however, the 2008 financial crisis accelerated the process. After the 2008 financial crisis, fiscal pressure upon state and local governance intensified due to additional measures of austerity, justified as temporary but revealed as a long-term governmental strategy. In an analysis of the British case, the economist Paul Krugman (2012, p. 3) finds that

[A]usterity isn’t really about deficits at all; it’s about using deficit panic as an excuse to dismantle social programs. And this is, of course, exactly the same thing that has been happening in America (…) For economic recovery never was the point; the drive for austerity is about using the crisis, not solving it.

Austerity has become a tool for the reproduction of the neoliberal agenda. Krugman continues that the most recent wave of austerity is selectively consolidating and intensifying the underlying logics and deepening contradictions of the neoliberal agenda.

Austerity is applied by a reduction in municipal aid and outstanding debt, among others. Often accepted as the only way to govern under recession-like conditions, austerity involves a multiform and uneven application process, restructuring the state and geared toward specific political goals (Lobao & Adua, 2011). Austerity imposes highly differentiated pressures on local areas, due to federal and state governments’ recession-related problems and long-term movement of capital. Duveneck & Petzold, (2018) explain that this long-term funding transformation produces a permanent condition of public scarcity. This has resulted in the suppression of multiple levels of governance and the oppression of low-income and marginalized communities.
The neoliberal agenda can be summed up in New York governor Andrew Cuomo’s favorite phrase: “Do more with less.” With this, Cuomo signals the mandatory cuts in place after the 2008 crisis, framing the imperative to function on shoestring budgets. Whether it be money or resources, for an individual, State agency or governing body everyone, according to Cuomo, needs to make sacrifices in hard times. Cuomo’s phrase “do more with less” is the epitome of neoliberal discourse and provides a justification for the implementation of austerity. This phrase has put into actions policies that have exerted significant influence on local programming and organizations, even while they are presented as seemingly neutral, common sense examples of innovative frivolity. Cuomo’s phrase does nothing but cover up the real hurt and detriment of what budget cuts and “doing more with less” actually mean for communities who need social services and benefits to survive. Less is not more; it is less, and Cuomo’s conversion of the philosophy into a sound bite both conceals and legitimates the sacrifices and injustices experienced by the poor.

In New York State, austerity is a significant part of local budgets. The Federal Policy Institute (2015) describes the years from 2005 to 2015 as an “austerity decade” for New York, in which multiple budgets have already seen spending cuts in a host of areas and lay out multi-year plans of spending cuts that will extend austerity for years to come. This amplification of austerity after the 2008 financial crisis is illuminated by Governor Cuomo’s actions with regard to state

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4 In his first few years, Cuomo’s budget cut state spending 2.7%, a reduction in spending not seen in Albany since the mid-1990s. This resulted in $3.7 billion less than the 2010-11 budget. He also proposed a freeze of wages and pensions of state workers, the consolidations of state agencies, and the creation of commissions to institute “operating efficiencies,” promising to also cap state property and corporate income tax to “get the fiscal house in order” and “right-size” government (Mahler, 2010). Mauro and Parrot (2011) explain that what is most devastating about this tax structure is its regressiveness, which takes a larger percentage from low-income earners than for high-income earners. Low-income families, they continue, pay a much higher share of their income than do the richest 1%, who gain 35% of all income (up from 10% in 1980). Cuomo’s actions reduced the state’s projected four-year deficit by 86%, from $64.6 billion to $9.2 billion, directly affecting state and local governments’ long-term fiscal health but also their ability to provide services to their constituents.
spending and tax cuts, state service mergers or closures, state worker salary freezes, contract or union renegotiations, resistance to increasing the minimum wage, reductions in funding for social services, privatization and reduced oversight, and the reduction in municipal aid and outstanding debt.

The Cuomo’s administration 2015 Executive Budget continued to apply austerity measures with a proposal of a multi-year plan of steep spending cuts to create the appearance of a budget “surplus” and justify multi-year tax cuts of more than $2.5 billion per year. Cuomo called for “shared sacrifice” (ironic given New York State’s extreme income inequality), proposing to reduce the estate tax by 40% ($800 million a year in lost revenues), benefitting the super-wealthy (FPI, 2014; Mauro & Parrot, 2011). Cuomo also merged or closed state services and renegotiated terms with labor unions. He established a commission to draft a “rightsizing plan” for the consolidation, proposing to shutter 20% of state agencies to create leaner state government (Virtanen, 2011).

This was most clearly demonstrated in my conversation with Carl, a state worker and migrant services provider. On the topic of funding cuts during our interview he stated “my office has experienced ten percent cuts over the last three years.” He talked very fast, providing dates, names of funding lines, and who was let go or quit. Carl explained that prior to the funding cuts, his office covered multiple services for migrants, taking a three-pronged approach through advocacy, education, and outreach. Now, however,

We only cover youth educational needs. The school migrant youth 18-21 year program was eliminated. Teaching English at farms, eliminated. Currently I am only in grade schools, and even that had been limited. I used to take kids to get DSS papers, to doctors’ appointments, get social security cards, food stamps, school uniforms, provide support if they are being

5 Susan Kent, president of The Public Employees Federation (PEF), insists that Cuomo’s cuts to the public workforce have damaged the ability of state agencies to fulfill their basic tasks (King, 2014). This is both detrimental to the state workers themselves, who are devalued and insecure, but also to the people whom they serve. Furthermore, they have a negative impact on the morale of the workplace and workers themselves.
bullied, translation services, but that’s all out the window. When I do it, I have to do it on the
down low.

Carl explained he still uses the three-pronged approach; he just isn’t getting paid for it. As
Cuomo says, “just get it done.” It was evident that Carl goes beyond his job description to help
teachers and students, working in small reading or math groups and in-home visits where he
brings food for his families.

Carl asserted that he would be able to work through the funding cuts if they were not so
intense. The constant barrage of cut after cut, and then the loss of clients and workers, leaves
those who are left demoralized, depressed, and scared. He recalled:

My hours were cut 25% from last year. I used to work over 50 hours a week. Now it’s 30. We
had 13 employees, now we are down to nine. It is demoralizing, and even though you don’t
know these people very well, you’re in it with them and it affects you. It’s harder for you to
do your work because your network shrivels; people who used to be resources for you are not
there anymore. Currently, we get bits of funding, but never enough to do something
completely. Meanwhile, stricter restrictions and qualifications have increased to meet each
grant, making it harder to find migrants that fit the funding line to enroll in programs.

Carl speaks to a frustrating cycle under austerity experienced by many social service providers.
Funding relies on numbers of participants being served, but with less funding, fewer participants
can be helped, especially when the services provided are of poor quality or incomplete. It then
appears that no one needs or is using services, setting the program up for failure. Many
organizations don’t have the resources to keep operating consistently with quality services; state
and local governments and service providers are poorly affected by the loss of funding,
resources, staff, and by the consolidation of programs. This attempt at efficiency and “doing
more with less” elides the fact that it is not only services that are limited; it is human workers.6

6 Under Cuomo, state funding for human service agencies dropped 12% between 2016 and 2019. In addition, according to the
state Labor Department, New York lost 44,000 state and local government jobs from 2017 and 2019, a greater decline than in all
other job areas except manufacturing (Keho, 2016). Kent argues that many state agencies are understaffed, services are being cut
in communities, and expensive privatization is on the rise (King, 2014).
City landscapes have become the site of the greatest variability of the neoliberal agenda. Crilley (1993) finds that megaprojects in urban areas distract from the absence of money being infused into the local economy. Hackworth (2007) explains the way state officials often (...) advertise a city’s willingness to participate and promote a business-friendly atmosphere, no matter how risky. This process transforms the local state into a more aggressive vehicle for business, normalizing this process as a response to broader changes while downsizing the state and privatizing resources.

One area in which this absence has been felt in the Capital Region is in the Aid and Incentives for Municipalities (AIM) program. AIM aid provides unrestricted state funding to local governments, to use for a multitude of purposes. These cuts to AIM demonstrate how the “city is a significant scale of geography at which to examine the economic political and social implications of austerity” (Glasmeier, Gray & Lobao 2014:4). In particular, it illuminates the way state governments shift some of their responsibilities to local governments. This is accomplished by mandating that local governments provide additional services, but not providing adequate funding for these services; job or department consolidation; divestment from job training; eliminating jobs; and other strategies of reallocation or spending reduction.

Local governments throughout the state are serving an increasingly poor population, which might require additional services but are less able to pay for them. These factors, coupled with cuts to AIM funding, are increasing difficulties for local governance. Glasmeier, Gray, and Lobao (2014) argue that “cities have become both victims and instigators of new forms of urban

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7 After the 2008 financial crisis, Governor Cuomo reduced AIM by 2% statewide, except in New York City (governor.ny.gov). The 2% in Cuomo’s budget may not seem like much, but the last increase was in 2008. It then decreased $50 million, or 7%, until 2014-2016 and as of 2020 is fixed at $175 million.

8 Peter A. Baynes, executive director of the New York State Conference of Mayors and Municipal Officials, stated that cutting AIM “Leaving our cities and villages to ‘go it alone’ – without a strong fiscal partner at the state level – is a recipe for continued economic stagnation in communities throughout our state.” (Smith, 2015, p. 6). Shawn Hogan, mayor of the Western New York town of Hornell, adds that “it’s high time that municipalities, which provide the lion’s share of services in their communities, get more help. All we’ve taken from the legislature and the governor in budget is hits” (Smith, 2015).

9 Many states entered the recession with their largest budget reserves in history, totaling $69 billion in 2007, but the length and severity of the recession has depleted those reserves (Shure, 2010). In addition, state revenues fell more during the recession than at any time in at least the past 45 years.
austerity.” They depend on state aid for nearly 20% of their revenue, but in tough financial times, local governments are often forced to reduce spending (Office of the NYS Comptroller, 2013b). Local governments with a high reliance on state and federal aid are most vulnerable to reductions or unpredictable changes in aid, often cutting their own employees and reducing services for their communities but also cutting funds for services needed by people in their communities, like healthcare, housing, and food.

These austere measures under Cuomo demonstrate the distinctly neoliberal era of capitalism whereby inherently hurtful rhetoric and economic policies are hidden behind progressive values and even further a discourse of working through the hard times together, when the poor are left to go it alone.10 Cuomo embodies the particular political and the political programs informed by neoliberalism, which claim to understand something about human nature and economics, and which claims that their understanding of human nature and economics gives them superior insights into how to use government mechanisms in order to maximize human flourishing, when in fact they do the opposite. More than a decade after the 2008 financial crisis, middle-class and working poor communities, while not responsible for the crisis, are still paying the price. Blyth (2013) explains that the 2008 financial crisis may have originated in the private sector, but has been re-engineered through neoliberal discourse into a crisis of public finance, intensifying economic ramifications for local governments and vulnerable communities.

10 Complaints about Cuomo’s policies began with austerity measures to balance the budget during his first term (Greenblatt, 2017, P. 4). His primary concern was to reduce debt while handing low-cost victories to progressives, like marriage equality and gun control. Richard Brodsky, a former democratic state senator, dubbed Cuomo’s worldview “progractionary,” a mix of progressive and reactionary (Sietz-Wald, 2014). On social issues that grab news headlines, like hunger, he is a textbook liberal democrat, but on economics, he’s embraced tax cuts, resisted increasing the minimum wage, withheld funds from education, housing, and health care, and fought with teachers’ unions. Cuomo stands firmly as a Democrat in terms of his social policy; however, he operates fiscally as a conservative, leading to increasing struggles for New Yorkers exemplified by food programming (McGeehan, 2018).
Consequences Under Austerity: Food Programming and the Latinx Community in the Capital Region

At the state level, Cuomo’s administration has taken steps in the right direction, making SNAP accepted at farmers markets throughout the state and making funding available for the Fresh Connect program for targeted SNAP outreach to eligible families, informing them of how to apply and access benefits. These policies offer new programming to address hunger, yet some Capital Region based nonprofits and activists are skeptical. Karen Scharff, executive director of Citizen Action, finds: “the governor still seems to feel that the best way to strengthen New York’s economy is the failed trickle-down policies that offer tax breaks to corporations and the wealthiest New Yorkers” (Greenblatt, 2017). A key element which directly supports the neoliberal philosophy that the only real way to improve current socioeconomic conditions is to offer incentives and maximize the profits of capitalists. An examination of Cuomo and his support of neoliberalism also reveals the insidious “good-naturedness” rhetoric fabricated to allow the continuation of a neoliberal policy agenda.

Despite current economic policies that still adhere to the neoliberal agenda, the Capital Region host tens of anti-hunger organizations that are rethinking and adapting under austerity conditions, such as Capital Roots, Food Pantries of the Capital District, Albany Victory Gardens, Capital District LATINOS, Centro Civico, A Village, South End Market, and Radix, among others. They have brought much-needed aid to those most affected by the financial crisis,

11 In his 2018-19 budget, Cuomo included additional funding for the No Student Goes Hungry program to provide students with access to healthy, local meals. In 2019 he assigned Susan Zimet, former director of the Hunger Action Network, now Special Assistant to Governor Cuomo, to coordinate Food and Anti-Hunger Policy and add hunger and food insecurity to the New York State’s prevention agenda, a health improvement plan.

12 Sean McElwee, a policy analyst at Demos, a progressive think tank in New York, states that despite these successes, Cuomo gets little credit from progressives. On nearly every issue, activists complain, Cuomo has to be dragged kicking and screaming, coming around only when he realized it might be politically advantageous to do so. When he does pursue a left policy, it seems like he’s doing it as his last option (Greenblatt, 2017, p. 4).
recession, and austerity. However, these organizations are not panaceas; they can only do so much under additional financial and social pressures after the 2008 financial crisis.

Capital Roots, a food access non-profit and community gardening organization in Troy, had to reconsider their garden plot sizes. Community gardens are one of many strategies to increase access to healthy food; however, according to the director, Amy Klein, after the 2008 financial crisis the demand for Capital Roots’ services increased. The Capital Roots Newsletter (2011) noted that “the continuation of the economic downturn, frequent news reports involving unsafe food, and the continued growth of ‘eat local’ and ‘eat healthy’ movements kept demand for garden plots near the record level established in 2009.” Klein said that to better manage the gardens, decrease wait time, and meet this increase in demand, they changed the way individual plots were sized. She explained:

After the 2008 financial crisis, it was hard to find land to expand into completely new gardens. Between the crisis and market insecurity, people were holding on to their land, even if it wasn’t worth anything. So before 2008, some of the plots were larger, less [sic] people got plots, but after 2008 we resized the plots to meet the need and get more people in the gardens.

In one community garden, 49 plots in 2002 were increased to 61 by 2015. In the Leonard Place garden, 20 plots in 2001 increased to 33 in 2015, a trend that continued in various gardens.
Capital Roots fared better than most nonprofits after the financial crisis while many others struggled. Across the region, some even closed, like Hispanic Outreach Services (HOS). HOS had been in Albany since the 1970s, funded by the nonprofit Catholic Charites, with the mission to honor Latino culture and people and to promote integration and acceptance in society through direct services, advocacy, and empowerment (HOS, 2007). Nelson, a former employee at HOS, remembered that the organization provided translation services, guidance in filling out social service paperwork, finding jobs, networking, childcare, food, clothing and other provisions to the Latinx community. Prior to 2008, Nelson explained, HOS had four offices and served over 1,000 people in total. However, after 2008 the offices consolidated and then began to close, an instability which forced Nelson to look elsewhere for employment. Catholic Charities officially closed HOS in 2010. A former board member, Dan Irizarry, stated:

This was the worst timing, a slap in the face to the Latino community. I put calls out to people to help the Latino community but no one responded. Everybody was too concerned about the bailout, financial crisis, and their own funding.

However, despite this retraction from the larger community, Irizarry (with help from Micky Jimenez, also involved in HOS) stayed at work. Over the last decade, they have been searching for a way and a place for the Latinx community in Albany. They succeeded in founding Capital District LATINOS (CDL) in 2012, a nonprofit dedicated to creating the conditions for the success of the Latino community by providing basic social services and advocating for the political, social, and economic empowerment of Latinos in the Capital District.

Yet this success was not without tradeoffs. CDL was only able to open as an affiliate of Acacia Network, the largest and most wealthy Latino nonprofit in the state. Acacia provides services to local nonprofits focused on health and the Latinx community. Acacia sets up nonprofits, manages costs, helps with the structure of operation, funding and goals, and in the
case of CDL, outsources much of the grant funding, personnel, and business operations. Some may consider this a loss of autonomy and control, a drawback for some and an advantage for others. CDL and Capital Roots are two examples that highlight the constraints of austerity on local food programs after the 2008 financial crisis. Meanwhile the state administration continues with increasingly brutal austerity measures, concealed by socially progressive values and justified by the idea that supporting business and letting that success trickle down is the best choice for our communities. As a result, social services are closing or limited in their operations and the scraps nonprofits and charities receiving in funding continues to dwindle increasing competition in community organization while food insecure, low-income and racialized communities suffer the consequences.

This examination of the localization of austerity in the Capital Region provides a more holistic and concrete understanding of conditions under austerity for low-income and racialized communities, in particular those experiencing food system inequities. The 2008 financial crisis intensified the way capitalism functions and the transfer of wealth from poor to rich, while parts of the state work to mitigate the losses. This escalation and transition have created profound changes, amplifying inequities and structural violence in social, economic, and political institutions. The food system is only one sector of many sites of contestation, defined by centuries of structural violence, dispossession and inequity. This trend continues today, systematized by a neoliberal agenda that has separated producers and consumers from food production and from one another.
Chapter 3: Structural Violence and Latinx Resistance in the Food System (1960s-2000s)

Structural violence has always existed within the food system; however, it has been amplified by the neoliberal agenda after the 2008 financial crisis. Crisis conditions have exacerbated systematized, cyclical, and intergenerational inequities in the food system, among other arenas, as capital accumulation intensifies in an already weakened and depleted economy. This chapter identifies and examines structural violence in the U.S. food system, not simply as an unintended consequence but as an inherent component in the formation and operation of the food system (Patel, 2007; Holt-Giménez & Harper 2016; Ayazi & Elsheikh, 2016). I analyze historical and contemporary examples of structural violence experienced by low-income Latinx communities. This chapter demonstrates how past and present strategies of everyday forms of Latinx resistance have presented and continue to present challenges to the neoliberal food system.

Everyday forms of Latinx resistance include writing letters, presenting theater performances, community gardening, and providing meals, among other activities practiced by individuals, groups, and larger movements. Historical examples of everyday Latinx resistance can be seen in the actions of the United Farm Workers (UFW) and the Young Lords. Present-day examples, after the 2008 financial crisis, include strategies exemplified by Cosecha and the U.S. Food Sovereignty Alliance (USFSA). Strategies of resistance demonstrated by these groups contextualize structural violence, bringing into focus the causes and consequences of inequitable conditions in the food system and emphasizing the power, solidarity, and ingenuity of Latinx resistance. This chapter demonstrates how low-income Latinx communities are not only producers and consumers, but active agents working to resist food system inequities.
The functioning of the food system consists of extensive connections and interdependencies between different stages in the larger environment, society, political economy, and culture. As the UN Environment Program (2016) explains, the food system is the complete set of people, institutions, activities, processes, and infrastructure involved in producing and consuming food. This covers all moments in the commodity chain, from growing and harvesting agricultural products to processing, packaging, transporting, selling, cooking, consuming, and disposing of waste food and packaging. The food system does not operate alone, but influences and is influenced by the state, politics, economics, culture, and society.

The contemporary U.S. food system, as we know it, has existed for about 100 years, since the development of mechanized farming equipment and the invention of the grocery store in the early 1900s. Since then, the food system has undergone many changes, most notably a reorganization and centralization of power with the consolidation of the neoliberal agenda in the 1980s. Patel (2007) explains that the neoliberal restructuring in the agri-food sector has prioritized the industrial production of cheap commodities, concentrating control among a few companies that distribute, process, and sell food, often at the expense of smaller-scale farmers and low-income consumers.

The current food system is characterized by a neoliberal capitalism that is constantly expanding and accumulating wealth with cyclical crises of overproduction, economic booms and busts, and increasing inequality. It seeks to concentrate power in the hands of a few while passing off social and environmental costs to society, particularly to racialized and low-income communities. These characteristics are why calls “to fix a broken food system” (Jacobs, 2015; Bonham et al., 2017) are misplaced and hide the intentional structural violence that is foundational to how the food system operates. Local food activist Amani Olugbala, with Soul
Fire Farm, asserts: “the food system isn’t broke, and those in power don’t want to ‘fix it.’ It is working perfectly for a select few at the expense of people of color.” Food First’s director Eric Holt-Giménez (2018) agrees, writing that when we say the food system is “broke” we ignore three centuries of intentional and systematic violence and oppression.

**Partners in Health**’s Paul Farmer (2003) asserts that structural violence in the food system manifests today as the theft of land from communities of color and small scale farmers, the destruction of the environment, and the violation of communities’ rights to produce their own food, a contributing factor to food insecurity that leads to poor health and nutrition. Furthermore, the disruption of local economies and the promotion of manufactured, prepackaged, poor quality, cheap “food” leads to diet-related diseases such as obesity, diabetes, and even death. Lawrence and Keleher (2004) explain that structural violence is the normalization and legitimization of an array of historical, cultural, institutional, and interpersonal dynamics that routinely give advantage to whites while producing chronic adverse outcomes for people of color.

Structural violence is legitimated by systems of race, ethnicity, culture, citizenship status, and other social constructions. Leah Penniman, co-director of Soul Fire Farm (2018), explains: “racism is in the DNA of the U.S. food system.” Our food system was and still is built upon violence and inequity, translating to all social realms and institutions including but not limited to labor, agriculture, immigration, health, human rights, and environmental abuses. Shiva (1997, p. 2) writes that “500 years after Columbus a more secular version of the same project of colonization continues.” Colonial and imperial ideologies have been replaced and repackaged by neoliberalism. The names may have changed and the violence normalized, but power, oppression, and capital accumulation at the expense of the other and the environment continue. As Holt-Giménez and Harper (2016) explain, slavery, exploitation, and the dispossession of land
and poor people of color are foundational to the neoliberal capitalist economy and food system, as are the resulting food system inequities.

**The Neoliberal Food Regime**

Within the neoliberal capitalist food system, food-related activities have been increasingly integrated into the market. This process has transformed food from a life-giving, health-ensuring sociocultural category to a product, a commodity, to be bought and sold. Today, food has become another way to accumulate wealth through the market and nations, governments, or corporations to impose power or control on each other. Sodano (2019) writes that food is and has always been a weapon and an instrument of power. As capitalism has developed and changed over the centuries, societies have also restructured food systems, forming different partnerships or regimes of production and consumption of food on a world scale (Holt-Giménez, 2010).

Food regimes are structured moments in the history of capitalist food relations, characterized by the centralization of power and profit by agri-food corporations and their growing investment in agricultural chemicals, pharmaceuticals, and fuel (Holt-Giménez, 2010). The concept of food regime is not about food itself, but about the relations of capital and power within the food and agricultural system, how resources are generated, and how capital is produced and consolidated. It offers a historical and structural lens through which to view the political and environmental relations of capitalism and the food system, enabling a closer examination of food politics, accumulation, stages of capitalism, and the inconsistencies and consequences for people and the environment.
McMichael (2009) writes that food regimes contribute to the dispossessession and privatization of land, a lack of access to or control of resources, deregulation, less oversight, increased corporatization, a decline in social services, economic decline, and human and environmental rights violations. Friedmann and Friedmann (2004) explain that in recent history there have been three food regimes: the “Settler-Colonial” (1870-1914), characterized by mono-agriculture and industrialization; “Surplus” (1945-1973), defined by international U.S. economic hegemony and food and agricultural aid programs to developing nations; and “Neoliberal” or “Corporate” (1973-present), defined by deregulation, international trade liberalization, reduction of public expenditure, and privatization. All three food regimes integrate food production and consumption activities into the processes of industrialization and capital accumulation. Each transition from one to the next reframes the political economy of the agricultural, food, environmental and agri-chemical sectors, reorganizing technologies, food access, food security, nutrition, health, and their relations to fossil fuel and other related industries.

The neoliberal food regime is defined by the institutionalization of corporate power, corporate influence in manufacturing and retail, the division of labor based on global food commodity chains, and the displacement of small-scale farmers. It is also characterized by an increase in bio-nanotechnologies, genetic modification, and intellectual property rights that have emerged as the newest points for profit extraction and accumulation (Shiva, 2008). Our current neoliberal food system is also marked by an increased instability in food markets, the accelerated depletion of natural resources, and increasing dependence on oil. It is a massive contributor to climate change (Sodano, Hingley, & Lindgreen, 2018; Garnett, 2008). It consists of one global market that excludes poor and racialized communities, creating economic inequity at the global, national, and local levels with devastating human and environmental effects from hunger to
climate change. McMichael (2009) explains that under the neoliberal food regime many are dispossessed and made to function as reserve labor, prompting lower wages and labor casualization, a process whereby jobs become precarious or contractual.

The neoliberal capitalist food system does not respond, and has never responded, to the nutritional needs of people or sustainable production based on respect for the environment. It is rooted in a neoliberal logic which seeks maximum profit, optimization of costs and exploitation of labor in each of its productive sectors (Vivas, 2010). The commodification of food contributes to growing wealth inequality and injustice, chronic hunger and poverty, the destruction of local and communal food systems, deteriorating self-sufficiency, and growing dependence on larger, centralized food markets. This shift in the perception of food, from sustenance to commodity, in a globalized context under crisis conditions has contributed to increased structural violence.

The neoliberal food regime is unique, its power coming no longer from nation-states but from private entities or corporations, in a shift from state to private food governance. As Sodano, Hingley, and Lindgreen (2018) explain, the first and second food regimes’ strategies also accommodated the private interests of the wealthy elites, but states and corporations still operated in two separate spheres, the political and the economic. However, after the 2008 financial crisis, there are no longer two spheres, but one, and private interests do not simply influence or inform state policy; rather, they serve as substitutes for the state by becoming themselves the regulators, even policy makers, of the political economy and larger society.

Crises have repeatedly served as moments of reanimation for the neoliberal project, mutating and disguising the process and its effects (Peck and Brenner, 2012). However, after 30 years of neoliberalism, the capitalist food system is proving inadequate to meet people’s needs and ensure the preservation of natural resources and the environment. This trajectory culminated
during the 2008 financial crisis, which also initiated a global food crisis that ushered in both financial and food security. The fragility of the capitalist system and the food system nestled inside of it were brought to the forefront of public discourse.

The 2008 financial crisis, like the 2008 food crisis, did not appear without warning. Sodano (2018) explains that the origins of the food crisis are also political and economic in nature, defined by the excess of power by large food and agricultural corporations over the market. Other factors included increased financialization, making food commodities, home prices, and markets vulnerable to economic crisis. The food crisis exacerbated already rising global food prices, highlighting the extreme vulnerability of the current food system affecting more than 3 billion people (Vivas, 2010; Holt-Giménez, 2010). However, in each food regime, despite restructuring, there has been vary forms of social resistance.

**Historical Forms of Everyday Latinx Resistance: The UFW and The Young Lords**

Structural violence and resistance have long legacies in the food system that continue today. They can manifest in a myriad of forms from letter writing, theater, gardening, walking, boycotts, free breakfast to community building and more. Shorris (1992) states the history of Latinxs has many roots and branches, and each person or community’s story changes its entry point. Shorris emphasizes, the Latinx community and its history is diverse, and this diversity carries into their experiences of oppression and practices of resistance.

This dynamic, multi-sited history may make Latinx resistance more difficult to identify, but it also makes it more sustainable and difficult to repress. Social resistance is situated in a certain context within unique sets of socio-political, cultural, and economic relations, creating diverse articulations of oppositional acts, not fixed but temporary actions sustained by practices.
Everyday practices include boycotting, writing letters, solidarity building, striking, and theater performance or “actos,” all seen in the actions of the United Farm Workers (UFW) movement (1965-1975). While the Young Lords, a Puerto Rican-led movement based in New York City and Chicago in the 1970s, fought for self-determination and community empowerment by writing and publishing a newspaper, leafletting, community gardening, the direct occupation of space, murals, poetry, community organizing and disruption (Jeffries, 2003).

The UFW strike began with the Delano Grape Strike in 1965, led by Cesar Chávez. Chávez was a son of sharecroppers who had his family home repossessed by the government during the Great Depression, forcing his family into migrant farm labor (Kim, 2017). The goal of the strike was to challenge the low pay, discrimination, and abuses of workers’ rights by imposing financial losses on grocery stores and landowners. The strike connected consumers with farmworkers, building empathy between middle-class families in cities and poor and working-class farmworkers in the fields (Quintana, 2018). The strike was also remarkable in that Filipino and Latinx farmworkers crossed racial lines to protest years of structural violence. They used racial, as well as class, solidarity by uniting rural and urban working classes by way of boycotts of everyday food products (Kim, 2017). After five years, they won a historic contract with the major grape growers in California, fueling a larger movement (1965-1975) that spread throughout the United States.

Farmworkers have been and are consistently targeted as an easily exploitable labor force as many are temporary laborers, migrant laborers, non-English speakers, or otherwise unable to fight for workers’ rights without severe repercussions. This exploitation has been routinized through unjust immigration and labor policies like the Bracero program (1942-1964). The Bracero program was a temporary work program aimed at using Mexican migrant labor to fill
the farm labor shortage in the U.S. during WWII. Morgan (2004) explains the economic advantage of the Bracero program for the U.S., in that it supplied low-wage agricultural workers, easily obtained at little expense, which translated to lower consumer prices in the U.S., maintaining a growing agricultural market.

The Bracero program took two forms. Under the 1942 agreement the contract was between the worker and the U.S. government (Morgan, 2004). It recognized the U.S. government as the employer to pay for the transportation, living, housing and medical expenses, not to engage in discrimination, and to pay the same wage rate as that paid to domestic workers. At the height of the program, in the 1950s, approximately 2.5 million Mexican Braceros came to the U.S. (Morgan, 2004). However, the Bracero program soon shifted from a contractual agreement between the workers and U.S. government to an agreement between workers and the farmers or employers themselves, cutting out the state as a mediator. With this shift, the U.S. government was no longer responsible for contract fulfillment, minimum hourly wage, or unemployment payment.

After this change, working conditions greatly deteriorated as there was no assurance that the farm owners would meet their obligations. The Bracero program failed to fulfill its promises to Mexican laborers (Quintana, 2018). Housing, sanitation, and food quality quickly worsened, as did wages and treatment from white business owners, employers and larger communities. Zatz (1993) finds that Braceros were subject to exploitation by their employers, racial discrimination in the communities where they worked, and harsh living conditions on the farms that employed them. This inhumane treatment laid the groundwork for some of the systematic exploitation and violence migrants and undocumented individuals experience today.
Morgan (2004) writes that while the Bracero program may have filled a labor shortage, it eventually increased the number of undocumented individuals entering the U.S., depressing wages and undermining collective bargaining efforts by citizen farm workers. This increase in undocumented workers was of concern to the federal government, which promptly launched “Operation Wetback” (1954), designed to target undocumented Mexicans and return them to the other side of the border (Morales, 2018). Morgan (2004) continues that the Bracero program was also a way the Immigration and Nationalization Service could control and managed the flow of immigrant labor. Roadblocks, inspections of trains and neighborhoods, and detention by local police forced migrant workers to participate in the Bracero program, or face deportation.

However, despite the human and workers’ rights abuses, many farmworkers resisted through solidarity, exercising their voices to identify and challenge food system inequities. For the UFW, the most successful practices were striking and boycotting, but they also practiced everyday acts of resistance by fasting, marching, leafletting, writing letters, and staging theater performances to support and sustain resistance activity. Chávez himself wrote many letters to local stores, politicians, and other farmworker groups. In one letter, with support from the Black Panthers, addressed to the CEO of Safeway Stores in 1969, Chávez wrote: “Blacks, Filipinos, and members of all minorities will express their solidarity against all oppression by joining their neighbors in supermarkets other than Safeway” (Chavez, 1969). The goal was to simply deprive Safeway of consumers’ support. Podulka (2018) explains that Safeway’s CEO underestimated the groups’ ability to mobilize people, and was shocked when the boycott forced the Safeway in Oakland to be deserted and close indefinitely. Resistance, both direct and indirect, is innovative, experimental, and creative, forming and reforming over time with consideration of past actions and reactions.
Another practice of Latinx resistance that was inspired by and garnered support for the UFW came from El Teatro Campesino, the first farmworker theater, founded by Luis Valdez. The Teatro celebrated variations of cultural resistance by performing “actos,” short skits, songs, and musical numbers on flatbed trucks in fields and union halls. El Teatro Campesino (2019) explains that “actos” were ideal to educate farmworkers about the UFW and their rights using art to create social change, and inspire community involvement, social consciousness, and political action. Farm workers, especially those undocumented, have few rights compared to citizens; however, an examination of the everyday practices of resistance reveals that they also have a dynamic history of ingenuity, power, and organizing, forming alliances across racial and geographic lines.

Another group in the 1960s-70s that practiced everyday forms of resistance to address structural violence in the Latinx community and contributed to this effort was the Young Lords. However, unlike the UFW, the Young Lords weren’t farmworkers in rural areas but lived in cities where many worked in food retail or service. Both organizations included low-income consumers and workers in racialized environments who took part in everyday resistance practices to challenge food system inequities. The practices carried out by the Young Lords include occupation, community service, disruption, solidarity, community gardening, and providing meals to resist structural violence in the form of redlining and a lack of access and funding for resources like healthcare, childcare, and food.

The Young Lords was founded in the late 1960s by Jose “Cha Cha” Jimenez in Chicago, who was shocked at the disproportionate number of people of color, especially Latinx, in the prison system. Judson (2003) explains that Jimenez began to understand that the real enemy for poor communities of color was the U.S. government. As one Young Lord stated,
what we had to realize was that it wasn’t no good fightin’ each other, what we were doing as a gang had to be done against the capitalist institutions that are oppressing us (Judson, 2003, p. 290).

Though begun in Chicago, the Young Lords had chapters in many major U.S. cities, most famously New York. José Martinez, a member of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) was inspired by Jiménez’s organizing in Chicago and started the East Harlem chapter in New York City.

The Young Lords worked within their communities to provide resources liked education, healthcare, and housing that were withheld from them. They aimed to help others become aware of the oppression they were facing and understand the struggle of diasporic Puerto Ricans. They devised a 12-point program that called for self-determination for all oppressed people, an education that reflected the Latino experience and an end to capitalism. The Young Lords promoted a radical approach to Latino community activism (Fernandez, 2018). They adopted a grassroots, community-based service approach, strengthening local Latino organizations, writing their own newspaper, creating programs to benefit the community, and fostering ethnic and nationalist pride.

Their concerns included poor housing, a lack of bilingual education, discrimination, violence, and inadequate city services. New York Young Lords occupied vacant land, hospitals, medical facilities, and churches, picking up trash, sweeping the streets, and writing and speaking about their experiences through their independently published and distributed newspaper, demanding justice for the Latinx community. The newspapers and fliers were a critical component through which the Lords spread their message and increased membership. The work done to produce and distribute these newspapers was also indispensable to the intellectual and political development of the organization and its activists.
Newspapers were viewed as an educational and consciousness-raising tool, a medium through which to engage people in dialogue, raise their level of class consciousness, and gain new recruits in the process (Gonzales, 2013). They also connected with outside activists, fellow travelers, and kindred organizations, thereby securing financial support and strengthening bonds of solidarity. The Young Lords also practiced occupations of space, taking over a church to run a free children’s breakfast program, daycare, and clothing drives. They seized hospital equipment and moved it to where it was needed most, providing door-to-door healthcare services. They went through neighborhoods testing for lead poisoning and tuberculosis, refusing to accede to the systemic inequities faced by low-income racialized communities in cities.

The lack of access to healthy food in urban areas is structured by government policies such as redlining and the corporatization of the food system. Redlining is a discriminatory practice by which banks or insurance companies refuse or limit loans, mortgages or insurance within specific geographic areas, especially inner-city neighborhoods usually characterized by a specific racial or ethnic community. Redlining policies segregate cities racially and economically, affecting housing, homeownership, and home equity as well as community grocers’, restaurants’, and other small businesses’ abilities to operate in those areas. Meanwhile, neighborhoods are left without access to food, recreation, amenities, jobs, or economic development, undermining the stability of many low-income urban neighborhoods (Bianco, 1999). These policies called for the removal of existing populations, to be replaced with more affluent white communities or projects and resulting in the displacement of poor and racialized communities, (Lopez, 2018). Eisenhour (2001) explains that redlining drew broad conclusions about the investment worthiness of communities based on class and race, eroding property values and declining tax bases, reducing resources for social services from education to food stamps.
With the introduction of the neoliberal agenda in the late 1970s, the willingness of the government to relinquish regulatory control contributed to the growth and corporatization of the retail food industry monopolizing the market (Bennet, 1992). The growing political and economic power of food retailers began to dominate retailing, production, and distribution and to cater to white middle class neighborhoods where supermarkets were already plentiful.

Supermarket chains then steadily left cities for the suburbs (Springen, 1997), leaving many urban residents paying higher prices for a poorer quality and selection of food (Turque, 1992). In redlined neighborhoods, gaining access to healthy food became a struggle. This process has been identified as “supermarket redlining” and though it is not the only cause of health inequity and diet-related disease, it plays a large part in creating a lack of wealth, health, and access to resources such as food (Turque, 1992). Areas with a pronounced lack of access to fresh, healthy, and affordable food have become known as “food deserts.”

Anti-hunger advocates argue that a more accurate and representative term for a food desert is needed. Washington (2014) identifies ‘food desert’ as “an outsider term” that implies desolation, rather than describing places with enormous life and potential. ‘Food desert,’ Washington continues, fails to consider inequities like systemic racism, classism, and sexism, among others, that permeate the U.S. food system. “When we say ‘food apartheid,’ the real conversation can begin” (Washington, 2014). At a community meeting if the Albany Victory Gardens, Musa, the Community Gardens Market Coordinator, spoke to the role of local resistance in areas with poor access to food:

Of course, food deserts suck. We are in one, we know. But [smiling] this could be our greatest opportunity as gardeners. We will become the oasis in the middle of the “desert” for our community (Musa, 2018).
As Musa insists, there is life, opportunity and people in “food deserts.” Leah Penniman, co-director of Soul Fire Farm, also prefers the term “food apartheid community” because it represents an engineered space – a human-created system of segregation, not a neutral or natural ecosystem (Penniman, 2017). The word desert and its neutrality relieves people and policymakers of responsibility for their actions or inactions, and erases the history of racist policies that “decimated” these areas, as if the “desert” just showed up on its own. In contrast, apartheid, a policy or system of discrimination on grounds of race, is human-made, not by accident but as an engine space of injustice and inequity, illuminating the problems as ours to fix.

The term “food apartheid community” also emphasizes the high death rate associated with low-income and racialized communities due to diet-related illnesses and conditions. The health risks differ for everyone; however, the Food Research and Action Center (2016) finds that low-income people of color are at greater risk of obesity and diabetes than their white peers, experiencing conditions that can further complicate hunger. They also often face limited resources in acquiring food. The loss of food stores is especially difficult as they can be an economic anchor in the community, providing jobs, food, and access to amenities, a symbol of the community’s ability to thrive and its connection to a larger social fabric outside of cities (Turque, 1992; Eisenhour, 2011). Eisenhour writes that the lack of access to quality food sources and adequate nutrition has been a central cause of diminished health, constrained choices, and changed behavior over generations. Many experience a continual lack of access to food, cycles of deprivation, overeating, high stress levels, depression, greater exposure to high-fat, low-nutrition products, and limited access to healthcare. Additional challenges often faced include challenges to adopting and maintaining healthy behaviors: limited resources and income, time
and energy constraints, a lack of availability of affordable foods, and fewer opportunities for physical activity (FRAC, 2015; Feeding America, 2014).

This is exemplified by the New York chapter of the Young Lords in East Harlem, the Bronx, and the Lower East Side of Manhattan. The socioeconomic effects that result from educational barriers, occupational working conditions, income, or other factors are closely tied to where people live. The Young Lords worked to address these issues, among others such as food access and healthy living conditions. Pablo Guzmán, a founding member of the Young Lords, explains:

Breakfast and lead poison today are considered ‘of course,’ but back then, bringing environmental factors like lead-based paint into the discussion or connecting poverty and health, that was all new (Lee, 2009, p. 1).

Geographic isolation, low socio-economic status, and limited opportunities are the interconnected pathways through which hunger or food insecurity occurs, increasing the risk of chronic health conditions. Over time, public policy initiatives combine with private food sector activities, the criminalization of the poor, and reduced spending on social services to compound structural violence experienced by poor, racialized communities in cities. Strategies of resistance practiced by the Young Lords exposed inequitable health and living conditions in their community, educating the community and challenging capitalism while drawing strength from and validating their identity and culture.

Other Latinx practices of resistance by the Young Lords included painting murals on the walls of city streets that showcased culture and memorialized the lives lost to urban violence. Wilson (2003) finds Latinxs, many of whom are migrants, bring rural agricultural practices to the city. This is done by transforming vacant lots and side yards into gardens, keeping chickens, and
planting fresh vegetables common to the U.S. and the Caribbean. These practices function to reclaim vacant lots for community activities, food, and mental, social, and physical health.

The history of resistance and the forms that it takes are important because spaces today are (re)productions of past spaces (Rothrock, 2005). This examination of food system history, violence, and contestation from poor and low-income Latinx communities offers possibilities for informing and inspiring present-day forms of resistance. Though short-lived, the most powerful strategy of resistance was the Young Lords’ ability to disrupt institutions and produce political change and make their subordination visible, forcing authorities to respond. The resistance strategies of the Young Lords laid the groundwork for “a new kind of Latinx,” a less passive generation willing to bring about faster and more substantive change (Wilson, 2003). Many of the Young Lords went on to be judges, news reporters, professors, youth empowerment leaders, vice presidents of unions, city council members, and more (Fernandez, 2018). Both the UFW and Young Lords exemplify significant everyday strategies of resistance with a common cause and intent to achieve justice in the food system and expose structural violence.

Everyday Forms of Latinx Resistance After the 2008 Financial Crisis: Cosecha and USFSA

Neoliberal capitalism has been perpetuating socio-economic disparities for decades; however, the 2008 financial crisis represents a fissure, an insecure and amplified neoliberal context, especially at the local level (Moragues-Faus & Marsden, 2017). It is facilitated by globalized financial systems and labor markets, corporate control over the public sphere, and increased commodification of human heritages such as land, seeds, water and increased consumerism (Ayazi & Elsheikh, 2016). It is within this context that everyday forms of Latinx resistance respond to the ever-changing political economy and unjust conditions under austerity.
These practices include educational trainings, boycotting, social media campaigns, cross-racial solidarity and network building, skill or labor trading, occupying space, community gardening and food programs, saving seeds, the arts, and gaining access to government funded programs, among others. These practices are undertaken by Cosecha and USFSA, two coalitions led and sustained by the Latinx community that seek food justice and expose structural violence in the food system.

Holmes (2013) explains structural violence can manifest as back and neck pain, stomach aches from indigestion, and general bodily fatigue resulting from hard labor. Holmes also reported the job of working in the fields to be not only physically abusive, but also psychologically humiliating and demoralizing. He continues to explain that the violence committed by configurations of social inequalities has come to be (mis)recognized as an inherent or natural. He describes “violence that in the end, has injurious effects on bodies similar to the violence of a stabbing or shooting” (Holmes, 2013, p. 43). With the expansion of the neoliberal agenda, structural violence against migrant laborers has created brutal living and working conditions in varying forms. The harm that this causes the laborer is structural because it was caused by larger global systems, not by the farmers themselves.

Manifestations of structural violence exist within crisis conditions, not just of capitalism but of the political legitimacy of the state. Today, structural violence manifests as racist immigration policy, redlining, increased corporatization, workers’ rights abuses, and diet-related illnesses are intensified while private capital and its allies in the State work to reestablish dominance, hegemony, and control over the poor, working, and middle classes. Defunct immigration policy and the Farm Bill are two mechanisms in the neoliberal food system that perpetuate and normalize structural violence.
Farm labor has always been connected to the politics of racism and has depended on migrant workers to sustain it, from the colonial era with the enslavement of Africans to the use and abuse of Latin American farmworkers today. Agribusiness has used whatever means necessary to create an insecure racialized underclass for cheap labor. Violence against immigrants has also existed for centuries; however, recent rhetoric and policies contribute to the normalization and intensification of violence against immigrant populations both in and outside of the food system. Under the Obama administration, the Department of Homeland Security reports that three million people were deported, the highest rate in U.S. history (Nowrasteh, 2019). Meanwhile, anti-immigrant bills passed at the state level include Texas’s SB4 bill, aimed at separating families, North Carolina’s HB 370, which requires local law enforcement to cooperate with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), and SB 533, which blocks a program to provide local identification cards to residents who cannot obtain state identification because of immigration status, lack of documents, or money. This legislation forms part of a broader anti-immigrant effort make states more hostile to immigrants and ensure that the neoliberal food regime has cheap, temporary, and divided labor.

The Institute for Agricultural and Trade Policy (2018) states: “it is no surprise, given their record of racism, that the Trump administration is seeking to continue in [Obama’s] vein.” More recently, the Trump administration’s zero tolerance policy has separated and detained over 2,000 children from their parents. In 2019, seven children died while either being detained or at hospitals, while the lasting psychological trauma which many children have faced has yet to be studied fully (Associated Press, 2019; Pilkington, 2019). Trump’s immigration policy is defined by cruelty, inhumanity; it is not broken, but intentionally brutal. Public health experts have found evidence of a “Trump effect” on the health of Latinos, pointing to increased stress rates over the
past few years resulting from “the fear of raids, the deportation threats, the [T]weets every morning, [and] the separation of children from parents” (Wan and Bever, 2019).

Epidemiologist Nancy Krieger (2019, p. 2) writes:

There’s a price being paid for all the hateful rhetoric we’re hearing now. It’s not a game or just words. The words are meant to induce fear, and fear carries a physical toll on our bodies. Health risks have been shown to rise with the stress of natural disasters, racism, and domestic violence (Wan & Bever, 2019). The authors recall two studies that found a relationship between fear of immigration raids and negative outcomes among pregnant Latina women. Birth records before and after a 2008 immigration raid at a meat-processing plant in Iowa involving hundreds of Latinos found that babies born to Latina mothers in Iowa in the nine months following the raid suffered a greater risk of premature birth and low birth weight. Wan & Bever (2019) outline other studies that have found increased fear, anxiety, and anger among Latinx youth since Trump’s election, as well as increased blood pressure and problems sleeping, another noted manifestation of psychological distress.

The current immigration policy agenda is defined by racism that promotes fear and hate through unconstitutional and immoral policies through the continued separation of families, and use of migrants, asylum seekers, and recipients of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrival (DACA) program as pawns to pass immigration reform that enacts harsh judgement on undocumented immigrants. In this context, justice and dignity are not only a matter of addressing prejudice, but of life or death for many in the Latinx community. But this injustice has not gone unchallenged. Many groups in the U.S., from DREAMers to the Refugee and Immigrant Center for Education and Legal Services (RAICES), border advocacy groups, the American Civil Liberties Union, Cosecha, and the USFSA, among others, seek to disrupt politics and ensure justice through a variety of resistant practices.
Cosecha is a decentralized network of organizations supporting communities in more than 20 states across the country. It challenges racist immigration policies through both direct spectacle and everyday practice. Cosecha was founded in 2015 as a nonviolent movement fighting for permanent protection, dignity, and respect for the 11 million undocumented immigrants in the U.S. Cosecha, or “harvest” in Spanish, honors the long tradition of farmworker organizing and the present-day pain of undocumented workers whose labor continues to feed the country (Cosecha, 2017). They practice sustained mass non-cooperation, boycotts, and strikes, inspired from Latinx cultures with a rich tradition of popular struggle and movement-building. Like the UFW and the Young Lords before them, Cosecha does not rely on traditional tactics or political parties.

Cosecha calls upon everyone from musicians, artists, dancers, creative minds, poets, academics, and workers to students to be involved, encouraging members to encourage trying new things and taking risks because the diversity of creativity will help us find the most effective strategies, tools, and actions for the movement (Cosecha, 2017, p. 3).

This takes shape in changing consumption habits, trainings, recruitment, “mini actions on public transportation and grocery stores,” educational workshops, offering rides/transportation, translating, cultivating solidarity and awareness via community events, and social media, art, and music. Cosecha uses old and new tactics to expose how the way our food is grown, harvested, distributed, stocked on store shelves, prepared and served in restaurants, and ultimately disposed of, is largely hidden from the majority of consumers in this country (Food Solutions, 2018).

Cosecha frequently organizes with other groups such as the Food Chain Workers Alliance, the Fight for $15 campaign, Black Lives Matter, Migrant Justice, and the HEAL Food Alliance, working to bring attention to the racism and economic injustice inherent in the food
system. Resistance builds on the material left by other rebels, their stories, myths, symbols, structures and tools (Tilly, 1991). New forms of resistance connect to old forms by using them as a stepping stone, translating existing hegemonic elements, dislodging, and recombining that which is available (Vinthagen, 2006). The acts of everyday resistance practiced by Cosecha honor and draw from the legacy of past resistance. Organizers considers themselves students of the thousands of farmworkers who, under the leadership of Dolores Huerta, Larry Itliong and Cesar Chavez, fought back against labor exploitation. We have learned from the millions of African Americans who challenged the racism of Jim Crow and fueled the Civil Rights Movement.

By harnessing the power the community has as workers and consumers, these practices shift debates about immigrants, demonstrating the U.S. cannot operate without them. Immigrants are the backbone of the agricultural labor force and should be treated with dignity and respect.

Structural violence in the food system also includes unjust immigration policy associated with the Farm Bill, a package of legislation that affects the way food is grown and what kinds of foods are grown, covering programs from crop insurance to healthy food access. Smith (et al., 2017) explains the way the Farm Bill ensures the neoliberal agenda by making food and agriculture subsidies, regulations, tax breaks and policies more complex and often indirect, so the food industry doesn’t pay the full cost of producing food, passing it to taxpayers and consumers. This system of tax breaks and subsidies contributes to food system inequities by harming farmworkers and the environment by way of overproduction and mono-cropping (Guthman, 2011).

Agricultural labor in the U.S. food system is predominantly composed of racialized individuals, who make up 88% of farm laborers; meanwhile, the majority of managers and owners are white (Rotner, 2016; Ayazi & Elsheikh, 2016). According to the National Agricultural Workers Survey, approximately 48% of farmworkers lack work authorization,
though this estimate may be low due to a variety of factors (Serrano, 2012). Some sources estimate that as much as 70% or more of the workforce is undocumented. Using these estimates, roughly 1.2 million to 1.75 million farmworkers are undocumented (Farmworker Justice, 2014). The majority of immigrant farmworkers in the National Agricultural Workers Survey – 95% – were from Mexico, while 3% were from Central America and the remaining 2% from elsewhere. In total, 76% percent of all farmworkers identify as Latino/Hispanic and Spanish is the dominant language, spoken by 70% of all farmworkers (Farmworker Justice, 2014).

In addition, wages for food system jobs are among the lowest of any U.S. industry. Workers are likely to receive minimal benefits while being subjected to hazardous, unhealthy working conditions, such as chemical exposure or extreme temperatures and unfair or illegal labor practices such as wage theft (Food Chain Workers Alliance, 2016). The Farm Bill is an omnibus bill, the primary agricultural and food policy tool of the federal government. It plays a significant role in the production and maintenance of structural barriers to socio economic well-being for communities of color and low-income communities (Ayazi & Elsheikh, 2016). Moreover, the Farm Bill reinforces imbalanced relationships between the government, corporations and everyday people, perpetuating inequities in the food system.

These inequities are seen in the 2018 Farm Bill, constrained by passage of the GOP tax plan, which sharply reduces taxes on powerful corporations. The 2018 Farm Bill fails immigrants and undocumented food system workers and low-income consumers (Institute for Agricultural and Trade Policy [IATP], 2018). It increases corporatization, privatization, environmental and worker rights abuses, low wages, diet related illnesses, destruction of local food economies, centralization and concentration of power and control over the food system (Ayazi & Elsheikh, 2016; Farmaid.org, 2018; Vidal, 2016). It sets the stage for our food system.
The IATP (2018) states that if the Trump administration continues with similar policies and cuts, the emerging crisis in both rural and urban America will only get worse.

However, this process is complicated and biased in that the State is a committed ally of large corporations, regardless of party lines (Crouch, 2011, p. 145). This process produces favorable environments for corporate growth and the centralization of power in the food system. The Farm Bill is a critical mechanism in justifying and structuring the neoliberal agenda and structural violence within the food system, especially in regards to workplace inequalities and the influence of policy along the lines of race and citizenship status. The structure of the Farm Bill is a tool of the neoliberal food regime, allowing corporations to reap the benefits of an overworked and underpaid workforce both on and off the farm and into big box stores, warehouses, and food service industries from restaurants to prisons, schools, and consumers. The Farm Bill rewards corporations, redirects state funds, encourages the growth and subsidization of cheap, less nutritious food, harms the environment, and promotes the production and distribution of unhealthy processed foods.

The Haas Institute (2016) found that only four corporations control 53% of U.S. grocery retail, while roughly 500 companies control 70% of food choice globally (Ayazi & Elsheikh, 2016). Meanwhile, political parties have become a vehicle for corporations to extend their own political agendas and ambitions (Crouch, 2011). The corporatization of the food system is also a vehicle for further structural violence, manipulating democracy and placing profit over people, as seen with corporate welfare, whereby the government provides special treatment for corporations through the transfer of subsidies, tax loopholes, grants, and tax breaks (Kristoff, 2007). Corporate welfare is a key component of the Farm Bill, which rewards competitiveness, individualism and profit.
Large retailers like Walmart receive special treatment from the government, while their workers do not receive a living wage. This forces many to use SNAP, most likely at the retailer in which they work. This dynamic funnels profits back to corporations, first by government funds and second via their own workers. Corporate welfare allows large amounts of wealth, once set aside for social services, to be redirected to the private sector, taking money from the vulnerable populations that need it most and reinforcing economic inequality. Another component of corporate welfare is to ensure policies that work for corporate interests, that provide more subsidies or government payouts, rather than improving the quality or variety of food created. Ayazi and Elsheikh (2016) explain that corporate entities lobby campaign donations and other efforts to push for specific language and policies that advance their respective interests, as in the Farm Bill.

Between 2016-2018, increased corporatization in the food system peaked when the six largest agriculture companies began to buy out their competition. ChemChina bought Syngenta for 43 million dollars; Dow merged with DuPont, a 130 billion dollar merger, and Bayer bought Monsanto for 63 billion dollars. Vidal (2016) states that these three megacorporations now control 60% of the world’s seeds and 70% of the chemicals needed to grow food. With the current seeds, chemicals, research, and lobbying power in the hands of a few immensely powerful corporations, governments struggle to maintain control and regulation over key resources, a massive consolidation of power that determines who gets seeds to grow food to eat, and who doesn’t.

The financial and food crisis of 2008 revealed that an increasing number of people in advanced capitalist nations simply cannot afford to buy or have access to healthy food (Shawki, 2012, p. 424). Shawki writes that the U.S. Food Sovereignty Alliance (USFSA) emerged out of
this context of crises, inequity, and insecurity to mobilize and educate U.S. and international activists on the food crisis and collaborate on sustainable and equitable responses. Different groups aligned to address issues such as increasing food prices, global hunger, unequal food distribution and food insecurity. The USFSA (2017) brings together myriad food justice, anti-hunger, labor, environmental, faith-based, and food producer groups, all of whom work to uphold access to food as a basic human right.

The USFSA identifies neoliberal policies as “sustained by human rights abuses and increased violence” (Desmarais 2002, p. 99), and works to address how and why the neoliberal food regime and U.S. agricultural policies remain inequitable and perpetuate, reinforce, and normalize structural violence in the food system. The coalitions that make up the USFSA work to ensure food justice on a local, national and global scale, part of historical and anticolonial struggles that came before them. Everyday forms of Latinx resistance by members of the USFSA draw from strategies of resistance used by the UFW, Young Lords, and Cosecha. An awareness that can spread empowerment, leading to everyday actions that emphasize the power, solidarity, and ingenuity of the Latinx community. Practices that reaffirm racialized communities’ survival, and in that act also their strength, resilience and existence. Efforts that challenge the normalization of structural violence and expose why people of color suffer disproportionately from labor abuses, resource inequities, diet-related diseases and environmental degradation.

This chapter demonstrates the power of resistance practices to locate structural violence in the food system, moreover its legacy that directly affects human lives today, not only those of immigrants, migrant laborers, and poor or low-income people of color, but all who live in the United States. Labor conditions in the food system have been produced socially through public policy, funds, and discursive practices of racism, most recently intensified by the neoliberal
agenda and its latest crisis. Allen (2016) explains that the conditions of labor today cannot be separated from those of the past; they are built upon and inherit the practices and benefits of slavery, indentured servitude, and exploitation. At the local level, austerity perpetuates and conceals the legacy and amplification of structural violence in the food system. Despite these escalating inequities, low-income Latinx communities and their advocates endure food system inequities after the 2008 financial crisis.
Chapter 4: Food System Inequities in the New York State Capital Region

In the New York State Capital Region, many in low-income and racialized communities struggle with food system inequities. As stated, these inequities include a lack of food access, food insecurity, high food prices, incomplete and inconsistent private and state-run food programming, low wages, diet-related disease, and environmental contamination. With firsthand accounts of community members, teachers, parents, children, SNAP recipients, and state and nonprofit workers, I clarify and illustrate the inequitable experiences of those in the local food system. I demonstrate the way that, in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis and its imposition of austerity measures, government and private food programming, albeit still helpful for some, is for the most part constrained. These constraints intensify inequities, with further ramifications for those already struggling. This chapter emphasizes the way government and private food programming is inhibited under austerity when it is needed most, but also how those within and a part of low-income Latinx communities, endure food system inequities.

The choices for people-as-consumers, such as what one eats, are highly constrained by economic and political forces far removed from their everyday lives (Guthman, 2011). In the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, Shrecker and Bambra (2015) find that austerity budgets have had a significant impact on workers, and I find that New York State’s residents are no exception. Thomas DiNapoli (2018), the New York State Comptroller, reports that jobs have been lost in all industries throughout the state. While ALICE (2018) states that job opportunities have not yet returned to 2007 levels and continue to lag significantly in Upstate New York, where 3.2 million households (some 45% of the population) lack sufficient resources to pay for basic needs. This insufficiency can become a treacherous cycle for the health of individuals and families, especially when the safety net of government programs catches some, but not all.
Government Food Programming: Constraints Under Austerity

The USDA’s goals for food programming include increasing food security and reducing hunger by improving access to food, a healthful diet, and nutrition education for low-income Americans (USDA, 2013). The largest government food assistance programming includes the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). Others include child nutrition programs such as the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program, in addition to a host of smaller programs like the Special Milk Program and Office of Head Start, in addition to nutrition programs for seniors and alternative venues such as larger mass food distribution programs and coupons for farmers’ markets.

However, despite the widespread and varying foci of government programs, many households still struggle with food system inequities. These programs, though helpful for some, do not provide enough assistance, only partially addressing food system inequities. This failing of government, nonprofit and charitable food programming stems from the motivations and goals of government food programming, which critics argue are aimed not at solving or ending food system inequities, but mediating and managing resources for those who are struggling. Food security and the lack of access are not the roots of food system inequities; rather, they represent two of the many consequences of larger food system inequities and the neoliberal agenda over the last five decades. Though government food programming does improve the lives of some individuals that qualify, it attempts to adapt to, but does not address, increased corporatization, lack of funding and support for social services or economic inequality, and stagnant wages. This partiality leaves poor and low-income communities in a perpetual state of dependence on inconsistent and incomplete resources.
Residents in low-income Latinx communities highlight these shortcomings in SNAP and School Breakfast and Lunch Programs (NSLP). Faults and inequities identified include poor or low-quality food, excessive restrictions, documentation and eligibility requirements such as language and literacy barriers, timing challenges, and a lack of daycare and/or transportation. Additional constraints include a lack of skilled and empathetic state workers. Many times, if an application can’t be completed, is late, or a family doesn’t qualify, state workers are instructed to move on, end their case, or pass on a list of food pantries in the areas. Community members explain that even if one manages to finish the application process and qualify, the benefits received are not enough or cannot be used towards healthy fresh food because the recipient lives in a food desert.

This process leaves those in need feeling undignified and frustrated. These feelings emerge in the testimonies of Richard, a SNAP recipient, and Zorraida, a state health worker and counselor. Richard explained that he lost his job in 2009 and because of this had to apply for social services for the first time. He said:

I looked for jobs, not a place I wouldn’t go. But I was 50, you feel that from people. I got discouraged, no one wanted me, I was depressed. I applied for SNAP but when I finally got it, it was $44 dollars every 2 weeks, for a grown man, that’s not enough. I had to move in with my sister, they were barely keeping themselves right. It was a low time in my life, I felt like I had no purpose.

His experience highlights the shame that comes with the loss of a job, and the mental health issues many face when forced to deal with these confusing systematic and unempathetic bureaucracies on a frequent basis. Richard also shares the frustration and difficulty of navigating the eligibility and application process; moreover, even after a long enrollment struggle, the SNAP benefits are not enough to give him access to sufficient and healthy food.
Zorraida explains that as a health worker, she knows that the amount of healthy food a family can afford with SNAP does not go very far. Though it can make a difference in some cases, many in need tell her that it is not worth the trouble to apply. This is especially true, she continues, for those in the Latinx community living in multigenerational households. She states:

It’s common to think Latinos don’t get food stamps because of the language barrier, and yes, that’s true for some, but what I see as the biggest problem is the lack of empathy. Many state workers seem to not be invested in what they are doing, to go that extra mile to help someone. People go and try to apply, but many are denied because of something trivial. A lost document, misspelled name, missing information, or lack of additional documentation and too embarrassed or discouraged to go back. They get frustrated. It is hard to take off work or have someone watch or feed your family and go back two, three, four times, sometimes taking a half day; no one can do that! Sure, they have ‘access’ [signaling quotation marks with her fingers], but at the same time, [they] do not.

Zorraida highlights the need for increased benefits and points to a dangerous narrative put out by state agencies: that gaining access is easy, and everyone who is in need has a chance. Yet the USDA estimates that only 83% of eligible individuals participate in the program (Dean, 2017; Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (2017), leaving 17% without – and many more, like the millions of people undocumented – ineligible in the first place.

Another underused program is WIC, which is in a 10-year decline and currently reaching only 56% of eligible participants. This decline was discussed at the 2019 Food Summit, attributed to difficulties with the application process, a lack of empathy, transportation and timing of appointments, overall “hassle,” paper checks themselves, or when cards don’t scan. Similarly, the New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (2014) found that “three-quarters of students eligible for a free lunch participated and 57% of those eligible for a reduced-price lunch participated. The gaps in participation for those with few other resources suggest that these children face food insecurity at various times throughout the year.” Many services are not being used where they are most needed. Only 32% of school lunch recipients
also use school breakfast programs, and only 30% of lunch recipients take part in summer food programming (Food Summit, 2019). Zedlewski and Martinez-Schiferl (2010) explain that confusion about complex restrictions or concerns about immigration consequences may be driving eligible individuals to not enroll. In one study, 24.2% of Latinx families receiving food assistance through Feeding America reported that they did not apply for SNAP benefits due to concerns about ineligibility due to citizenship status. Groups who participate at lower rates include people with disabilities, low-income seniors, pregnant women, infants, and toddlers.

Zorraida continues: “The Latinx culture is a proud culture, and when one feels disrespected or undignified, they are unlikely to repeat that experience, leading to an increase in food insecurity.” Feeding America (2016) supports Zorraida’s experiences, finding that Latinx families are less likely than others to get help from SNAP. In addition, Latinx households that use emergency food assistance tend to have more members than other racial and ethnic groups, a factor that places additional pressure on food budgets. Moreover, Latinx families are also more likely to include undocumented individuals who may be ineligible for SNAP. Their lower participation also may reflect confusion about rules resulting in less awareness or trust in the program. A survey conducted by Children’s Health Watch (Garcia, 2011) found that more than one-fifth of SNAP eligible families reported barriers in applying for SNAP, such as a lack of information about the program and immigration concerns.

Both Richard and Zorraida also stressed the importance of empathy, a quality they believe few people value today but which is key to helping others. This lack of emotion and care directly correlates to the way in which one person responds to another, especially in times of crisis or need. The constant rotation of service providers and lack of training can be detrimental to those seeking services. Many times, they need assistance, explanation, translation, help filling
out or meeting the requirements of SNAP application protocols. However, when many state and
city employees are under-validated, underappreciated, and underpaid, a high turnover rate can
occur. This means new people, who many times are less skilled and less invested in their work,
are filling these positions, making it more difficult, awkward, and confusing for those who need
their help to gain access to services. Brown (2015) argues neoliberalism holds a deeply
disseminated governing rationality that transforms every human domain, endeavor and human
beings themselves into the economic realm. Neoliberalism contributes to a reconfiguring of
human beings as market actors as homo economicus, financialized human capital expected to
transform themselves in ways that maximize their capital value in the present and enhance their
future value. In this both individuals and the state become projects of management, rather than
rule, as economic ends replacing political ones, submitting to the project of economic growth and
accumulation.

Richard noticed this lack of connection between some workers and potential recipients of
SNAP. He reported that in order to help others, he interprets for his Spanish-speaking friends;
however, it can be difficult, as some state workers do not follow through or give conflicting
information. He found:

There are not enough Latinos here in social services. I speak English, they speak English, and
I still don’t understand this process! I can tell you now if I didn’t speak English I wouldn’t
have benefits.

Richard observed that many state workers are white and seem “better off than those coming to
them for help,” making it difficult to relate, leading to a disassociation with their work and the
applicants themselves. This lack of empathy and training among state food programming
workers contributes to the confusion of the application process and the stigma associated with
assistance.
The Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed Project, “ALICE” (2016), finds that 44% of New Yorkers are struggling to make ends meet, while 15% are in poverty as defined by the FPL and 29% are “ALICE” households. The term refers to households that make “too much” to qualify for benefits, yet are still in poverty, struggling to fulfill basic needs. ALICE represents a growing population that is often ignored in lieu of more traditional measurements of poverty. Frank Lazarski (2015), of the United Way says “people that are one paycheck away from poverty, the distinction is important.” Oftentimes, working people are not synonymous with poverty but today you can be employed and be in poverty.

Another constraint of food programming under austerity, one that puts our society at risk of health problems and diet related disease through the increased consumption of low-quality, mass-produced, and subsidized food. This type of food is most commonly served through the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), not from the government but from large corporations such as Sodexo, Aramark, and Compass Group, who cater to large institutions like schools, prisons, and detention centers. Ziperstein (2012) explains that the school lunch sector is highly concentrated and dominated by these three corporations, with a combined annual revenue of $43 billion in 2009 and $64 billion in 2019 (Mazareanu, 2019; Brown, Shepard, Martin, T., & Orwat, 2007). This concentration of power has led to concerns about possible overcharges and rebates to food vendors that were not given back to schools, which would be a violation of federal law. Ziperstein (2012, p.3) explains Sodexo violated the law when it agreed to a $20 million settlement for failing to pass on rebates to several school districts in New York, revealing questionable practices and corruption which dominates school lunch contracts.

Another constraint of the NSLP is that the food provided operates on surpluses from agricultural subsidies, usually from large agribusinesses that receive tax breaks from the
government, while putting smaller local farms out of business. These agribusinesses place profit before people, pumping school lunches full of less expensive, less nutritionally dense food, and making it easier for contractors like Sodexo to serve unhealthy meals at a low cost. School meals are reduced or free for students in need; however, the selection and quality of food is lacking (Ralston, 2010; Strauss, 2019). Much of it is over-processed and/or not culturally appropriate, leaving students vulnerable to the only other option of the high fat, high sugar, prepackaged junk food and fast food common in low-income areas.

Between 2007 and 2012 in Albany county, there was a 12.7% increase in the prevalence of fast food restaurants. The increase in Saratoga county was even more remarkable, at 16.25% (USDA 2012; Rissew, 2016). Meanwhile, Morrison (2010) reports that the safety standards of the Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS), a part of the USDA that buys meat for school lunches, were lower than the standards of the average fast food restaurant in the country. It found instances where the AMS bought ground beef that retailers and fast-food chains rejected because of a high amount of indicator bacteria, which indicates an increased probability that the meat contains insidious pathogens (Eisler, et al 2011). The report also revealed that the NSLP purchases chicken for schools that KFC and the Campbell’s Soup Company would not use. The chicken bought by the USDA would have gone to compost or pet food if it were not being eaten by schoolchildren (Morisson, 2010, Ziperstein, 2012).

Charlie, a state employee with Migrant Services, attends breakfast and lunchroom meals with students. He commented, “the food is not food,” shaking his head with critical disapproval.

For breakfast they have sugary cereal, milk, and a banana if they’re lucky. For lunch they receive disgusting globs of meat with cream sauce, whatever the hell that is, or greasy tacos, pizza, burgers, tater tots or fries. There are no fresh veggies. They are all canned, processed with a horrible texture and color. So, sure they have ‘access’ to limited vegetables and fruit but because of how it’s presented and processed, little to no one eats it, and I don’t blame them!
According to Charlie’s account, school meals put “food” in students’ stomachs, but not fresh or culturally appropriate food. He continued that many students refuse to eat school meals because “it’s gross,” but as a service worker, it’s his job to encourage them to eat.

This exposure to government food programming, low-quality, Americanized, mass-produced food, has a significant impact on students’ diets and family life. Charlie’s clients consist of Burmese, Caribbean, and Latinx families, the parents of whom carry food traditions from their places of origin, emphasizing fresh fruits, vegetables, spices, and lean meats. But the children, he explains, grow up eating in schools and increasingly choose to eat unhealthy foods, habits they then take home. This process is called acculturation, whereby “members of one cultural group adopt the beliefs and behaviors of another group” (Abraido-Lanza, et al., 2006).

Acculturation has a major impact on the health status of Latinx low-income individuals and families. Neuhouser (et al., 2004) found that less acculturated Latinxs ate more fruits and vegetables and less fat than highly acculturated Latinxs and non-Latinxs. Perez-Escamilla (2010) finds that acculturation to U.S. food and eating habits may increase health disparities among Latinxs. The process of acculturation is likely to lead today’s immigrant youth to adopt less healthy diets that put them at higher risk of being overweight (CDC 2015). Higher levels of acculturation have been associated with an increased risk of obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease (Amaro & de la Torre, 2001). Charlie explains:

I see kids getting fatter. I see Burmese and Mexican kids getting bellies after a few years here. Obesity increases when you eat that shit day after day, whether at school or a fast food stop on the corner. A lot of kids say they hate school food, or many know fast food isn’t “healthy” food, but at that age, when there is little food at home, who isn’t going to eat the mystery meat in cheese sauce or the pizza and fries?

Food traditions or habits usually pass from parent to child, but Charlie finds that the opposite occurs: children pass poor eating habits to their parents, creating an unhealthy cycle.
Another concern with government food programs in schools is the piecemeal and inconsistent nature of funding. The staff at Sheridan Preparatory Academy, or “Sheridan Prep,” spoke fondly of various past food programs to improve food access and nutrition. The most discussed, “Healthy Snacks in the Classroom,” was a favorite, but short-lived. Tina, a faculty member, explained:

Food was delivered for a class snack, like a kiwi or papaya. Every day kids were introduced to a fruit or veggie. Everyone talks about this program with fondness, but it wasn’t perfect. I mean, will eating a kiwi three times have an impact on their life later? I can say yeah, they liked eating the kiwi, but there are two things working against them in our neighborhood. One, where do you find a kiwi, and two, if you do it’s likely old or too costly. So yeah, if all stars aligned, they might choose a kiwi.

Offering good food to students in this way is a short-term, unsustainable solution, It does not change the conditions of exploitation and oppression.

Another staff member, Abby, stated that their school and community has always been in a food desert and struggled with access to food, and the 2008 crisis only intensified it. She continued that if a family faces unemployment, the money set aside for food may be one of the first things to be sacrificed to pay for rent and other costs, or for schools to cover. Many families find it difficult to address food system inequities such as food insecurity because they cannot gain access to consistent healthy and culturally appropriate food options. They only have access to convenience store options or fast food, which are easily available and cheap, but less healthy.

Out of the 62 counties in New York State, 32 counties are identified as containing food deserts (Seserman & Whalen 2011). Around 656,000 New Yorkers are currently living in areas that are considered food deserts, about 86% of them urban areas (Rissew, 2016). The Times Union (2014) reported that according to the USDA, which tracks food deserts, there were 21,109 households in the Capital Region located in a food desert as of 2013. These are clustered in the cities of Albany, Rensselaer, Schenectady and Troy. Many Albany neighborhood stores sell
some vegetables like potatoes and onions, which have longer shelf lives, but more nutritious ones like broccoli, tomatoes and spinach are much harder to find.

Moreover, Feeding America (2016) explains that many low-income households lack the time or the means to prepare healthy food, a challenge furthered by stress, high prices, and other pressures contributing to poor health. Children who are food insecure have an increased risk of asthma, cognitive impairment, and behavioral problems; they are more likely to suffer from depression, twice as likely to repeat a grade, and three times as likely to be suspended from school as children who are food secure (Alaimo et al., 2001). Children also showed learning disabilities, developmental disorders, low bone density, obesity, and diabetes (FRAC, 2016, p. 3). Meanwhile, food insecure adults have an increased risk of depression or anxiety (Seligman et al., 2010; Whitaker et al., 2006). Adults have more than twice the risk of diabetes (Seligman et al., 2007) and Feeding America (2016) finds that they have increased rates of cancer, asthma, heart disease, stroke, osteoporosis, and depression.

Consistently poor diet can create chronic illnesses or can worsen existing issues or result in an inability to work and thus increased healthcare costs, which further restrict the household food budget (Feeding America, 2016). Fresh and unprocessed foods are not only the healthiest foods to eat, linked to improved immune function and other health benefits (Chandra, 1993), but also the first to be omitted when food security is threatened, the least available in inner cities, and the least profitable to retailers. Eisenhaur (2011) continues that food is critical in promoting health, and in cities food choice is often severely constrained. The racial, ethnic, and economic segregation of urban areas has resulted in increasingly racialized repositories of poor populations in the U.S. (Eisenhaur, 2011). With time, as stores moved outside of cities and social service
programs became more restrictive and less supportive, people’s food security and health are compromised.

FRAC (2016) finds that, depending on family history, environmental conditions, and age, this lack of access to food can harm health, learning, productivity, and drive up health and other costs for families, families’ employers, and government agencies. Melissa Boteach, of the Poverty and Prosperity Program at the Center for American Progress (2014), explains: “obesity and hunger are two sides of the same coin. People make trade-offs between food that’s filling but not nutritious.” The extra pounds that result from poor diet are collateral damage, an unintended side effect of hunger itself (McMillan, 2018) and detrimental to one’s health, especially when repeated over time.

At Sheridan Prep, staff members are fully aware that their community is challenged with food system inequities from a lack of food access, diet-related disease and food insecurity. The principle of Sheridan Prep, Zuleika Sanchez-Gayle, explains that students bring in junk food to eat for their meals because that is what’s cheap, available, and easy to grab and put in their mouths. She continues:

When students bring in a jug of Mountain Dew or Kool-Aid, Takis, chips, or Honey Buns for breakfast, you know their sugar level is high and you see the ups, downs, and crashes in the classroom. And if they do bring a lunch, it’s more snacks. Hot fries are a big commodity, Oodles [of] Noodles, too. You know when they are 10 for $10 at Hannaford because all the kids got them. It has an immediate impact on their attitude, attention, and learning process, even how they work with and respond to other students. What they eat is directly reflected in their actions and learning ability. Teachers talk. We all know from personal experience how even more difficult it becomes to handle certain students when you see them walking down the hall in the morning with junk food. Its sets not only students up for a challenging day of learning but teachers as well.

Sanchez shares firsthand accounts of the direct and negative effects of food system inequities on her students. She emphasizes not only the immediate ramifications on their behavior and attitudes, but also the consequences on their learning and their health.
Buying inexpensive, unhealthy, and often expired food is the most commonly reported coping strategy for food-insecure families (Feeding America, 2014). Eating foods that are higher in fat, sodium, and sugar, or no longer fresh, can contribute to health risks and poor nutrition. Tina explains that she sees not only the behavioral and learning issues that arise with poor diet, but also the physical impact. Sheridan Prep partners with a healthcare provider, Whitney Young, to provide a mobile health unit at the school. Tina shared: “I go to doctors’ appointments and see the damage sugar and fat has on kids’ teeth! Our students may look healthy, but don’t know the damaging effects of poor food choices.” Poverty, food prices and food insecurity are linked, as seen in the firsthand accounts of community members and educators.

Food system inequities cannot be fixed by merely telling people to eat their fruits and vegetables, because at its heart this is a problem about wages and poverty (McMillan, 2018). It is not just about bringing food to people, giving out extra money, or educating the poor about how or what to eat. Solutions must include systemic sociocultural, political, and economic factors. Government programs provide services to alleviate hunger, but in their current form, they will never end it. Meanwhile, private businesses and nonprofits are contracted to provide further assistance, or create alternatives or taskforces to “manage” poor populations. Dan, a state worker, describes this epidemic shift towards privatization as “death by taskforce, an inefficient, lopsided approach. A sticking the finger in the dike routine.” This is the process governance takes when in crisis, following the neoliberal agenda. The private sector is immediately consulted to solve fiscal problems, giving money to corporations for staffing and technocratic taskforces and diverting funds away from the people who need them most.

The process of privatization, the selling of state-owned goods and services to private investors, is justified under austerity by the imperative to “balance the budget.” However, the
idea that private services are more capable than those run by the state or that these services will actually help to reduce state-incurred financial debt is largely false. The insertion of private interests into the provision of public goods and services hurts poor individuals and families and people of color. Programs that serve these population are the first targets of privatization efforts, as they affect only those who have little to no political power. Many social services contracts have financial incentives that can even perpetuate cycles of poverty and divert money from critical programs toward corporate profits (*In the Public Interest*, 2016, p.3). This is evident in the current school, prison, and healthcare systems, which are marked by human, worker, and environmental abuses, low wages, corruption, a lack of transparency, and worsening inequities.

This shift in privatization, government outsourcing, and retrenchment of neoliberalism in food programming has led to the creation of new markets for capitalism to expand through new technologies to collect data, specialty grocery stores, private sector jobs, new food-based products, locations, and tools, among others. Post 2008 the use of and investment in privatized technology services, data collection tools on the poor has increased (Eubanks 2018). Multiple State departments frequently share welfare recipient’s names, social security numbers, birthdays and other information with the department of defense, state government, federal employees, civil and criminal courts and the department of justice. These methods are rationalized by a call for efficiency, *doing more with less*, and getting help to those who really need it. But the uptake of these tools is occurring at a time when programs that serve the poor are as unpopular as they have ever been. This is not a coincidence. Technologies and poverty management are not neutral. They are shaped by our nations fear of economic insecurity and hatred of the poor they in turn shape the politics and experience of poverty (Eubanks, 2018, p. 9).

The increasing shift and reliance on privatized responses to inequality, in many cases only furthers it.
Guthman (2011) and Nestle (1998, 2002) state that it is not just government but also private nonprofit and charitable food organizations who are criticized for managing poor populations rather than solving food insecurity. Those left out or not receiving enough government aid are forced to make difficult choices, take costly risks or make hard trade-offs. Feeding America (2014) finds that after exhausting state programming, buying inexpensive, unhealthy food is the most commonly reported coping strategy for food-insecure families. The second is relying on charitable and nonprofit food assistance.

**Nonprofit and Charitable Food Programming: Constraints Under Austerity**

The culture of contemporary charitable or nonprofit work today has historical roots in the 1980s under President Reagan, who cast volunteer work as a citizen’s patriotic duty. As Poppendieck (1998) explains, Reagan’s framing of philanthropy-as-patriotism gave fiscal conservatives, who were in the process of instituting drastic cuts to social services, the opportunity to appear caring. Volunteerism allowed conservatives to act concerned, helpful, and to feel and look good, all while upholding the neoliberal agenda by voting for detrimental policies that target low-income and racialized communities. Poppendieck (1998) finds that the use of volunteer labor, time, and energy has contributed to the increase in food-oriented anti-poverty responses through food banks, pantries and soup kitchens. The National Center for Charitable Statistics (2016) counted more than 1.5 million nonprofit organizations registered in the U.S., and identified 25.3% of Americans over the age of 16 who have volunteered for a nonprofit. Nonprofit and charitable work, most commonly done by volunteers, seeks to improve the common good of society through educational, scientific, or religious means.
As of 2019, New York State had 200 registered food pantries and 10 regional food banks, both numbers that continue to rise (Eagan, 2019). Meanwhile food insecurity rates remain high, suggesting that many New York residents still cannot meet food needs and employ more than one strategy to avoid hunger (FRAC, 2016). Feeding America (2014), a nonprofit and nationwide network of more than 200 food banks and third largest U.S. charity, reports that nationally, the number of clients served by their food programs increased by 25% from 2010 to 2014. The Food Pantries of the Capital District (FPCD), a coalition of more than 60 food pantries in New York’s Capital Region, also cited an increase in the use of their pantries over the last decade.

Though helpful for some in the short term, the increasing reliance on private nonprofit and charitable responses conceals the state’s retreat from its responsibility to provide social services (Guthman, 2011; Riches, 2011). Government programs and services are a critical component to food access as they are mandated to receive guaranteed funds and resources structured by law. Meanwhile, charitable or nonprofit services are not overseen by state institutions: their terms are subject to change; their supplies depend on donations; and they may be unavailable at any time. Another drawback of nonprofit and charitable responses is that in some cases they relieve state or unionized workers of well-paid and secure jobs, replacing them with part-time, insecure and low paid work in the private sector. These actions entrench neoliberal logic, preserve capitalism, and individualize poverty, rather than state responsiveness to social needs.

The emergence of the private charitable sector to fill the void left by the neoliberal state has given rise to the “nonprofit industrial complex,” marked by depoliticized and neoliberalized social action rather than solidarity (Lambie-Mumford, 2016; Riches, 2011). The complex is a
system of relationships between the federal government, state or local governments, wealthy elites, foundations, and non-profit social service organizations. Lambi-Mumford (2016) writes that since the early 2000s, these relationships have come to define a new wave of nonprofit and charitable responses, characterized by professionalization and business models. Under conditions set by austerity after the 2008 financial crisis, nonprofits and charities make financial management decisions to cope with the ever-tightening government budget and increased demand for nonprofit services. This has manifested in increased competition between organizations and the consolidation or merging of organization and services, as well as an expansion of the types of services offered by each organization (not always accompanied by additional staff or training) and inconsistent programming, disorganization, lower quality provisions, less skilled and/or lower paid workers, and an increase in volunteer labor. These are all coping mechanisms that place the running of the organization above the people it seeks to serve. This places social justice on the backburner, if ever a consideration.

Nonprofits are operating under increased financial pressure and higher expectation of accountability to funders, meeting benchmarks and improved performance (Smith, 2010), often sacrificing the quality of the work done or how it is done to satisfy goals. In the wake of the 2008 crisis, nonprofit and charitable organizations focus on immediate short-term needs and organize popular volunteer activities aimed at attract participants, like gardening, cooking, harvesting, or preparing food rather than the long-term arduous and frustrating work of policy or systems change (Guthman, 2007). This tension between resources and expectations challenges nonprofits in performing their desired social functions in the community. Leah Penniman, co-director of Soul Fire Farm, stated, “nonprofit funding lines are unpredictable and many times don’t address the core of what we do” (Penniman, 2018). Often, the funding that is available has certain strings
or expectations attached that need to be met. This can influence or derail the core goals of many organizations, placing money over mission, risking reforming or refocusing what they do to fit the stipulations of the grant (INCITE, 2007).

In my interviews at Food Pantries of the Capital District locations, FOCUS Churches, and the Capital District City Mission, volunteers and workers shared in the sentiment of too many people in need and not enough resources. St. Vincent’s pantry noted a significant rise in visitors between 2007 and 2017. The director recalled, “The total number of clients in 2007 was 5,835 and increased to 22,121 people in 2017” (Warner, 2017). In the first five months of 2019, St. Vincent’s served over 560 households, or 24,100 people, already surpassing their numbers for previous years. The food pantry CoNSERNS-U, a nonprofit that makes up part of Catholic Charities, also noted an increase in clients. The director stated that her numbers had tripled since 2008, and the services they provide have also diversified.

After the 2008 financial crisis, CoNSERNS-U has also been pressured financially, forced to seek more donations to meet the demand. However, as the director explained, some people who used to donate food became food pantry clients themselves, while both regular donors and the state have been pulling back their resources. She continued: “10 years ago I used to get $16,000 in grants. Last year it was $3,000. We see increasing demands and varying needs, but with less funds, it’s difficult to do anything.” Similar trends of increasing demand and need for diversification of programs can be seen at other Catholic Charities locations, such as Emmanuel Baptist. They display a broadening of services including food, housing, job training, childcare, furniture, and clothing services, among others.

Lorraine, the food pantry manager at Emmanuel Baptist, noted that between 2008 and 2012, they had an increase of 35 families, and their numbers have been increasing again.
beginning in 2015. This increase has encouraged their decision to partner, merge, with the Food Pantries of the Capital District in order to meet demand. Lorraine continued:

It’s difficult to stay open and provide services. A lot of grants and other funding lines have decreased in last 10 years, making us reliant on personal donations or donations from local businesses. Since the crisis, funding has been tight or nonexistent. It’s one thing to try to find and apply for funding, but once they say yes, the hoops you have to jump through - they want your firstborn! We hope partnering with FPCD will get us funding. Even if sharing grants is slim money, it’s better than none.

These stories speak to the increase in need and public reliance on charity, but also to the financial pressure and daily struggle experienced by Albany families and their service providers following the 2008 financial crisis.

In recent years, smaller grants have opened but are often competitive, pitting people and organizations against each other. Often, the grantor wants results and numbers from the group that has “best practices” or “countable results and impact” to manage funds. Warfield (2018) explains that this moment – measuring impact - is when the racial divide kicks in. Organizations led by people of color are often less likely to have the mechanisms in place to handle large grants, unlike well-established, white-led, corporatized nonprofits with dedicated grant writers. (Slocum, 2006) Thus, they are not awarded funds, further concentrating money in the hands of a few predominantly white-led organizations.

Ladan Alomar, the director at Centro Cívico, a Latinx-run nonprofit in Montgomery County, commented on the lack of funding and the competitive environment between nonprofits, commenting:

White, corporate-modeled nonprofits have more resources, they don’t need to partner. Meanwhile, that’s why we are still here. It’s like there are two different levels or worlds of nonprofits. The grant applications made available by the government puts us in the same category, against each other, but we don’t even have a grant writer. [It’s] like David and Goliath. I am the director, but I write grants. They may not be perfect, but I pour my heart into it, yet that’s not considered. We are grassroots and led by minorities, while a lot of the white nonprofits hire minority workers to put out front or in photos to take advantage of
minority grants. Then when we try to get those grants which were designed for us, it’s harder.

Another constraint identified in my interviews of clients at nonprofit and charitable food organizations is unpredictability, characterized by the differing standards of operations, with gaps in coverage depending on funding that diminish the ability of people to gain access to services (Wakefield, 2012). Many organizations do not have to meet regulations or standards in quality of products or services that the state is required to meet, and are spread too thin. This can result in programs being cut to keep staff paid, or the opposite, staff is cut and the program is left to survive on its own, where with little support can dwindle. For instance, state-provided services are open Monday through Friday from 9:00 to 4:00, but food pantries may only be open once or twice a week for two or three hours. At St. Vincent’s, St. Anne’s, and the Salvation Army mass distribution center in Albany, volunteers complained that during the winter and early spring it can be difficult to acquire produce at all, let alone any variety of produce, compared to summer choices. This, they said, makes it difficult for them to remain open all year.

At St. Anne’s one July morning, I joined the group waiting on the uneven sidewalk. We waited for over 40 minutes in the sun while heat radiated up from the concrete, the line extending a full city block down the entire length of the building. A pantry volunteer finally emerged from the building handing out neon green tickets. She started at the beginning of the line and made her way down to the end, passing a ticket to each family. I received ticket number 47. A woman waiting next to me explained that a good number was a low number; it allowed you to be the first in line and get the pick of the food of the day. Our numbers, she said, were “just okay.”

As we received the tickets, the volunteers reminded clients that the pantry would be closed next week as too many volunteers were going on vacation and not enough people could be here to open the pantry. Those waiting in line seemed concerned. I spoke with a mother and
daughter with an infant in tow, who informed me that they were recent immigrants from Mexico. They had used the food pantry about five times, they explained, and said that if it was going to be closed next week, they would go to a farmers’ market at the Empire State Plaza and that a family friend could bring extra food over later next week if needed. This speaks to the frequency of the insecurity of the food programming, that those seeking services spend more time and effort to secure back up plans in case their primary source needs to take a vacation.

The lined crawled forward. As the first group went into the building, people rubbed their knees and shifted their weight from one foot to the next. We wiped sweat from our faces as cars drove by, wafting fumes into the air as the drivers gave us all long stares. Finally, our section went into the church. The shade was a relief. We did not need to provide identification, just our names and addresses to the small table in front of the food distribution line. The food to be distributed looked sparse. Empty vegetable boxes were stacked along the wall, making it obvious that the first groups had more choice. As we moved down, we could not select our own food items from the boxes, but had to point to what we wanted and a predetermined number would be given. The whole line had entered and cleared out all the produce within two or three hours.

St. Anne’s Food Pantry, July 2018 (author photographs)
I asked where the produce came from. A volunteer explained it was “cull,” leftover food from farms and grocery stores that was deemed too ugly to sell. I sat and watched the end of line select what was left from the boxes. No one complained or showed anger or surprise at the dearth of choices that remained. As I sat and observed the rest of the distribution process I began talking with an older black woman, Ms. Dorthia. She had a “good number” and received her food in the first group. She explained that she stayed and sat to talk with other clients of the pantry who passed by, saving her energy for the walk home in the heat. She had a matriarchal tone about her as volunteers and community members who passed said their hellos.

She asked me why I was there observing and interviewing. I explained that I was researching food insecurity in the Capital Region and continued with further details until she seemed satisfied. She nodded along, moving in closer, and said loudly, with confidence, “But child, I can tell you all about hunger.” Her head and eyebrow lifted as she leaned in. Her stare seemed willing me to ask her more, so I did. She shared her struggles with gathering food from different places, explaining, “Child, you got to make it work.” She described an integrated network of communication between food insecure individuals about food resources in the community, how she cooks with other women, and shares and prepackages meals to freeze for herself and family. Because of cultural biases, women often are the first to enter the informal sector.

At the same time, the impact of the reduction or elimination of social services falls directly upon the shoulders of women, who are charged with supplying them within the framework of family or community (Fernandez Poncela, 1996, p. 63).

This implies more work, wears women out, and leaves them sad or even ashamed at not being able to meet the needs of their families.
When social services are reduced or eliminated, women, conscious of their roles in their families and the communities, are the ones to protest and attempt collectively to fill the gap. (Fernandez Poncela, 1996; 56) I learned everyday forms of resistance can encompass informal labor inclusive to couponing, networking, child care or elder care, carrying food items to multiple locations, sharing and dividing cooked meals and other food preparation techniques. All in an attempt to buffer themselves from the deterioration of living standards and the reduction or elimination of public services. Despite the constraints of food pantries, Ms. Dorthia’s stories emphasized strategies of adaptation and modification both within the state, using government resources, and outside of it, with pantries and networks of neighbors and friends cultivating alternative strategies to ensure the survival of themselves, their families and communal networks.

It is common for many pantries and nonprofits to receive the surplus food products, the cull, or the “ugly” not-shelf-ready from large food retailers, corporations, or farms. Many pantries and nonprofits celebrate the fact that they are diverting food from landfills and ensuring a more sustainable and environmentally friendly food system. However, it’s the ultimate win-win that big food corporations and retailers love as they continue with business and profit as usual while also gaining social capital in taking part to feed the needy and save the planet at the same time. Food retailers and corporations also avoid the annoying disposal fees of their leftovers into landfills and receive tax deductions for all produce donated to registered charities and nonprofits. Dignified access to fresh, healthy, and culturally appropriate food is a right everyone should enjoy, and although nonprofit and charitable approaches to food system inequities provide short-term relief (at significant logistical cost to beneficiaries), they also undermine this right by feeding people food waste, discarded and unwanted by traditional food retailers and consumers.
Another example of undignified access to food is characterized by the disorganization and inconsistency of requirements for services that vary from pantry to pantry. This is not to say standardization is the answer, but instead pantries should respond to the unique needs of the communities and culture in which they are located. Charlie, a state worker who advocates for food insecure families, struggles himself with the inconsistent requirements of nonprofit and charitable food programs. He said, “many food pantries require a license, address, contact info and name, something. Or if it’s not a documentation restriction, it’s a matter of timing.” He continued that what his clients find most inconvenient are the random hours of operation, changing schedule, or lack of types of food. Charlie said that to feed an Albany family of five who were in great need with a newborn baby he drove 20 minutes to Rensselaer, where a food pantry director he knows personally could give him enough free food and personal care items without the documentation or paperwork.

In speaking with homeless individuals, I found that many lack current, up-to-date licenses or licenses at all. An older white man in his 50s or 60s at Unity House in Troy shared that his “license was simply lost.” He explained, he moves constantly, staying with friends and at shelters, even on the street if the weather is nice. He couldn’t approximate when it was lost, but he suggested that he had been without a license for years and just hasn’t had the time to go back and apply for one. Another woman in her early thirties, standing outside of the First Street Pantry, explained that she “loaned it to a friend to use and never got it back. At the time, I didn’t use it; I don’t drive, so it wasn’t a big deal. And the staff here knows me, they don’t ask for ID. They know who I am and where I live, so I just write my name on the list.” She seemed confident in her connections with the pantry workers but shared she would be hesitant to go to other pantries.
All of the 18 individuals and families I spoke with at eight different food distribution sites mentioned having to share some sort of information or documentation to receive food, from basic first and last names and addresses to a piece of mail or a license. The consensus was that at all locations, whether they did require documentation or not, you had to provide something. This requirement unfortunately excludes many people from even thinking about receiving food from pantries. The inconsistency of what is needed for services complicates the goal of getting food to people in need. I learned from these individual and families that some locations would waive the information requirements as suggestions, explaining it was common to be “just let in” or “waved in.” One man described it feeling “as if to be down on the ‘down low.’”

Similar trends of requirements, inconsistency, and low-quality food were also experienced at the Albany mass distribution that takes place once a month, where food is dropped at the Salvation Army downtown. In speaking to individuals in line on an early weekday morning, many felt it was inconvenient standing outside, in lines for hours, but they commented, “what choice do we have?” One older woman stated, “I don’t have money left [in reference to her SNAP assistance].” It was obvious looking at the line that many were still in their pajamas, standing up sleeping, while others were wearing work uniforms, ready to clock in right after they got their food.

Mass Distribution at Salvation Army, Albany NY, 2018 (author photographs)
I spoke in Spanish with a family of three Latinx women standing in front of me in line, representing three generations. We spoke in Spanish about the mass distribution. I shared that it was my first time there, and they were happy to help me. They showed me which line to stand in, told me what documents I needed to provide, and then looked me up and down in confusion.

“¿Dónde están tus bolsas?,” the daughter asked. The granddaughter, only about seven, echoed in a motherly manner, “You have to have bags to put your food in!” The grandmother murmured quietly in Spanish, too low for me to understand, but out of her night dress pocket, she pulled out extra plastic bags.

“These are not good bags,” her daughter explained. “You need to bring these bags next time,” she said as she pointed to her recycled bags. They are thicker, can hold more food and won't split when you walk away, she explained – even better, I should have a cart. It struck me how helpful and giving everyone was in line. I noticed people giving bags to others if they forgot because they woke up late, and some held spots in line for others, though this was frowned upon and contested by a few others in line already. One gentleman, whom I found out later was a homeless man who volunteered for the position, acted as “security.” He was to make sure everyone stayed in their own line.

I learned that one line was for elderly and disabled people and the other was for able bodied and younger. I asked him, and people in line, who decided on the two lines? The security guard responded, “We did,” opening his arm to the crowd. “It’s the right thing to do. Old people can’t stand out here for hours; they’ll die!” He was a loud talker and immediately apologized to the elderly line, “Sorry y’all, you know what I mean.” Replies of “it’s okay, baby” and “we got you” were shouted out from different sections in the line. As we made our way to the food distribution point I needed to provide my license and sign in with my name.
At the point of food selection, two or three volunteers and a worker with Trinity Alliance helped people to receive food and pack it in their bags. Personally, after participating in three other food distribution lines at other pantries, I felt awkward and guilty for taking food I did not need. I continued nonetheless, as I wanted to see as a young individual how much food, what type, and in what condition I would receive. Many of the boxes and crates as I approached were empty, or what was left was quite damaged or moldy. I heard comments in line between family members about how they “should have come earlier.” The little girl in front of me poked a tomato with her tiny finger and squealed “ewwww,” but the mother picked it up anyway. In my ripped plastic bag, I had one bag of celery, five potatoes, two bananas, an orange, three overripe tomatoes, and four onions. Yes, it was produce, but what I had at the end of this experience didn’t feel worth it and most certainly didn’t make me feel good or excited to cook or eat.

These stories, told by workers, volunteers, and low-income racialized individuals and families struggling with food insecurity reveal that though some nonprofit and charitable food programming locations offer produce, the selection and quality are unreliable and contingent on recipients’ ability to arrive early and wait in long lines at irregularly scheduled dates and times. Supplies are often insufficient, and both supply and quality are dependent on someone else’s surplus, through a collection or food rescue. Furthermore, there is little to no transparency or regulation of the food. Some is past its expiration date, and the majority is canned with lower nutritional inadequacy. Many pantries are limited in size, availability, and types of donations received at different times of year. The food they do acquire is often not is not culturally or diet appropriate. People have different food needs. One’s culture, preferences, the taste, the time of year, the types of food available, their health concerns, allergies, religion and more are considerations not easily accommodated by private charitable responses.
The requirements placed on food-insecure families and individuals, whether assumed or actual, from basic information to licenses, speak to the constraints of nonprofit and charitable food programming. They emphasize the problematic “gifting” of services within charity frameworks, whereby charities or volunteers can give or not give access to food services depending on the day, situation, the person in charge, or the availability of staff. These stories also illuminate the indignity and dehumanization of having to acquire or shop for food, often discarded or low-quality food, on “the down low,” when it is in reality a basic human right. In many locations people lined up for hours in open areas, visible to others and subject to extreme temperatures, waiting for “handouts.” These conditions, easily normalized, can make one feel othered and isolated from the rest of society, and dispossessing them of empowerment. Anderson (2013) explains, it must be understood that as helpful as they are in the short term, food banks, soup kitchens, veggie mobiles, and mass distributions are not socially accepted ways to acquire food for oneself and one’s family in “advanced” nations. They segregate already poor and or racialized groups of the larger community, taking the out of normalized ways to access food such as grocery stores.

Despite the many insufficiencies of both state and private food programming, individuals, groups, and communities experiencing food system inequities endure, persevere, adapt and rework everyday practices to reach for food justice. These firsthand accounts emphasize the socio-cultural and economic ramifications of food system inequities in low-income and racialized communities under austerity. Conditions of austerity weigh on many, but some rethink, reimagine or recreate their lives, to undermine, disrupt and resist food system inequities. Everyday practices of Latinx resistance can include sharing alternative narratives, music, poetry, art, community gardening, community kitchens, and meals, in addition to farmers markets,
CSAs, and training and education programs. The next chapter will identify and examine everyday forms of Latinx resistance to better understand and contextualize responses to food system inequities through self-determination, solidarity and community empowerment.
Chapter 5: Food Justice Through Everyday Latinx Resistance

Cities have been historically the most active centers for implementing neoliberal economic policy, they have also been the most active breeding grounds for alternative visions (Hackworth, 2007). The application of the neoliberal agenda is inconsistent: unjust conditions under austerity are neither absolute not subject to a standard process, but incomplete. This partiality provides avenues to strengthen neoliberalism’s entrenchment, but it also opens weak spots, access points for adaptation, challenge, and resistance. Austerity weighs on many, but some seek to rethink or recreate their lives, to undermine and disrupt unjust conditions. I find that it is within these unjust dynamics that those most affected or assumed to be compliant respond by participating in everyday acts of resistance.

In this chapter I identify and examine everyday acts of Latinx resistance to food system inequities in the Capital Region after the 2008 financial crisis. Through interviews and observations, I assess the nature and context of those acts while interpreting the actors’ intents and the outcomes of particular forms of resistance. Rather than placing them in a hierarchy of comparative efficacy, I seek to identify the varied repertoire of practices in play in order to deepen our understanding of Latinx resistance to austerity. In analyzing resistance, it is critical to understand the way it exists relationally with neoliberalism, not only motivated by it but influenced by its logics. Resistant practices are beyond the binary of supporting neoliberalism or counteracting it; they can encompass both, operating on multiple levels (McClintock, 2014).

Acts of resistance are multivalent, complex, and dynamic practices imbued with their sociocultural, economic, and political contexts and conjunctures.

Everyday resistance refers to the way people question, rethink, adapt to, undermine, or challenge power through actions in their daily lives. They are strategies that Scott (1985)
describes as normalized practices, imperfect tactics that may not be politically or directly articulated, but which people under oppression use both to survive and to undermine authority and current systems. As Vinthagen and Johansson (2001; 2013) explain, everyday resistance is an active and dynamic interaction with opposition to power due to changing contexts and situations. It is a practice, not a fixed consciousness, intent or outcome, and is historically and intersectionally entangled with power.

Resistance strategies that work to promote a more equitable food system under austerity include alternative narratives, music, poetry, art, CSAs, farmers’ markets and community meals, and education and training programs. The examples analyzed here are the most prominent practices of everyday Latinx resistance I observed and participated that promote elements of food justice inclusive to self-determination, solidarity, and community empowerment. They criticize existing solutions, undermining institutionalized and normalized racism. Everyday forms of Latinx resistance also provide a holistic and informed critical perspective, serving as entry points for effective and culturally informed solutions that allow for more sustainable and resilient approaches to addressing food system inequities.

**Alternative Narratives**

Alternative narratives provide differing accounts of events, histories and peoples, alternative accounts to the singular story of domination (Myrsaides, 1993). History is not neutral. It is constructed by those in power, the victors of wars and conquest, distorting reality. Ngozi-Adiche explains that narratives “show a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again and that is what they become” (2009). Dominant narratives silence or marginalize voices that contradict them. So, taking part in alternative narratives allows participants to “inscribe the
local and the subjective into the process of time, liberating the local from the oppressive use of
the past and opening interventions to create the future” (Myrsaides, 1993:101). Alternative
narratives offer opportunities to rethink and reconsider events, history, or peoples while also
becoming a part of the process, even freeing storytellers from past assumptions or “facts” from
single stories written by those in power.

Common dominant narratives about low-income racialized communities include stories
like “they are unmotivated or have a poor work ethic,” “they use too much welfare, or once on
welfare they stay on welfare” and “social mobility is made possible by working hard; we all have
equal opportunities.” Racist and classist stereotypes describe low-income people as less
competent and less human, resulting in objectification and justification for abuse or neglect.
These dominant narratives lead to unjust, biased, and false understandings about racialized low-
income communities. Over the last 100 years, various forms of cultural production, including
song, dance, and the visual arts, have seen the proliferation of tropes of Black people addicted to
fried chicken and watermelon, or of Latinxs as taco, tequila, and nacho cheese fiends. These
narratives make for a Black and Latinx food heritage that is strained, fraught, and part of a biased
public discourse.

Soul Fire Farm (hereafter SFF) and Centro Cívico (hereafter Centro), through the
retelling and collecting of alternative narratives, demonstrate two examples of everyday forms of
Latinx resistance. These practices contradict and complicate dominant narratives, offering more
accurate and transformative understandings of marginalized groups and histories. SFF is a black,
indigenous, and people of color-centered farm committed to ending racism and injustice in the
food system. Located in Grafton, New York, the farm provides trainings, programming, and
events for the community and other activists, farmers, and youth focused on race, culture, power,
land, history, privilege, and food (Moyers-Mendoza, 2019). In 2018 their training programs reached over 11,000 people (SFF newsletter, 2018). I attended an *Uprooting Racism in the Food System* training which was described as “a theory and action training for farming and food justice leaders to uproot systemic racism in our organizations and society.” One of the first activities we participated in was exploring alternative narratives of the U.S. food system history.

The training I attended consisted of a medium-sized group of predominantly nonprofit food workers. After a welcome from the leaders, a spiritual ceremony was held to honor the land in which we were learning. Leah Penniman then explained that the story we’ve been told about farming is inaccurate and incomplete. “When we learn about how to farm as black and brown people,” she said, “we are taking back our power.” Participants were handed small strips of paper listing events and people in history that had to do with contesting or contributing to racism in the U.S. food system. My piece of paper summarized the Chicano movement, César Chávez and the United Farm Worker (UFW) movement of the 1960s. The goal was to talk with others and put the historical events in chronological order.

As a participant in the exercise I felt a part of the retelling of history, activated to share what I knew about my piece. Others, too, went into detail about the papers they had been given. I realized I was not the only one who had heard some of these alternative histories before. Everyone was highly attentive to the information, new or not, and made sure the alternative narrative was in chronological order. Once our group was satisfied with our order of events, we read through the whole narrative together in a circle. By that time, I had casual conversations and knew the names of at least five of the people in the circle. It made the activity personal. I felt integrated and responsible for the part I had to play, reading the piece of “unknown” history I was given. Myrsaides (1993) explains history becomes more accessible in re-narrations, holding
the potential to be recreated in self-reflexivity, actively forming one’s position where resistance takes shape. The activity allowed us to reflect upon our own places in the history we were recreating, reorganizing the learned history in our minds we had relied on for so long.

We took time to discuss the paper pieces with clear examples of racism, resistance and key historical figures. As each person shared, we brought the narrative to life, giving deeper meaning and context to each event, person, or group, actively reproducing a shared social reality. One of the leaders, Amani, made sure we were not just focusing on the oppressive parts of history but also recognizing the strength, hope, challenge and resiliency that people of color brought to changes or responses to the food system. This activity put everyone in attendance literally “on the same page,” as our pieces came together. It also created a linked frame of mind through building another history together, solidifying a foundation from which to begin to address racism in the food system and resist the current single story. The act of redefinition and alternative narration “protects the innovation of multiple small stories or voices, preserving the possibility of a stable community, making it possible to construe resistance as positive, continuous force of social reproduction” (Myrsaides, 1993, p. 102). These stories and words of the food system presented by SFF provide new meaning, defending the mind from hurtful single stories and giving power to those most oppressed through a renewed or deeper understanding.

Leah Penniman, co-founder and director of SFF, wrote the farm’s history in her 2018 book, *Farming While Black*, written by and for “the Soul Fire Family” to share and celebrate their knowledge, history and culture. As Penniman explained at a 2018 book launch,

To farm while black is an act of defiance against white supremacy and a means to honor the agricultural ingenuity of our ancestors. It is the book I needed someone to write for me when I was a teen who incorrectly believed that choosing a life on land would be a betrayal of my ancestors and of my Black community. It’s a reverently compiled manual for African-heritage people ready to reclaim our rightful place of dignified agency in the food system. This book not just my book, it’s our book, our stories, our community’s that begins with the audacious
Penniman asserts that those who cared for the soil of past generations recognized that healthy soil is not only imperative for food security, but also foundational for cultural and emotional well-being. Moreover, these histories, especially of people of color in the food system, need to be told and retold as current histories of food, food systems, and land exclude their voices.

Storytelling is a universal human experience through which we learn and maintain culture and community, bridging collective realities with individual experiences. For Bell (2010), stories are analytic tools with which we can unpack and dismantle racism, reinscribing social forms and counterhegemonic ways of thinking, enabling a critical consciousness and alternative visions for human relations and societal structures. The practice of storytelling can also be seen at Centro Cívico, a nonprofit in Amsterdam New York found in 1986. Their mission is to educate the community and act as a vehicle for self-sufficiency and growth. Centro uses a five-pronged approach, focusing on education, healthcare, housing, economic development, and cultural preservation. The city of Amsterdam struggles with transportation issues and food apartheid communities. Ladan Alomar, the director of Centro Cívico, explained food is always a part of their various programs.

If you don’t have a safe home, food on the table, you can’t go on to the next step and the cycle of poverty continues. Food helps to protect and preserve culture and it is a non-threatening way to open the door to others. Food is an important part of education and economic development (Alomar, 2017).

Ladan continued that many of the people within their community are immigrants; food is not only a basic necessity for them, but a comforting reminder of their homes and family and a stabilizing or normalizing factor during drastic changes or stress.
Ladan herself is an immigrant from Iran and shared that she struggled to find her place when she arrived in the U.S. in the 1980s. She explained that as a young Iranian woman, though not of Latinx decent, when she arrived in the U.S., of all racial and ethnic groups, she has felt most welcomed by the Latinx community. She recalled:

In a time when I was scared, with ‘Nuke Iran’ posters on pillars where I attended school, I felt safe among them [the Latinx community]. They never blinked an eye when they find out where I am from.

She said the closeness of family ties, the welcoming spirit, and food, especially rice dishes, were a part of her decision in establishing her career and life within the Latinx community.

Ladan continued, her experience allows her to better understand the variety of people that Centro supports. Like her, many have traveled to the U.S., seeking a new or better life and works to make it their home. Ladan also has used state services and worked for the state in health care and now experienced in multiple levels of community justice and nonprofit work. A lot of work has been done for poor, low-income and racialized groups, but there is still a lot to do. She said:

As a citizen, when I say the pledge of allegiance and we say ‘liberty and justice for all’ in the beginning, I assumed that it is for all, but then I learned, no, it is our job to bring liberty and justice for all. It’s a vision, something we have to strive for every day. Our country is not a perfect place, but here we still have a chance to make a difference and mold our country to be what we need it to be.

Ladan knows that Centro’s work – justice for all – is a constant and ever-changing process, especially as Centro Cívico is celebrating their 30th year anniversary working in the community. To commemorate their anniversary, they are conducting an interview project whereby community members affiliated with Centro can share their stories and relationships with the organization. They hope to document their organizational history, but also Latinx history in the Capital Region, celebrating how far they have come over the last decades. To accomplish this, Centro is working with the University at Albany to record and transcribe community interviews
for a book that will highlight stories from the past and present about the Latinx experience in Amsterdam. Narcisa Nunez, a University at Albany student and volunteer with the project, is participating in the interview process. This project is important to her, she said, because

Their story is unique. It depicts the history and struggles of Latinxs in a rural community in the U.S. We hear a lot about Latinxs in big cities, but the fact that this story occurs here in Amsterdam, New York is so important and highlights the variety of Latinx experiences.

Narcisa’s comment illuminates a significant disparity in services: many nonprofits focus on cities and not rural areas, leaving people in the country with less access to food and food programming. She also highlights the fact that Latinxs live not only in major cities, but in rural communities and smaller cities, where they have been for decades. She believes that these stories will help diversify that dominant narrative and other stereotypes.

At the Centro Cívico Gala in the Fall of 2018, one of the video interviews recorded for the project was played for the attendees. The room became silent as the audience listened closely to the video projected on two large screens. It presented the story of Julia, a client of Centro’s, a former troubled teen and single mom of three. She shared her life journey, both the trials and tribulations and the successes and the support Centro provided. She explained how they helped her to continue forward in tough times and not just live, but thrive. Julia credits receiving her higher education and watching her daughters attend college to her involvement with Centro Civico. She states proudly, “I am Centro!”

Julia’s story connected her to others in the audience, emphasizing her struggles and success while also paying homage to Centro’s work. Narcisa explained that stories like Julia’s …make me feel empowered and connected to the Latinx community. It reminds me how important it is to give back to the community no matter where I am in life. It is why I am involved in this project. It makes me proud to see their work in the community and the ways that they continue to aspire for greatness and inclusion.

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People often feel disempowered in their daily lives, struggling to gain access to basic needs or provide for themselves and family. By taking the lead in her own story, Julia is sharing her humanity and mistakes, her courage and failures. In this practice Julia becomes a site of authority about her life, confident in (re)claiming her life and inspiring others to do the same. She is empowered and empowering others.

The practice of (re)telling alternative narratives threatens to delegitimize and undermine people and institutions in power. Stories are also vehicles for discussion that can lead toward more accurate language and complex understanding of people, culture, and society. The process of creating counter-storytelling practices that can promote more critical and thoughtful dialogue about injustice and solutions is key to dismantle it in our institutions and interactions. Alternative narratives unite groups of people traditionally marginalized, offering a sense of pride, community solidarity, and empowerment. These practices offer the opportunity and tools to rethink and reconsider policy, people, and events that contribute to current economic insecurity and health and food disparities.

**Poetry**

The arts help to create, express and cultivate alternative narratives. The sensory engagement, aesthetic experience, and insight of the arts can open minds. They provide critical perspectives by embodying different experiences, stimulating deeper understanding. The arts can be another way to share an alternative narrative or knowledge(s) about our reality, history, or identity. Many social movements, organizations, and individuals use art in different mediums, from signs, banners, and posters to other printed and performative materials to convey a particular message to shape reality. Poetry, music, art, and photography are four examples
among many that represent everyday forms of cultural resistance. Bleiker (2000;278) explains art as “the countless non-heroic practices that make up the realm of the everyday and its multiple connections with contemporary global life.” The arts are powerful practices and materials because they are dynamic, flexible, and serve multiple purposes.

These practices are exemplified by Climbing PoeTree performance art and poems, music by Taina Asili, paintings by Barbara Masterson, and photography by Saratoga Springs’ Backstretch workers. These different art forms use refined tactics like poetry, song and art for avoiding direct confrontation with authority but also making (in)direct statements about the U.S. food system, injustice, and marginalized communities. They offer a middle ground between direct confrontation with power structures and passive acceptance of oppression. In observing poetic discourse, unique imagery, metaphors, symbolism, and multiple voices of resistance are created with varying themes from economic injustice, the exploitation of resources, and the brutalities of corporations and policies, to wealthy elites. The arts analyzed here address systematic marginalization and the constant search for cultural identity, carrying messages of hope and equality. Poetry, art, and song are often seen as indirect from of resistance however can have a role in raising social and political consciousness and sustaining discussion.

Alixa Garcia and Naima Penniman, two women of color, farmers, food activists, and artists, are the creators of Climbing PoeTree. They interweave spoken word, hip hop, and multimedia theater to expose injustice, turn hope into vision, and make a better future visible. They state: “Art is our weapon, our medicine, our voice and our vision” (Garcia & Penniman, 2019). Art, because of its many forms and interpretive nature, has the ability to transform and be used in multiple ways and contexts. Climbing PoeTree is a tool for education, community organizing, and personal transformation. With poetry, song, video, and performance, its creators
tell powerful stories of love and liberation, state violence, social, environmental and racial
(in)justice, and mobilizing and shifting culture.

At a Climbing PoeTree performance the two women’s energy, passion, and messages set
fire to the crowd. All around me, quiet people began to shout, still people started to move, and
even after the performance conversations continued about their words, actions, and visual
movements. People began to move and dance in respond to their chorus and discuss lyrics and
images. I myself felt more open, inspired, and attuned to the creativity reverberating through the
crowd. One attendee, Mahalia, spoke to it being “healing to listen to women of color not being
apologetic, taking up space and demanding change.” For her their words were reassurance that as
a woman of color she was not alone in the injustice she experienced.

In a poem performed by Naima, she acknowledges the men and women of color before
her that have supported their communities through food. She spoke of Booker T. Washington,
Fannie Lou Hamer, and Emmet Till and the Freedom Farm Cooperative, the significant
contributions and wealth of knowledge of farmers of color. She rhymed and spoke in rhythm of
the sustenance of soil, abundance, and variety of produce and traditional foods grown by farmers
of color. She reminded us of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers’ initiative that called for the
Fair Food Program, transforming the tomato industry from one in which wage theft and violence
were rampant to an industry with the some of the highest labor standards in U.S. agriculture. She
sang of the importance of “interruption and disruption of systems of power” and not to forget
that to “feed yourself is to free yourself.” The journey she described cannot be undertaken alone,
but in community, connected to a legacy of food, farming, resistance, and resilience.

Climbing PoeTree demonstrates the way art engenders hope, serving as a tool to rebuild
communities and a weapon to win this struggle for universal liberation. In their bilingual
performance and video titled *Love Will Triumph*, they remind us that if each of us dedicates their force to embody the transformation we believe in, we can change the story, making the future we are walking into one of dignity, justice, and reciprocity. The video shows images of a young boy wandering through a community garden, meeting an elder woman who hands him a shovel to plant seeds. He then tips over a bucket by accident, and in frustration walks through the garden, where he stops in front of a fence painted with a message that says “We are the seeds of our ancestors’ dreams.”

Here the elder woman tosses him a tomato and he eats it while the chorus picks up with “be the change that you want to see.” The video ends with that young boy opening the gate to a community garden full of food. A man follows him into the garden and he turns, offering his hand to a young child, welcoming her into the garden and together walking forward. In the garden, they tie up vegetables together on trellises as the camera zooms in close on a hand about to harvest a plump yellow pepper. Poetry, media, music, and performance art as seen in *Love Will Triumph* recognize unjust systems and their consequences while offering alternative visions and a language for healing and hope. It also emphasizes the important role elders and children have in that future change, the connection to land and food, community and perseverance.

**Music**

These feelings, visions, and language can also be experienced through the music of Taina Asili, a local Puerto Rican singer, songwriter and activist. Taina’s work highlights the multiple dimensions of resistance, action, opposition, intent, and recognition. Moreover, Taina explains that depending on who you are, your resources, your personality, the way in which you experience oppression, changes the ways in which you respond or resist. I met Taina at her
home. We sat in the kitchen, where the air was warm and filled with delicious smells of food. Her partner, Gaetano, was also present, grating and sautéing cabbage, and we exchanged questions, stories and discussed her lyrics and music videos.

Taina explained that she is dedicated to using her art as a tool for personal and social transformation that emphasizes prisoner justice, environmental justice, and food justice. Music and art represent the highest forms of human expression, she said: “It gets people thinking, talking, and doing.” Her music inspires audiences to “dance to the rhythm of rebellion,” acknowledging the integral role music has always played in social change. She continued:

Music plays a central role in how people think. It also influences how we make change in the larger political landscape by starting with ourselves, how we affect one another. Dancing, singing, drumming, art has played large role in movements of resistance against all forms of oppression. The rhythm section is the backbone of our work, it gets people up and moving, lifting up people’s spirits while simultaneously carrying social justice messages.

Taina emphasizes the history of powerful songs as engines behind some of the greatest social movements. Simple songs or chants can often serve as a uniting force to provoke social change. Songs help people come together, march, walk, protest and can provide a sound and voice, giving them focus and resolve to make change in their day to day lives or larger social change. Many times, songs can be taken up by people in protest or movements, without the authors’ consideration or intent, transforming their work or giving the words deeper meaning. Stuempfle et al. (2007) explain that the roots of calypso music, for example, have a rebellious past. It was used to ridicule colonial masters, policies, values and traditions through verbal attack in song as well as a complex mode of negotiating the complex cultural terrain of the Caribbean. Calypso music, they also explain, is a form of collective memory that is intimately linked to traditional constructions of cultural identity through history, legend, myth narration and performance.
Taina said that resistance can look like feeding people, and that act can be just feeding people. It depends on the language you use and the purpose of your act. She continues,

When I think resistance I look at Bomba, a Puerto Rican folkloric art form that incorporates drumming, dancing and singing, since African and Taino enslavement. In one art form, music, resistance is exemplified in various aspects. The reclamation of our humanity in face of inhumanity is resistance that can look like love and celebration. It can also involve actual rebellion, in the fight. Maintaining who we are, our cultural, spiritual, and language traditions. Also, taking up space, claiming and reclaiming space, is a form of resistance. Especially, when we are told we do not deserve or allowed to have that space. It can manifest in music or art, community organizing, parenting or breathing, reclaiming our health, farming, every aspect of life and human existence done with intention can be about resistance.

Taina highlights the history and deeper meaning of Bomba that for some might just be music but for her provides multiple forms of resistance from reclamation of one’s humanity to direct action. Her understanding follows that of everyday practices of cultural resistance. It also highlights how resistance is constantly in flux, and by focusing solely on larger events, such as protests, collective action, or organizations, subtle but powerful forms of everyday resistance like parenting or reclaiming health can be missed.

Mitchell and Feagin (1995) argue that African Americans and Mexican Americans draw on their own cultures to resist oppression under dominant ideologies and in turn influence the dominant culture. Scott (1990, p. 266) explains “Their families, spirituality, music and other aspects of culture become viable forms of oppositional culture” (Martinez, 1997). Many of Taina’s songs contest food, land and environmental injustices and inspire hope and resilience. One song, “Sofrito,” was especially poignant in our discussion on promoting food justice and Latinx resistance. She shared the inspiration for the song, her abuela, and how she used to make sofrito, a sauce in Puerto Rican cooking with cilantro, garlic, and onions, used as a base for beans and flavoring. She explained that her grandmother’s sofrito recipe was renowned on the island, not just in her family, but among everyone who tasted her cooking. She recalled:
My abuela’s tradition of food kept community together, held community and held love. When I smell the potent ingredients, they remind me of who I am, who my family is, and that is what the song “Sofrito” begins with.

As Taina has become more involved with food justice work she explained she could see the significance of her abuela’s teachings and powerful food traditions.

The powerful food traditions, she explained, came from precolonial times, before U.S. imperialism and fast food dominated ways of eating. Taina said she cherishes the memories and traditions her grandmother passed down to her. “The root veggies today are usually fried, like yucca, but traditionally it was boiled, not fried in pig fat, which was introduced by Europeans.”

Taina touches upon a movement called “decolonizing food.” It encompasses a reconnection to the land, native ingredients, and dishes that reject Amero or Eurocentric understandings of food and seeks to remove those items from one’s diet that would not traditionally be there.

Latin American cuisine encompasses food from throughout Latin America, from maize-based dishes, arepas, pupusas, tacos, tamales, tortillas and various sauces like salsa, guacamole, pico de gallo and others. In the U.S. this cuisine has come to be characterized as fried, greasy, loaded with carbs, beef, cheese, and processed meats. However, Ramirez (2018, p. 8) explains:

The truth is that there are a lot of ingredients used in Latin food that’s [sic] actually quite nourishing and considered to be super foods: maca root, chia seeds, cacao, quinoa, spirulina, beans, lentils, and collard greens – just to name a few. These are the rooted vegetables our ancestors used to prepare foods, which is why there’s been a movement among Latinos to decolonize, embrace alternatives to Western ideas on food and medicine and reclaim their ancestral food knowledge.

This process of decolonizing food is reflected in Taina’s song “Sofrito.” The lyrics state “Sofrito, el corazón de abuelita” (sofrito, grandma’s heart). It continues to explain how the sofrito flavor is created, its ingredients and how food connects to the people, traditions, and history of Puerto Rico. Through sofrito, Taina saw how her grandmother led like a “reina” (queen), learned how to be proud of and respect her ancestry, and how to fight like a “guerrera” (warrior). These lyrics,
the messages and symbolism they bring to listeners, undermine dominant narratives about Latino food, encouraging a rethinking and relearning about food, and celebrating the roots and historical legacy of food in Latinx culture.

Cultural resistance, like song, music and the arts have been used to sustain the people working towards systemic change. It can heal minds and spirits, inform, inspire, and galvanize people’s hopes and goals for change. Taina states:

When all has been taken away and we are left with nothing, that is when we see our human creative potential. We finally see our light that we carry within us, our bioluminescence. A lot of people say we are without power but I don’t believe that. I believe we have a lot of power.

Systemic change doesn’t happen overnight. Poetry and music may not directly affect policy change, but they contribute to a cultural shift, altering individual and communal behaviors. The arts play a powerful role in efforts to better understand ourselves, identity and build a better world through connection, solidarity and empathy.

Art

Visual art, too, is a means of communication. It invites people into conversation, increasing awareness and curiosity about larger structural injustices. Art is a tool to form a social consciousness and understanding, to create networks in an accessible manner, and to reach the larger community. It also creates laughter and humor, which can break down borders and begin tough conversations about difficult topics. Laughter and creativity can build bridges between people. The use of art in resistance can make protests less frightening and something people want to attend and join. No matter how subtle, art contains elements of political, cultural, sociological influence and this in turn becomes a factor in interpretation. This can be emphasized in paintings by Barbara Masterson, a Hudson Valley based painter.
Masterson began painting landscapes in 2015, but she explained “the farmworkers slowly crept into her view and as they did, they also began to walk across her paintings.” The migrant workers Masterson has met are some of the “faceless” people that work in the food system. They often remain unseen and unknown, despite their presence in our communities for many months each year. So, for her, getting to know them and then paint them changed her perspective and forged a commitment to know them as people and not merely as faceless workers in the field.

Masterson shared that she didn’t want people to become a part of the landscape so instead of wider frames she began doing portraits to make her subjects relatable. She said she made a great effort to speak and learn from and about them, despite the language barriers. Masterson was quick to note her privilege as a white person in a farm setting. She knew her presence and that capturing images, even by painting, might create fear or feelings of worry. She worked to be conscious of this and adapted her distance, language, and presence when needed.

Her goal is to reveal and celebrate the people and to bring awareness to them as humans, skilled humans with families and histories that are often not thought about. In the food system, she continued, there are so many different specialties or industries and the people get lost. So, these paintings call attention to the lesser-known duties of farmworkers. She continued: “I learned a lot from the workers.” Masterson titled one piece ‘Wise Men’ because of all the different tasks she saw being completed and the skill with which they were performed.

Masterson’s art, below, reflects the multigenerational tradition of farm work in many migrant families. It also emphasizes that men and women both work in this industry in addition to the myriad duties and tasks that need to be performed throughout the day.
Masterson’s work highlights the strength, the dexterity, the commitment, the fortitude, the skills, and the knowledge that being a farm worker requires. In her art, she also titles some “Mr. Nixon” or “Greg,” “Andrew” and other names, giving the work further life and depth. An unintended side effect of her art was that when she would gift the paintings or copies of painting to the workers, they would look at it with pride. She said many hung their portraits in their homes back in their countries of origin or kept it in a special place at the farm, showing it to friends and family. Art in this context validates farm workers work as important and necessary, challenging the dominant narrative of farm workers as drains on the U.S. economy and in need of deportation. Masterson also humanizes farmworkers as people with their own personalities and histories, not as some “wave,” “flock,” or “swarm,” as often stated in media outlets.

Masterson’s art helps to localize and individualize the paralyzing large-scale of the U.S. food system, riddled with human, environmental, and workers’ rights abuses. By painting a specific task, farm worker, or group of workers, Masterson forces the viewer to pause and look at humanity, a reflection of ourselves. Art approaches dynamics of the food system in an emotional and interpretive way as opposed to facts, figures and graphs. Zeese and Flowers (2014) explain that facts that disagree with someone’s belief are often ignored, and can even have the
unintended effect of strengthening people’s preconceived notions. Giving people access to data often leaves them feeling overwhelmed and disconnected, not empowered and poised for action.

With all the global issues, from food system inequities to climate change and economic inequality, many can often feel untouched by the problems of others, even when we could easily do something to help. Many do not feel a part of a larger community. This is where art can make a difference. Art does not show people what to do, yet engaging with a good work of art can connect you to your senses, emotions, body, and mind, cultivating empathy. These feelings may spur rethinking, engagement, and even action. The food system inequities Masterson confronts in her art, as well as the deeper emotional connection, accessibility, and critical perspective of society can also be seen through the experiences of the Saratoga Backstretch workers and the “Estamos Aquí” photography collection presented by the Saratoga County Economic Opportunity Council (EOC) for the Latino Community Advocacy Program.

Photography

The back part of a horseracing track is called the backstretch. It is where workers care for and train the horses, and where they themselves live. Many backstretch workers are migrants, undocumented or low-income racialized U.S. citizens. They are racialized in that they are a part of a larger racial or ethnic group that has been socio-culturally constructed and given certain characteristics, subjected to differential and or unequal treatment. This manifests in a lack of access to jobs, basic necessities, and social capital, as well as in language barriers. For many, backstretch work is all they know. These circumstances can lead to precarious labor, unacceptable living conditions, and exploitation.
I saw these conditions firsthand with a young Puerto Rican man named Omar, whom I met in the EOC office. I told him about my project, and we began talking and then walking around the backstretch. He showed me the workers’ dormitories, and explained that they had no kitchen or appliances unless they purchased them on their own. Omar showed me his “kitchen,” which consisted of a broken wooden picnic table with a single burner hotplate. The lid was coated with dust, which he touched, leaving a finger streak while flicking off a piece of hay. He explained that “horse dust” gets over everything. Omar corrected himself: “The shit [horse dust] gets all over our stuff. You should see my tissues [he touched his nose, sniffling].” Just 30 feet in front of us were the horse stables and a huge pile of dried horse manure.

The cooking supplies on the picnic table were literally covered in dried manure particles. Omar explained that workers couldn’t cook inside their rooms, so the outside was the only place left available, especially if you didn’t want to set the fire alarms off. When fire alarms were set off, he said, the police would come, people would get scared, and then they would hate you because you disturbed everyone. He continued, while cooking:

You only use one one pot for one plug. It’s a process you need to think through first, how you want to cook. Usually I cook meat, then wash it out, then the beans, wash it out, then rice, wash it out. To make a simple meal it takes an hour. If you plug in more than one hotplate the whole electricity on your block ‘go boom’ [he pointed to the breaker box at the side of the building]. So you’re in the same situation with the fire alarms, but maintenance has to come fix it. So, you are hungry, your food goes bad, your neighbors hate you and you have no electricity. So only use one plug.
Omar shared that he likes to cook “cocina boricua” when he has time, but explained that he is usually too tired. So instead he buys tortillas from a Mexican woman on the backstretch two blocks down who makes her own. He said they taste better and are cheaper than the Walmart brand. He bikes to Walmart, depending on the weather, for food but explained he can only buy what he can carry in his backpack while riding. Another food option, he said, is to buy from the “cocinas,” the cafeteria owned by NYRA (New York Racing Association), the largest not-for-profit corporation operating horse racing tracks in New York. But food at the cocina is expensive, Omar said, at $10 per plate.

These struggles, but also resilience of the track workers, are captured in time and promoted by the EOCs photography project called “Estamos Aquí” (we are here). Photographs are then featured in a community fundraising event called “Visión,” a look at life behind the scenes. The EOC addresses the unique needs of the Spanish-speaking immigrant population in Saratoga County. They offer translation and advocacy services, English classes, access to medical attention, legal services, a food pantry, and other educational programs and services designed to assist families, addressing their basic needs and promoting economic self-sufficiency. The Estamos Aquí project encourages the participation of local farmworkers and
backstretch workers to become photographers and work with a professional teacher in class to provide guidance on angles, shadowing, distance, and positioning. Afterward, the workers document their lives through film. This includes work tasks, their coworkers, environment, living areas, free time, family, and other parts of their day. Workers then share their favorite photos and organize how they will be presented, titled, and summarized for the event.

The “Estamos Aquí” exhibit at the Vision event is a benefit for the Saratoga EOC to advocate for and raise money through backstretch and farmworker art. It is also a space to celebrate and connect farm and backstretch workers with the larger community and bring to light the injustices faced by the Latinx community in Saratoga. The photographs were framed and printed in a dramatic black and white style with glossy black frames. They were hung on a draped black fabric that took up about an 8-foot-high by 20-foot-long wall on the clubhouse. Each photo had a title, the photographer’s name, and a short description of the motivations and intentions behind the artist’s work.

Photos by Cassandra Andrusz-Ho Ching  Photo courtesy of Arthur Gonick, 2018

More than 20 photos were displayed, one by María Menendez, was titled “Working Calves.” it highlighted the questionable conditions animals were kept in, while at the same time raising questions about the human environment and treatment of humans. Another by Erik
Estrada, titled “Trapped in Freedom,” showed the photographer standing behind the gates of the track like a prison. He said, “We have the freedom to work, but we never know when someone will point at us.” This event shows how people organizing and working together with advocacy and photography can influence public attitudes, raise awareness about identity, culture, and socioeconomic status and draw attention from public officials and businesses in the area.

New York State Assemblywoman Carrie Woerner of the 21st District spoke at the event about the importance of creativity and the immigrant community. She stated:

A picture is worth thousand words. These photos tell a story that we can’t hear in words: what it is like to be an immigrant or undocumented in our community, to be Latino in the U.S. Narratives that are very poignant to current political and media debates. A commentary on our life today, this project educates, informs and use art to walk even just a few steps in shoes of the racetrack and farm workers in our area.

Even Andrew Cuomo was represented by his staffer, Jennifer Muñoz, who read a letter echoing Woerner’s message and the importance of including migrant communities on his behalf.

The art and advocacy event put everyone from wealthy donors and political officials to community members and workers in the same room, linking people who normally would never meet. Even with a language, cultural and class barrier, an inspiring exhibit allows viewers to gain a unique insight into the lives of those in more hidden sectors of the community. Meanwhile, the farm and backstretch workers were empowered by learning photography skills and showing their art. The workers are not just objects within the art, but the artists themselves, and active agents in selling and benefitting from that art.

Strategies of resistance are imbued with both radical and neoliberal elements. However, the content of the art and the messages it carries and awakens in others challenges the structure, inhumanity, and injustice of current operations. The art and advocacy event is a clear example of an organized effort aimed at influencing public attitudes to create a more just society that
promotes human rights. They not only helped advocacy workers secure resources and reduce barriers for the populations they serve, but worked to influence the social environment at the track, framing a dialogue between track and farm workers, community members, organizations, businesses and policymakers.

Everyday forms of cultural resistance within and part of the Latinx community challenge unjust systems and power holders through nonviolent means. Duncombe (2002) and Barnard (2011) suggest that these may be spaces for developing tools for political action, a “dress rehearsal” for the actual political act or as a political action in itself by redefining politics. Poetry, music, painting, and photography all hold great potential, promote identity formation, begin transformative conversations, and create social collectivity on the themes of social justice and human rights. All contribute to a counterculture that criticizes the constraints of an unjust economic system, raising curiosities about alternative choices and systems beyond neoliberalism.

Farmers’ Markets and CSAs

Another set of practices that provide alternative choices and promote food justice are farmers’ markets and Community Supported or Sustained Agriculture (CSAs). New social relations are emerging based on communal principles, sustained by the realization that capitalism has nothing to give us except more financial misery and class divisions (Bollier & Helfrich, 2012). This trend increased following the 2008 financial crisis, with alternatives to neoliberal spaces including urban gardens, food co-ops, skill trades, bartering, farmers’ markets, and Community Supported Agriculture (CSAs). These alternatives represent a critical means of survival. The Capital Region has a booming farmers market network, all different days and times, each market with its own specific culture and attractions. One market exists in the South
End, a community that struggles with food access but that is also defined by a collaborative communal response through organizations like AVillage, The Radix Center, Trinity Alliance, The Free School, and Children’s Café, among others. A Village is a South End neighborhood nonprofit that prioritizes health and environmental justice by addressing air quality at the Ezra Prentice, homes, public housing units and food apartheid through the South End farmers’ market.

On a hot Saturday, visitors to the South End farmers’ market approached the cashiers’ table. “Finally!,” they said as they paid for their vegetables. “We have been waiting for this.” According to the federal government, 12,000 households in the Capital Region exist in food deserts. They don’t have a car, and they live more than a mile from the nearest grocery store (Churchill, 2010). Willie White, former director of A Village, commented as he prepared for a TV interview, “we may be small, but it’s a start. And the people here believe in what we are trying to do. It’s about quality, not quantity. We will grow.” It has taken a few seasons, but A Village and their partners have worked to develop an affordable and accessible farmers’ market in the community on Warren Street that accepts all federal food assistance and benefit cards.

Their mission is to encourage low-income and racialized community members to try new things, and they provide the information needed to healthily prepare these foods. The 2019 season is the 7th or 8th year, said Wille on their opening Saturday in July 2019. Jahkeen Hoke, current director of the organization, envisions growing the market into a block party, adding food trucks, music, and other family events. The soundtrack of the opening day was salsa and bachata music, as a teacher led a Zumba class under a tent. A volunteer mentioned, “we do a lot to promote, but [we] lack capacity.” She gestured to the market space, which held about 20-25 community members, volunteers, and local organization representatives. Willie, after finishing a Zumba class, said: “We got to keep on it, change it up, until it works. We know it’s needed; we
are in a food desert – food apartheid community. It’s just a matter of finding what works for everybody.” The farmers’ market structure allowed community members access to fresh, local fruits and vegetables as well as allowing community members to sell their own beauty products or handmade goods, in addition to networking with local organizations and participating in Zumba and yoga and a variety of children’s activities, all with the goal of bettering individual and communal health through food access and solidarity.

Not all farmers’ markets are the same. Some farmers’ markets seek to be within racialized, low income areas to encourage food access, while others are promoted to upper class white millennials or retirees, displacing communities of color. At the Troy farmers’ market an older couple said they were there “to buy a few things, never their whole grocery list.” This understanding was common, echoed in other conversations with visitors. I learned that farmers’ markets were not about feeding customers for the week, but creating an experience around food, celebrating local food and growers, and fostering communal relationships. They are spaces to be social with food, meet friends, families and talk with new acquaintances, listen to music and people-watch. One vendor at a hummus stand said, “people come for food annnnnnd…”, exaggerating with her voice with a raised eyebrow.

The “annnnnnd” illuminates the importance of variations in food and local vendors, but also all the social benefits that markets provide. The vendor’s partner added, gesturing to all the booths and visitors:

This is how people have shopped for food since existence of commerce. Grocery stores have only been around the last 100 years. It’s not a long-standing tradition. Farmers’ markets are more popular now because people want new ways to spend and make money. Don’t think we don’t know farmers’ markets have problems; there is stuff to hate, too. It comes down to the economics. They’re just not right yet and we are trying to figure it out. We used to not take EBT, SNAP and farmers’ market checks, but that’s normal now. Who knows what the future will bring! But it’s not just about changing farmers’ markets; we (consumers) have to rethink shopping.
Most farmers’ markets fall short of a total redefinition of economic space; rather, they represent a repackaging. Diversifying food markets can be beneficial to decentralizing power in the food system, but can also further food system inequities. Many farmers’ markets offer a more socially conscious way to shop for local food, but this moral high ground conceals the neoliberal agenda as farmers markets still perpetuate inequality by allowing capital to expand into a new market. Some farmers markets also make fresh food exclusive and only economically available to middle class consumers, furthering diet-related health disparities and lack of food access among low-income and racialized communities.

Farmers’ markets are in constant flux. An imperfect politics, they don’t create an ideal model of food production and consumption, but offer open, continuous, reflective processes that enable food system change. Social change like farmers’ markets and resistance practices are full of unintended consequences, ironies, and contradictions. Some continue to make small changes, reworking the system to their advantage. This is true for the “Empanada Llama,” a Latinx-owned and operated vendor selling a variety of savory and sweet deep-fried empanadas at the Schenectady Farmers Market. Empanada Llama is the creation of a Peruvian woman, Maria, and her partner, Joe. She explained that they have been selling at farmers’ markets for 12 years, in order to make and save money to purchase a brick and mortar location for a restaurant.

After eight years of saving her farmers market profits, Maria opened a restaurant in Albany four years ago. Maria is the only Latinx person who is a vendor at the market, at least as far as she knows. “I need to represent my culture,” she said. She said the farmers’ markets provided a space to make “her food” and share her culture, to practice her craft and get exposure at less than half the cost of purchasing a real restaurant. She explained that the farmers’ market gave her more freedom, a lower price point and high demand, to start her business. The farmers’
market structure allowed Maria to participate and make a space for herself, her food and her culture, to achieve her dream of purchasing and opening a brick and mortar restaurant. Though she is an entrepreneur, a business owner, taking part in the capitalist system it was only achievable through a localized farmer market, without which she explains she would not have been able to gain a customer base and save as much money.

Farmers’ markets redefine economic space by reconnecting producers and consumers, encouraging locally sourced, anti-corporate food, keeping money and jobs within communities and renewing a sense of solidarity. At farmers’ markets there are food experts to consult, no advertising companies, no shopping carts or impulse shopping racks, no freezers or prepackaged junk food. The focus is well-being, not the maximization of profit at all costs. Community-Supported Agriculture programs (CSAs) represent another redefinition of economic space. These contest the neoliberal agenda through their structure and redirection of wealth from big agricultural companies to small farms. CSAs involve a powerful investment, versus extraction, in ones’ health, community, and local economy by the consumers and food producers. CSAs are a partnership between farms and consumers that helps keep local farms and independent businesses thriving while ensuring that customers eat seasonal, local produce. This gives farmers and consumers the power to build a strong, equitable, and resilient local food system (CSA Coalition, 2018). Depending on the CSA program, options vary, but in general, a small farm sells shares of its harvest to local customers, usually for a subscription fee. A buyer then picks up or receives regular deliveries of produce that range from a family-sized box to smaller portions.

Two CSAs in the Capital Region are Soul Fire Farm (SFF) and 2nd Street Farm. Both incorporate practices that promote equity and justice in the Food System. These CSAs place historically marginalized and exploited groups at the heart of discussions and practices about
reworking the food system at every level: from the wages and working conditions of laborers to barriers that prevent communities from controlling the means of food production, such as access to land and capital, to protection from food production-related environmental contamination such as air and water pollution or pesticide contamination. On the food distribution side, equity concerns arise when low-income communities lack sufficient access to healthy food options and experience disproportionate rates of diet-related disease (Kessler & Chen, 2015).

SFF does this by building from the African concept of Ujamaa, cooperative economics, and 2nd Street Farm focuses on decentralizing the food system. Both redefine economic spaces while emphasizing collective ownership, collectivizing resources, and promoting investment in members’ health and community. CSAs and shared cooperative initiatives are more than a mode of resistance to the neoliberal restructuring of food systems and cities; they also represent the seeds of an alternative mode of production in the making (Caffentzis & Federici, 2014). Both CSAs and farmers markets are active, ever-changing spaces where new ideologies and practices can lead to transformative change and challenge to the neoliberal agenda.

SFF’s CSA is based on Ujamaa, a Swahili concept which emerged in the 1950-60s in Tanzania and translates literally to family-hood. Jennings (2002) writes that the core of Ujamaa is self-reliance. It is about people building their own futures for themselves, total participation of all involved, communal labor, communal ownership of land, and nationalizations in the private sector and of public services. SFF moves beyond normalized exploitative relationships of producer and consumer experienced within the current food system (Penniman, 2018). They instead seek to develop long term relationships of mutual commitment with members. This is done through sliding scale payment, youth empowerment, organizational solidarity, mentorship, and recognizing humanity (SFF, 2019).
This commitment to and validation of humanity can be seen in their CSA “solidarity shares,” a no-cost farm share for refugees, immigrants, and people affected by state violence. SFF states in a 2018 newsletter to the community and CSA members:

Nobody has to forego life-giving food. You can help families receive a weekly doorstep delivery of abundant naturally grown vegetables with the option to add eggs or pasture-raised chicken.

The solidarity share works to make fresh food available to everyone through a social justice lens, not to simply give food as a gift, but as a cooperative partnership between farmer, consumer, and community. At a SFF community day, I learned from a staff member that the farm had about 110 CSA shares during the 2019 season, 22 of which were solidarity shares. The food is coming from, paid for, and delivered by the community in which clients reside, a people of color-led, insider, and bottom-up approach. Community members are empowered because they also give back, not just receive. Some take advantage of work trade options, use the sliding scale model; some reserve a portion of shares for low income families; use SNAP; share sustainable living skills; and offer free educational programming for urban youth.

This redefinition of economic spaces may have emerged out of economic inequities, but it was built by cooperative and collective work. These spaces hold great potential for rethinking how the city, farmers, producers, and consumers challenge the neoliberal agenda (Deflippo, 2003; Hackworth, 2011). Much of the research to date suggests that local food system attempts fit quite comfortably within the current food system. However, despite these contradictions, Gatrell and Ross (2016) find that participants in local food systems are well positioned to take the next step as they already recognize and act on many of the industrial food system’s contradictory and disempowering relationships among people, animals, and the environment.
Local food initiatives represent the potential germination of a societal shift in consciousness that supports a food based, counterhegemonic moment against the neoliberal food system.

This potential can be seen with the 2nd Street Farm and CSA in Troy, managed by Dara Silbermann. Silbermann, with help from her community and friends, transformed a vacant city lot into an intensively farmed plot that provides select fresh vegetables for the neighborhood at an affordable price. She paused momentarily in telling her story to clarify, “I don’t like the word owner; I don’t believe anyone can actually own land.” She understood that she had the papers and technically runs a business, but explained that she defines herself as anti-capitalist. She is not creating a communal farm and CSA for profit, though it is important; rather, she prioritizes living better and building a stronger and resilient community for everyone.

To accomplish this, Dara went through a foreclosure list to acquire land. The lot she found workable started at $300, but the taxes, assessor fee, and the fact there was no farm tax break because of how the land was zoned made the cost much higher than the initial investment. She explained that she was worried about covering costs and finding people who wanted to do the CSA, but quickly found she had a different problem: too many customers. She said:

I thought I would need to make fliers, but everyone in the community knew I was there when I cleared the lot. The farm itself was promotion enough. One community member shared they wanted to make a garden there too. I told them, I beat you to it on this lot, but I can help you get another foreclosure lot.

Purcell (2013) argues that “the city contains the seeds of the destruction of capitalism. Moreover, the city is already producing, here and there, the beginnings of an alternative society beyond capitalism.” Dara’s experience highlights this readiness for something new other than neoliberal capitalism and fact that ideas are already in production. CSAs, community gardens, and farmers’ markets are already trying, failing, trying again, and succeeding in creating alternatives to the
neoliberal food system. Though Dara is not opting out completely from capitalist social relations, she is reprioritizing and redefining them.

Silbermann said she is constantly blown away by what people in the community, especially people of color, tell her. Eggerman & Panter-Brick (2010) find that the most effective way to build resilience is to start by listening to what people have to say about their everyday lives. This helps activists understand what their experiences are, their goals, and identify what people are already doing for themselves to reach them. Silbermann recognized that local residents have a more concrete understanding of food system inequities because they live with them every day. She explains the garden encourages people to talk and provides a safe place to discuss neighborhood happenings and concerns. She sees her role in the community as a listener and a resource, not just for gardening, but for other concerns the community may have too.

After Silbermann had cleared the lot and started to grow food, she applied to get the property rezoned so 2nd Street Farm could be fully operational to sell produce. CSAs operate in the local sphere, within communities, and can mobilize quickly, as well as representing a specific site of resistance to larger scale structures of political and economic power that structure the current food system (Martinez, 2010). Over two dozen community members attended her Board of Appeals meeting at City Hall to show their support for her and the farm. She also made a call on Facebook to her friends and community, posting,

Lovers of healthy Food Systems! Next week, the 2nd Street Farm Stand will have its hearing in front of the City of Troy Zoning Board. Currently, Troy has no zoning that allows for commercial farming within the city. It would mean the world to me to have friends and neighbors join in the call for inclusive zoning for professional farmers! Tuesday, March 6th, 6 PM at City Hall. Appreciating all your support!!

The five zoning board members voted unanimously to approve Silbermann’s use variance for a farm stand business in a community commercial zone. A variance, the form that changes or
clarifies how the property will be used, was necessary because the definition of “farm stand” currently doesn’t exist as a permitted commercial use of land in the zoning code. (Buonanno, 2018).

In this act, Silbermann articulates Lefebvre’s (1996) concept of “right to the city,” which reframes the arena of decision-making to empower inhabitants to produce city spaces that meet their own needs (cited in Passidomo, 2014). Here she made a change to the local land policy, making space for urban farms, becoming a food policy actor, and engaging with the local government. This change is limited to the localized food system; however, the use of planning and gaining power within the city can make a significant difference to the quality of the urban food scape (Morgan, 2015). We “change ourselves by changing the city” (Harvey, 2005), emphasizes the importance of solidarity, collective power, and rights under austerity.

Silbermann’s goals are to decentralize the food system from her community outward, to build communal respect for space, and reduce waste. She hopes everyone can have access to their own community garden, putting vacant lots to use. She says, “the garden is about growing a food system that’s people-based before it’s profit-based.” In this context, CSAs redefine food as a common good, not a commodity, which puts citizens rather than corporations in charge of food and creates a moral economy (Holt-Giménez, 2017). This community-based approach to food production pushes back against neoliberalism, privatization, and a market-first approach. Silbermann hopes that in a few years the garden can be communal, that the community members will share expenses and profits from it, whether that is monetarily or through food harvest.

**Community Meals**

Community and cooperative spaces challenge the economization and individualization promoted by austerity. Free community meals represent a moral stance against economic
injustice and the neoliberal food system by practicing and building an alternative culture. In the operation and completion of a community meal, members are empowered to collect or prepare food, cook food together, serve and feed themselves, organize the dining area, socialize, and partner in cleaning dishes and resetting space. These acts of mutual assistance and support allow everyone to contribute to restoring justice instead of being labeled as a powerless victim. They provide the capacity and potential to help participants make sense of feeding themselves in an unequal system and in that process take part in the solution, promoting justice. These practices can be seen in community meals by Comida y Tierra (Food and Land), a Spanish-immersion conversation meal organized by the Kingston Land Trust, as well as “Soup Talk” at Troy CEO Unity House and at the Saratoga Backstretch.

Comida y Tierra dinners are monthly or bi-monthly community meals to feed those within and a part of the Latinx community, but with the additional goals of language learning and community awareness. These meals bring together native Spanish speakers from the area and non-native speakers to practice Spanish while talking about food, land, local policy, economic development, and community changes. Each meal takes place at a local Latinx restaurant to economically support the community. Non-native speakers contribute $10 per meal, which compensates the Latinx participants’ work as language facilitators. This location and cost for attendees functions to redistribute wealth among participants and local businesses. This dynamic of pay circumvents the upwards flow of wealth associated with neoliberalism while also offering native Spanish speakers a leadership role at the table while receiving an earned meal, versus being given a free one.

Under more precarious socioeconomic condition under austerity, food and eating shifted from a shared experience of preparation, eating, community and enjoyment to an individual act
of market consumption (Guthman, 2008;2012). Gustavo Esteva (1998) distinguishes between comida, food as a communal experience of nourishment, and alimento, food as a commodity purchased by an individual from an external expert on food production. Comida is an experience of food, while alimento is a food object (Mares, 2017).

The Comida y Tierra dinner I attended was buffet style; it included rice, salad, beans, and some pork with sides. Upon entering we chose a seat, made some short introductions, and filled our plates. We then sat at our table, ate, and learned more about each other, practicing Spanish and English. I sat with two local farmworkers originally from Mexico, Antonio and Zorriada, who live in Kingston. We learned about each other’s personal lives, histories, culture, and practiced our vocabulary and pronunciation as we ate. When we began to finish our meals, the facilitators from the Land Trust came around with maps. They explained that our conversation would be shifting to current land and food issues affecting Kingston, such as the Green Line, a network of urban trails and green spaces.

The facilitators gave each table two maps and a list of goals to talk about regarding what we saw on the map. They had us find where we live and local places we like to go. We found that many of us live close to each other or enjoy the same locations. Once familiar with the map, we received city plans for the Green Line, a proposal for new urban trails in Kingston, and were asked to talk about the project and decide how we want those spaces to be used and where to be located. We all had our own ideas, especially what to do with the green spaces. Antonio suggested a community soccer field. Zorraida suggested a community pool or cultural center that is indoor and outdoor for all seasons. It was informative and interesting to hear how other people wanted to build up their community and what aspects of life and society are important to them.
Through this meal we learned a lot about Kingston, the area, land surrounding the town, and what economic development projects were happening. Julia Farr from the Land Trust stated:

We are building a base of trust and new cross-cultural relationships. Comida y Tierra is a bridge to the Spanish-speaking community while setting the stage for new partnerships to develop, encouraging our local organizations to work together and engage our community on a mission that we are all working towards (Farr, 2017).

This practice of community eating highlights culture, age and class cooperation, emphasizing a deeper understanding and meaning-making for people from different walks of life and building a more just food system.

Comida y Tierra humanizes farmworkers, gives them a leadership role as language mentors, fosters cultural, generational, and class interchange, encourages awareness about local governance plans, and redistributes wealth to low-income racialized communities. Kayce at the Kingston YMCA Farm project, a partner of the Land Trust and Comida y Tierra, shared Latinx foods are a significant part of what they grow. She shared in their gardens they have ojo santos, apezote, cilantro, peppers tomatoes, tomatillos, culantro, papilo, because people are asking for it. She explained this food is an important partner because many latinos may feel isolated and separated, there is no established community only tiny pockets here and there, while many other live where they work. Many need a support system and no institutions are here to address that need, church help, but we want these communities connected and to feel they have a stake and voice with whats going on.

The meal also fosters a sense of hope and resilience. As Eggerman and Panter-Brick (2010) explain, hope is not the belief that something is going to end well, but the certainty that people’s lives and struggles, makes sense. Everyone in attendance was actively making sense out of their own local community, economic development, and people within it through food. In the process, they gained confidence and cultivated hope, bringing meaning and understanding to the
complexities of their lived experiences. Socialization and community building through meals is an essential part of the solution to establish a more equitable food system. Rajanigandha (et al., 2011) and Martin (et al., 2004) find that Latinxs attending cultural community gatherings have been found to more likely be food secure due to stronger social networks and access to resources and knowledge about their community.

Another example of a community meal is “Soup Talk,” held in a kitchen at Unity House supported by the Troy Commission on Economic Opportunity (CEO). Unity House is dedicated to enhancing the quality of life for people in poverty. The kitchen recovers food, otherwise to be thrown out, offering cooking classes to train those in the community to cook food and feeding them at the same time. The CEO believes people have the power to change, and that addressing poverty isn’t about charity, but about empowerment through targeting poverty at its root causes.

Soup Talk is put on by local teacher, cook, advocate, and author Amy Halloran. The community meal and discussion happens once a month, but Unity House provides meals every day, multiple times per day for the community. The dinner includes local activists, farmers, professors, and community members as guests and guest speakers on themes like food insecurity, urban farming, and the Irish potato famine. Halloran’s goal for Soup Talk was to start conversation through a meal and use food as an entrance point to examine and discuss the root causes of inequity in our food system with the community.

The Soup Talk I attended had about 15 guests, including local activists, unhoused community members, teachers, and other local residents. The meal consisted of a root vegetable stew with ham, bread, and a vegetable medley. It was served buffet style and people, once their plates were full, gathered at two long rows of tables. After our meal, Halloran began a discussion about our current food system and the importance of breaking it down into smaller pieces. She
also highlighted the connection between the U.S. food system and the larger global food system and its history. One piece of history she wanted to discuss was the Irish potato famine, celebrating the potatoes in the soup. She acknowledged that it sounded like a weird place to start, but promised us a deeper understanding at the end of the talk.

Amy told the story of the potato famine and introduced a group activity. Each team was given a role in the history of the crisis: some of us were Scots, the Church, politicians, the English, soldiers, and so on. We all read from a piece of paper our role and arguments for why the famine started and what should be done. Our goal was to figure out how the famine began and who was most responsible. As each team read the arguments the deeper connection was being made. The potato famine was a specific moment in time when there was plenty of food, but a select group of people were starving. “Sound familiar?,” she asked, drawing a parallel to today in the U.S., where there is plenty of food but specific groups are suffering because of food insecurity, diet-related diseases attributed to poor access, junk food, and food quality. Furthermore, like today, everyone wants to place blame with a specific person or group.

As we read through the complexity of the famine, we saw the complexity of our own food system and its players. Many of the participants who thought they knew who was to blame reached a deeper understanding of guilt and responsibility. At the end of the activity Amy said:

We could divide up the American food system and try to assign blame, action or inaction, but where do we start? People talk about the food industry and how they are responsible for the overproduction of food but it’s also important to understand how people are responsible too, how we contribute or conceal inequities.

Amy began with the huge global and historical perspective of our food system and slowly brought us down through each level to ourselves and our community.
At the community level, different members in attendance raised questions, concerns, and suggested ideas about how to move forward or criticize what others do. One gentleman brought up the idea of using money to change the food system, stating:

Corporations listen to consumers. They want our money, so we should put our money where we want the food system to go. I choose to eat healthy ‘big food’ can’t make me eat bad food. Today there are more health food stores than ever. People making healthy food choices created more health food stores. The Food System changes. We all can do that! People have to stop buying Doritos and fast food and eat healthy.

The man was very passionate about what he was sharing, despite its adherence to the neoliberal model of individual choice. Amy listened attentively to everything the man was saying, and responded, “I understand. I, too, like to make healthy choices and it would be nice if more people made those choices. What does everyone else think?” A few people pointed out that not everyone has the choice to purchase healthy food or the money to do so. Another man added that Doritos and fast food have higher caloric intake, which is sometimes more important than the benefits of a cucumber or an apple.

Amy then stepped in to clarify, as the first man who spoke seemed to be uncomfortable. She redirected the group’s attention to her, and continued, “Yes, having choices and the money to make those choices, we have to remember, are [sic] a privileged position and if we emphasize change through money, only people with money have a voice. What if you can’t afford those choices? Diet then become a privilege rather than a right.” She continued to explain that for people living in poverty with low wages and little time, it can be difficult to change habits and even just pay rent for an apartment. Many times, people don’t have kitchens or live in temporary housing or don’t have stove or refrigeration with little time to shop or organize coupons. Amy talked through the neoliberal approaches to changing the food system and encouraged a process of rethinking, promoting a more equitable understanding of the food system. Her website states
“I’m a writer, teacher, and cook. Food and words are bridges I like to cross.” Soup Talk, using “food and words,” converted the dining space into a “bridge”: a low-risk area for community members to ask questions, debate, learn, and take away action plans, connected to a historical global understanding and building resilience to rely on when dealing with future struggles.

Food is political, as the Soup Talk dialogue made clear. How we cook, what we cook, whether or not we can cook, and who is left out completely, are all political issues. Despite the conservative rhetoric of “personal choice,” food system inequities are far from having only personal consequences. In the U.S. alone, the health care costs from obesity and diet-related disease are estimated to be in the hundreds of billions. The decisions about who produces food, what food is produced, how it is produced, and who gets to eat have been shifting from households and governments to corporate boardrooms (Hendrickson & James, 2005). This restructuring of power and control directly obstructs our knowledge about the food industry and personal autonomy. However, many, like those in attendance at Soup Talk, seek to identify, adapt, rework, or undermine this concentration of power and lack control over food. This adaptation and reworking of power and food is also reflected through the meal preparation practices and planned community meals on the Saratoga backstretch.

Each day, many backstretch community workers contribute $4-8 dollars to a group or family within the community to who then buys, prepares, and cooks the food for the larger group. The payment is taken usually earlier on in the day, so the cooks can shop for their ingredients and get started on the meal. Meal preparation and cooking begins at 4:00 pm. I attempted to approach a community dinner being prepared, but I was shooed away by an older woman, who said the food wasn’t ready. However, when I explained that I wanted to observe how she cooked so much food, she allowed me to come closer and watch the process. The
cooking area, two picnic tables, and a few small fires, were under the authority of a middle-aged Dominican woman named Gloria, the matriarch and clear leader of the dinner production. Gloria directed everything from the picnic table with a knife in her hands. She did not need to move from her spot. With a few words she had two young boys shucking at least 30 ears of corn, three older children cutting meat, and two younger women peeling the potatoes and carrots.

All the food was placed into separate pots over small ground campfires. No hot plates were used; Gloria explained there was too much food and it needed to be hot all at once. The giant pots balanced ever so carefully on a metal tripod with foil over the fires. I tried to ask a question, but the group was hard at work and Gloria seemed too busy to be bothered to give any response. As we walked away to give the family space, Omar, my informant, pointed out in the distance a Mexican family preparing a community meal for another group of people. He explained that two or three different groups host the community meals on the backstretch and that these meals, for which people pool their money together, represented the best option they had.

Rising food costs after the 2008 financial crisis hit low income families particularly hard. Silvesti (et al, 2014) finds that family, friends and local communities were vital for social and
economic survival. The backstretch community meal was an option created by workers for workers to ensure not just economic and social survival, but also preservation of culture through the provision of culturally appropriate food. Omar and his friends emphasize this in their discussion of cooking spices. Omar stressed that there are many cultural differences, depending on where you are from in Latin America. “Here Dominicans, Puerto Ricans and Mexicans invent new food combinations when they cook.” A friend of Omar’s added, “the Puerto Ricans think the Mexican food is too spicy, so they bring their own baggies of seasonings and salsa or hot sauce bottles.” Omar added, “Our sazones are different, but you work with what you got. We adapt how we cook and what we cook. I don’t like Mexican chile sauce but I love their fresh tortillas!” Omar concluded, “we are all Latin and eat Latin foods, which can be very different but also the same. It’s always a meat, rice, beans or tortillas in a different sauce.”

I asked what they thought of the community meals and one man said, “for five dollars it’s a good deal, especially because I can’t cook and you need food to survive.” The others at the table chuckled at his response. Another man added, “it brings us all together; look, we are all laughing, meeting you, new people, and catching up with neighbors, that’s good for the soul. And the food served is good food, like from home.” One of the younger men joked “From home? I am not Mexican, bro!” The others exploded with laughter. “Well, sometimes from home,” the man corrected himself. While everyone may say “it tastes like home” in reference to something, for communities of color, food is a cultural line, connecting people to their heritage and a land from which they were displaced.

Grimes (2017) considers cooking and food to be “a possible tool in the fight to keep our minds, bodies, and hearts strong. What we choose to put in our bodies can be a revolutionary act” (Grimes, 2017, p. 5). In choosing to eat healthier food that is culturally appropriate, as
opposed to fast food or prepackaged, mass-consumed food, one places themselves, their health, and their well-being above saving money. This reprioritization challenges capitalism when consumers say, “I am more important; my health is more important; I value myself enough not to put poison or harmful foods in my body.”

Gloria finally gave a yell; the meal was finished. Those who paid walked over to pick up their food but lingered, letting any children, elders, or women get their food first. After visiting the cafeteria and other small food restaurants run by NYRA and the track, it was clear this food and process was different: simple, fresh, homemade. The other food served in the cafeteria or café was “Latinx food,” but mass-produced, with a generic flavor made in large quantities from frozen or canned food. The community meal provided local, end-of-July, sweet corn on the cob, each kernel popping, spurting out juice as the men bit into their cobs. The meat and soft chunks of carrots and potatoes were steaming on their plates. I watched as one of the men sprinkled his own sazón on the corn from a plastic baggie in his pocket.

The meal and picnic tables became a place for workers to complain, laugh, eat, smoke, drink, and celebrate. This space was no longer defined by work but reclaimed to prioritize community, cooperation, and well-being through sharing a meal that they controlled. These practices, though temporary, interrupt and disrupt systems of exploitation through a celebration and coming together around food and culture. Community meals may not change policy or larger systemic structures but they do keep culture, sport, and pride strong as well as bodies, physically being nourished by the healthy food. Nixon (2018;3) states: “food, resistance, and comfort go hand in hand especially with all the violence and trauma so many are exposed to daily.” On the backstretch, food becomes more than sustenance or a momentary distraction from the stresses and discomfort of a working life. It provides a way to feed oneself and one’s community – for
workers on the peripheries of the austerity economy, merely surviving is a form of resistance. A joyful meal prepared together seems like a celebration of that resistance.

Under extreme and intensifying economic pressures, many have begun to reform and rethink how they act, changing everyday habits to live with limited resources. These acts at first may be assumed to be coping strategies or a submission to power. Kerkvliet and Benedict (2009) argue that when people live within a political system and try to get by, they might perform actions that look like resistance, but are not. They finds these actions usually convey indifference to processes regarding production, distribution, and use of resources, trying to ‘cut corners’ to get by. However, I find many of these small, everyday acts, like preparing, cooking, and sharing a meal have taken on new meaning, promoting equity and resilience.

Acts of “cutting corners,” such as community meals, under extreme social, political, economic pressures, are at times at odds with power, questioning, critiquing or even challenging that power. “Why should resistance have to be pure? Why is it not allowed to be ‘contaminated’ with other motives or effects? Coping, survival, accommodation or resistance are not either-or choices, but combinations and permutations” (Vinthagen and Johansson, 2013). These strategies are normalized practices, everyday resistance - imperfect tactics which Scott (1985) describes as not yet politically articulated or formally organized, but strategies people under oppression use to both survive and undermine authority and current systems.

Education and Training programs

Education can be a powerful and effective tool for social change, inspiring new perspectives and influencing innovative approaches towards social, political, and economic justice. Education and training practices in the Capital Region take place in communities most
directly affected by poverty and food injustice: on local urban farms, vacant land, schools, nonprofits, and other spaces. Training sites, such as these, offer a space for critical self-reflection and possible contestation to dominant ways of thinking. In my observations, I find that they value experiences and real-life connections over the memorization of facts or data. These practices prioritize building skills in ecological design, nutrition and health education, community building, economics, politics, and the arts, while also grounding, connecting individual and communal practices with larger movements for justice.

Students or learners in these educational and training activities can be elementary, middle and high school students, college students as well as adults and even seniors. In these spaces all people are students, as education and training on the topic of food, health, nutrition, and the environment affects us all. These practices build meaning that can help preserve cultural traditions and values while helping to transmit beliefs to younger generations, contributing to future communal success. It is a dynamic process whereby resistance is not solely a reaction but a continually directed, adaptable, and constructive response. This process is exemplified in programming by a community health series at Capital District LATINOS: Latino Advocacy Through Inter-Neighborhood Outreach Service (CDL), in addition to community gardening at the Albany Free School and a state-sponsored summer work program for high school students at the Radix Ecological and Sustainability Center.

CDL is a Latinx-run nonprofit dedicated “to creating the conditions for the success of the Latino community by providing basic social services (health, education, employment training) to the Latino community, and by advocating for the political, social, and economic empowerment of the Latinos in the Capital District” (CDL, 2017). This advocacy takes shape in many forms such as poetry nights, community health conferences, workshops, surveys, jobs, worker training,
educational programs, and more. CDL opened its doors in 2018 and is the first Latinx-run nonprofit in Albany since the 2008 financial crisis and the closure of Hispanic Outreach Services. CDL is working to fill an important void in the Latinx community, as the city currently lacks a centralized, Latinx-focused organization to serve the general cultural, community, and policy needs of the city (CDL, 2018). Dan Irizarry, CDL Board Director, explains:

CDL wants to serve as a bridge between the Latino community and government stakeholders, many times don’t see the detrimental cycles it creates or perpetuates. Simply having [a] physical location that is owned by and run by a Latinos is revolutionary. It brings truth to the reality that there’s a large Latino community in the Capital District that has existed and continues to grow.

Their 2018 preliminary report notes that CDL is an important space for policy makers and community members to meet, a space for mobilization and celebrating culture. During the winter of 2019, CDL presented a series of five community education classes focused on topics related to Latinx health. These classes addressed stress, diabetes, heart health, mental health, and culminated in a community health conference with a tabling hour, special speakers, panels, and community partners present to provide attendees documentation, resources, and knowledge on how to better care for themselves, family, and friends. I facilitated one program dedicated to hunger in the Latinx community. Each of these classes worked to open conversations about sometimes taboo topics.

In the class I facilitated, we identified and discussed the food system, food insecurity, and increased risk of diet-related disease. We evaluated inequities in state and nonprofit resources, listened to experiences by those who used services, and heard concerns and ideas from the community on how to move forward. I demonstrated the making of an alternative recipe for empanadas, which were baked (instead of fried) and vegetarian (instead of meat-based). We ate
these empanadas together, discussing the health benefits, other adaptations to our diets and or shopping habits we could make.

We came up with an array of skills, including identifying barriers and inequities, active listening, story-telling, and problem solving as well as recommending possible solutions of changes needed to be made within the food system. Micky Jimenez, the Director of CDL, explains: “the classes were also a way for CDL to learn about the community, its needs, wants and struggles to adjust the ways in which we would move forward with other programming.” She stresses the importance of knowing what is happening within the community and then creating programs that the community identifies as valuable. Many participants were already aware of food insecurity in their communities, the negative impacts of large corporate food industries, and lack of policies aimed at making change. They were also familiar with charitable responses such as food pantries, but many were surprised to hear about social justice initiatives from low-income and racialized communities taking place in the Capital District.

As a white instructor working with predominantly Latinx individuals, my goal was to ensure that all voices and perspectives were heard. I took a co-teaching and group dialogue approach by highlighting knowledge and practices already within the community (McLaren, 1992; Ayers et al., 2009; Malott and Porfilio, 2011). These learning practices help to disperse power and obstruct common mistakes in educational practices such as the white savior complex. This refers to when white people seek to help racialized communities yet in the process intentionally or unintentionally impose their beliefs, principles and or culture in a self-serving manner, which functions to further marginalize racialized communities. By placing, in this context, Latinx ideas and experiences about food (in)justice at the center of our dialogue these individuals are empowered as educators themselves (Werkmeister Rozas, 2004).
At the culminating CDL health conference, after all five health classes were offered, everyone, in addition to local academics, came together to summarize the key points and findings. It was a well-attended event – so many were in attendance that more chairs had to be added and even then, people were left standing. Micky commented that the series of community conversations and other community events “have allowed for Latinos to have a voice, and offer their personal experiences and challenges living in the Capital District.” One of the most important lessons CDL has learned this year, Micky stated is, “where there is trust, people will participate and follow through on recommendations. The fact that we speak English and Spanish and are culturally sensitive has fostered positive relationships and increasing attendance to events.” Through these dynamic educational events, fliering, tabling, dialogue and outreach, CDL improves access and understanding about resources available and or struggles facing the Latinx community. CDL staff and volunteers are also educated by the community on their needs and daily experiences within the Latinx community. CDL reframed education to prioritize not only academic learning, statistics, and larger systemic issues, but also communal competencies, community knowledge, and experience.

Another group in Albany that promotes a rethinking of normative ideologies, reframes education, reclaims space, and provides an alternative to traditional education is the Albany Free School, founded in 1969. It is dedicated to promoting non-hierarchical instruction, shared decision making, community engagement, and equity in the food system. Through community-based learning, they challenge authority by abolishing the competitive individualism that often corrupts neoliberal education systems (Levi, 2017). Here education is neither a competition, nor something to be completed. This approach helps to eradicate feelings of failure or shame from the learning process, promoting it as a continual and dynamic exchange, not a top-down flow.
This more progressive approach to traditional pedagogical structure is in direct conflict with standardized curricula and testing. At the Free School, students are put before statistics and profit. Deirdre Kelly, the director of the Free School, explains:

Students have just as much to teach the teacher. We focus on responsibility, problem solving, social justice and most importantly, how to relate to each other. The school self-governs through a weekly all-school meeting where students and teachers each receive single votes in deciding school policy. This helps to emphasize students’ emotional well-being, community engagement, and confidence to follow their dreams and become voices for change (Kelly, 2017).

These practices promote community-building and student autonomy, which are in direct conflict with austerity. Riad (2005) argues that the implementation of the neoliberal agenda and the evolution of the state have historically been done through anti-democratic methods, to produce social relations more favorable to capital accumulation.

This is achieved by using a sliding scale model for tuition to be accessible to families from all socioeconomic backgrounds. Over 90% of Free School families are on this scale, so they can make the choice for their student to participate in this style of education. The Free School’s democratic model and practices also challenge the neoliberal agenda by holding people in power accountable, including teachers and staff, by emphasizing transparency, human rights, well-being and communal behavior. This is done by placing students at the center of decision-making about their own curriculum, teachers, and school through student-led meetings.

Deirdre explains the school’s kitchen operates not just as a kitchen, where students make their own food, but also a safe space for many students struggling with different lifestyle or socio-emotional hurdles in their lives. The Free School financially supports the admission of ten local students annually who live in the direct vicinity of the school. These students are from a historically marginalized neighborhood, low socio-economic status, and often face domestic
violence or the incarceration of a parent. These students often find reprieve in the school’s kitchens, particularly when feeling vulnerable in a new environment. She explains:

Food is key to life and the idea of food brings people together and builds community. What we found often with new students, they would be drawn to the kitchen, especially if they were quiet or shy. The kitchen became a place they could find solitude or acclimate to their new environment.

This space is an important safety net for students who may feel vulnerable and face insecurity at home. Homemade food and the process of preparing, cooking, and cleaning up after one’s own food is also part of the school’s mission. Some food is subsidized, partly funded by the state, but most is homemade in the school by students and staff. They have made applesauce, tomato sauce, pizza, salads, oatmeal, trail mix, granola bars, and more. The school has tried different government meal programs to feed their students, but found the process difficult, expensive, and of poor quality. At times, the school gets reimbursed by the state depending on students by income, but Deirdre shared that knowing that the same food from state programs also feeds prison populations and is largely criticized as being low quality, struck a negative emotion in her.

Food choices are meaningful because they may reveal a deeper understanding about an individual, group, or society’s identity (Blum, 2011). Food often is associated with nostalgic memories of family or community, allowing for a sense of togetherness but also openness. Food can be a unifier, a way to bring support and comfort to each other, bridging the gaps in life experiences or understanding. Informants have described food “as culture, our identity” (Alomar, 2018), “food as medicine and love” (Penniman, 2017), “food as a tool” (Lorraine, 2017), and “food as a bridge” (Jimenez, 2018). Deirdre also emphasizes the important role food plays as a “bridge between people” and a “stepping stone” to relationship building and feelings of acceptance.
She explains that the kitchen is also a place for community partnerships, not only used for school meals, student learning and classes, but also for Food Not Bombs (FNB), an all-volunteer global movement that shares free vegan meals as a protest to war and poverty. Each chapter collects surplus food that would otherwise go to waste from grocery stores, and occasionally from garbage dumpsters when stores are uncooperative, as well as donations from local farmers. They then prepare community meals which are served for free to anyone who is hungry. FNB believes that corporate and government priorities are skewed towards profit and have allowed hunger to persist in midst of abundance, a critique of our culture that Deirdre herself and the school echo. She shared that she used to be a part of this collective when she was younger.

The Albany FNB chapter provides one weekly meal and food pickup for the community out of the Albany Social Justice Center. The food for the meal is food rescue, collected from local grocery stores. After collection, it is transported by and cooked by volunteers in a commercial kitchen at the Albany Free School. The school kitchen provides tools and space, making a big impact by allowing volunteer cooks to get more creative and have access to reliable equipment. The food is then transferred again to the Social Justice Center, where more volunteers set up the dining, clean-up, and food pickup bags. She said partnering with community collectives and organizations allows more access and opportunities for the students. In addition to FNB, the Free School partners with The Radix Center, Soul Fire Farm, Children’s Café, Trinity Alliance, A Village, and Youth FX, among others.

Deirdre explained that the Free School is built on land they are “squatting on,” or unlawfully occupying. “The city doesn’t do anything with it, so we made it our own. They (the city) don’t say anything, so we keep planting, growing, and sharing the space. At this point, it’s ours.” There is an unspoken agreement between the Free School community, its neighborhood
residents, and the city over the lot. If the city were to take it or use it, Deirdre agrees the community would refuse and take a stand to protect their space, affirming the illegal occupation of the Free School in this space. Catteano and Engle-DiMauro (2015) find that occupying an unoccupied area of land or a building that the squatter does not own, rent, or otherwise have lawful permission to use is a symbol of community resistance. The Free School is claiming their right participate in urban life. This practice by the Free School of claiming, educating, and gardening in this space contributes to new forms of urban citizenship based on the experience of collective action and claim-making, such as new rights over land.

Students learn the scientific aspects of how food is grown and eaten and societal inequity of food injustice, why some people have food and others do not. Food system inequities are taught with hands-on activities in the garden, kitchen, and with community organizations dedicated to food justice. The Free School’s approach to learning, community engagement, and dedication to social justice equip the new generation of students to critically engage with normalized systems of power that are relevant to their daily lives, such as the production and consumption of food. This type of education resists standardization in assessing knowledge and normalization of individualism, and preserves community identity and values by providing students the space to question and critique systemic inequality.

These practices and space also foster student learning through composting, gardening, and other kinds of outdoor work which highlight the importance of sustainability. Students share their knowledge with the community through community celebrations such as Earth Day, when students sell plants and make gardening buckets, buckets with planted vegetables, to feed the community. Deirdre comments, “we are right in the middle of a food dessert so our goal, especially with Earth Day and around harvest time is to get people growing food, but not
everyone has a garden or yard. However, everyone has a stoop and can fit a bucket on it.” The celebration is held on a once-vacant lot, now a community garden the school has claimed as its own. This community-centered event empowers the neighborhood and students of The Free School to create spaces that meet their own needs.

Community gardens can address how land and property are valued; how nature and public space are understood in cities; whose needs are served by urban agriculture and public space; how such spaces are produced; and who can participate in these processes (Barron, 2017; Reynolds, 2015). It is argued that gardening is a tool of rebellion (McKay 2011) against the corporatization of our food system. Gardening is accessible to everyone whatever their age, gender, religion, or socioeconomic status. Once in the public, involving public space and community participation, gardening can serve to question and reinvent human interactions and power relations (Baudry, 2012). Community gardens serve as a common ground, literally and figuratively, for people of different backgrounds and experiences to come together. Deirdre couldn’t speak enough about what an amazing resource it has been for the students, parents and community. She continued:

“It’s a labor of love. It looks messy, but produces food like mad. We get early producers, things like cilantro, peas, and later vegetables and garlic. Volunteers and parents help keep it up. We put out literature to the community to explain what’s going on, we have plant sales and food sales from this corner and give out a lot of community freebies, part of why I think we are able to continue occupying this space. Every year we do “I heart the Free School” bags with fruits and veggies from our lot to help the community issue of poor food access in our neighborhood. We also have many of our lessons outside, weav[ing] in curriculums for different subject areas.

The practice of gardening for students, when incorporated into curriculum, is found to improve academic success along with physical, socio-emotional, and community health. Habib and Doherty (2007) find school gardens support student inquiry, their connection to the natural
world, and engages students in the process of formulating meaningful questions about poverty, food insecurity, and the food system.

School-based community gardening as part of a curriculum provides opportunities for students to engage in experiential learning and apply classroom knowledge to real-world problems. Students who are familiar with growing their own food tend to eat more fruits and vegetables (Bell & Dyment, 2008) and are more inclined to continue healthy eating habits through adulthood (Morris & Zidenberg-Cherr, 2002). Community gardens provide access to fresh fruits and vegetables and boost produce consumption rates of gardeners and their families. Gardening during childhood exposes children to healthy food, moderate exercise, and positive social interactions that can lead to a lifetime of health (Gross & Lane, 2007). This pedagogical approach engages students in community life while preparing them for futures beyond markets and competition (Gruenewald 2008, p. 315).

Community gardening and urban farming that includes community-based education and training are also part of the Radix Ecological and Sustainability Center. Radix works with the city of Albany, local schools, nonprofits, and the community in the South End of Albany. The mission of Radix promotes ecological literacy and environmental stewardship through educational programs based on sustainable technologies. Their practices and technologies rely on resources that are renewable or do not have any long-term adverse impact on the environment.

Stacey Pettigrew, the Executive Director, shared at a Siena Engage for Change conference that her work at Radix was motivated by her work in Latin America at a young age, acting as a conflict resolver in Chiapas, Mexico. There she learned about food sovereignty and saw a different relationship with land and the watershed than she was used to. She also saw firsthand the ramifications of U.S. policy and intervention – in particular, the violence created by
corporate policies, and how that cycle has been implemented here among low-income and radicalized groups in the South End. Currently, she is an active voice in many local environmental justice projects dedicated to the integration of equity into sustainability practice, self-determination, and structural change.

The educational and training programs at Radix offer children and adults an experiential education aimed at understanding environmental issues and building the tools to work toward positive solutions (Radix, 2019). The Education Director, Scott Kellogg (2017) on a tour of the Radix property shared “It’s a small attempt to change a big problem and being at the community level is critical.” This is achieved through block ambassadors, greening projects, block meetings and free soil testing for community members to learn about the safety of their own soil and its health implications. Radix also teaches practical skills that can be applied to create environmental and economic sustainability, with an emphasis on food justice.

In a summer work program in which Radix hires and pays local high school students, I met Justina, a local college student and educator at Radix. She describes her objective as an instructor to connect the farm and sustainability practices to the students’ daily lives in Albany. They begin each lesson by identifying and defining key terms related to sustainability, then work to find examples of such practices and ideas on Radix property or in the local community. Justina explains that their lessons and activities are centered on solving problems to make the community better. As I watched the lesson, students were vocal and engaged in activities, despite the sweltering sun. Justina said that their motivation and investment in learning comes from their equal relationships, built on trust and mutual respect.

This philosophy was demonstrated as Justina split students into pairs. Some students tended to the chickens and raised beds, while others started walking to the City Mission to
collect food for their compost. We walked down to a mass food collection site, where different grocery stores in the area drop their leftover food waste into large carts. Here past-date and damaged food is sorted, then redistributed to feed the City Mission’s homeless population or the community members. Located in the back lot of the Mission, we took the most deteriorated food for compost. The blacktop reflected the hot summer sun and the food that had been dumped had a ripe and potent smell. Justina explained that they take the worst food waste so community members can take home the better food for human consumption.

I watched as 10-12 community members “grocery shopped” out of the dumped carts, sort the rotten food from the moldy food, and took a bag for themselves. Many of the women digging through bins knew each other and shared personal news as they picked their food. Justina and the students were experts in food sorting, their hands quickly opening plastic food cartridges, recycling them, placing food in the wheel barrow and breaking down boxes. Once full and back at Radix, they efficiently redistributed food waste in more environmentally sustainable ways as chicken feed and compost.

Justina continued, as she sorted through rotten food with the students,
I don’t separate us. Education is not one way, it’s a partnership and why I like to use the words co-education and co-healing. Working with students of color – it’s we. I have knowledge I want to share, but they have knowledge too about this community. So, I give them the opportunity to teach me and much as I teach them. It’s important to have POC [people of color] in leadership positions, especially within education.

Passidomo (2014) finds that programs seeking to unite food and justice are better conceived and executed by, rather on behalf of, local residents. Justina expands on this idea by arguing that POC in education are important because they understand and connect with racialized communities because they themselves have likely shared similar social experiences. People often learn by example, and by having a POC in a position of leadership, students themselves can imagine themselves as leaders too. Justina opined that many people have privilege that they fail to take into account. Not many people recognize their own privilege, which can be destructive. People with privilege don’t want to or know how to come down to that level.

Other scholars (Dilworth et al., 2014; McNulty, et al., 2009) agree that teachers of color tend to provide more culturally relevant teaching and better understanding of the situations that students of color may face. These factors help to develop trusting teacher-student relationships. Teachers of color can also help students feel more welcome at school or serve as role models for students of color. They tend to have more positive perceptions of students of color, both academically and behaviorally, than white teachers do (Wright, 2015). Justina uses her role as an educator to combat negative stereotypes by constantly questioning society, politics, and what she sees in the media. She said that is where her resistance began – with small thoughts that led to larger actions – and now she is passing that on to others.

Justina explained that resistance, for her, takes shape in her everyday practices in the summer education program, being present as a student and educator of color but also as an individual interacting intentionally with others and with the food system. She works to make the
classes and trainings on the farm or in the gardens is relevant to students. Breunig (2016) states social justice educational practices need to be shaped around the lives of students, the classroom context, the educative aims of the practice, and the institution to construct learning experiences that articulate these (Breunig, 2016). Justina explained resistance involves knowledge and practice, a holistic comprehension seen in her lesson-planning and implementation. It involves the identification and consideration of the local and global food systems, politics, society, and economy, an understanding that allows her to evaluate and assess her own community and advocate for meaningful change.

Radix, CDL, and The Free School offer community-based strategies of everyday resistance that place community, health, and the environment above personal gain or profit through education, promoting equitable relationships. They enhance food security in Albany by improving physical and environmental health, engendering cooperation, and fostering sustainable community development. In addition, they educate and motivate individuals to participate, by taking an active leadership role in the food system. Everyday acts of Latinx resistance encourage dignity by promoting culture and justice, practices that create and contribute to new meaning, power, and actions in conflict with the neoliberal agenda.

Cities are social expressions of relations, movements, and ideologies so it stands to reason that even localized changes in cities can provide insight into broader political change. Alternative narratives, music, poetry, art, farmers’ markets, CSAs, community gardening, community meals, education, and training programming under extreme economic pressure uncover unrecognized assumptions, power dynamics, and social change potential guided by non-conventional intentions, actors, contexts, and means (Vinthagen & Johansson, 2013). The everyday forms of Latinx resistance not only bring a better understanding of local needs, but can
apprise, enlighten, and clarify larger movements and trends by emphasizing the power, resilience, creativity, and ingenuity of those thought to be subjugated.
Chapter 6: Conclusion: Resistance and Wellbeing in the Capital Region

This study demonstrates that the neoliberal capitalist food system is not intended to feed people healthy food. It is a system that does not ensure equal access to food or the right to grow and produce food in environmentally friendly and equitable ways, especially among low-income racialized communities. The neoliberal agenda, by means of state and corporate entities, seeks to maximize profit on food commodities, despite the food being unhealthy, lacking nutrients, or actively detrimental to consumers’ health. Ricardo Salvador, a Senior Scientist at the 2016 Farm to School Conference, states: “the food system serves well for those that have economic power. It does not for those who do not have economic power, and it doesn’t care, it wasn’t designed to serve that purpose.” This dissertation identifies and examines the effects of structural violence in the food system for Latinx workers and consumers, emphasizing food system inequities in federal, state, and local governance.

This dissertation contributes data on an under-researched population. It offers a more complex and detailed narrative about the Latinx experience in the U.S. food system and food justice movement. The study of daily food related practices among the low-income Latinx population in the Capital Region works to offer a human perspective on larger structural forms of violence, demonstrating the way macro-level statistical inequities are lived, endured, contested, negotiated, and survived in practice. This examination is significant because it brings meaning to the way food system inequities are challenged by those within and a part of the Latinx community in the Capital Region. These everyday strategies have the potential to inform different groups in different localities, linking commonly affected people in different cities. These practices act as a vehicle for a deeper understanding of socio-cultural resistance and the uneven implementation of food system inequities under austerity in different spaces.
The period following the 2008 financial crisis marks a more precarious neoliberal context for low-income racialized communities at the local level. This period is defined by an increased application of austerity and varying changes that have taken place in the U.S. economy with the increased use of artificial intelligence and mechanization of labor. Increased austerity measures have also led to the growth of the service sector, characterized by temporary contractual work, declining unionization, and the failure of the minimum wage to keep up with inflation (National Employment Law Project, 2014). Over the last decade, these changes have most drastically affected low-income and racialized communities.

The Latinx community also confronts other crises, such as the highest rates of home loss and foreclosure and highest rates of food insecurity between 2008 and 2012 (Coleman-Jensen, 2012; Hipple, 2010; Bricker, 2012). Many Latinxs have also faced political turmoil and poor hurricane recovery efforts in Puerto Rico. Most recently, the Latinx community has been struck by a mass shooting in El Paso targeting Mexican-Americans and Mexicans. Meanwhile, the community grapples with ICE raids, the Trump administration’s attempt to end DACA, concentration camps, and family separations at the Southern border (Hignett, 2019).

Research studies demonstrate correlations between Donald Trump’s administration and increased health risks for Latinxs (Bever & Wan, 2019). These risks include real-life consequences from premature birth rates, worsening cardiovascular health, sleep problems owing to anxiety and stress, and preconditions for more serious and or deadly diseases. These intensifying sociocultural, economic, political, and physiological issues affecting the Latinx community must be studied. The Latinx population is projected to double by 2050, reaching 26% of the overall U.S. population (PEW Research, 2016), making them an even more integral and essential part of the U.S. and its development. Acevedo (2019) explains that Latinxs also tend to
be younger than comparable groups, with a median age of 28 as compared to 38 for the general population, and accounting for 75% of the growth of the U.S. labor force over the last six years.

This study examines the impact of the neoliberal agenda on the food system, with emphasis on its ramifications in the Latinx community and their responses to food system inequities. The food system is the largest sector of employment in the U.S. economy. Food workers are 14 percent of the nation’s workforce, or 21,505,450 workers total (Occupation Employment Statistics, 2015). While employment levels in the food system recovered after the 2008 financial crisis, workers themselves have not seen positive changes. Since 2012 wages overall have remained stagnant, food workers are accessing food stamps at higher levels, health and safety problems have increased, and membership in unions has declined (Food Chain Workers Alliance, 2016, p. 5).

Latinxs are vital to the discussion of the food system, as they disproportionately represent food system workers and experience food system inequities. Almost 75% of Latinxs are, in some way, involved in food system work. Agricultural labor in the U.S. food system is predominantly (88%) composed of racialized individuals, while the majority of managers and owners are white (Rotner, 2016; Ayazi & Elsheikh, 2016). Latinxs receive the lowest wages for any employment, which contributes to a lack of access to health care, affordable housing, and basic needs, and high rates of diet-related disease. These are all intentional acts of structural violence in the food system, though they are accepted as normal; they have real and injurious effects on Latinx bodies (Holmes, 2013).

Everyday forms of Latinx resistance expose structural violence as an inherent component of the creation and function of the food system. I find Latinxs to be not just producers or consumers, but active agents within attempts to resist food system inequities and achieve food
justice. I argue that those most targeted and harmed by the neoliberal agenda reject it, along with its rhetoric that has normalized unhealthy corporate consumption practices. As demonstrated here, many in low-income and racialized communities prefer alternatives or attempts that favor a more equitable approach to food production and consumption.

The National Center on Farmworker Health (2018) estimates that there are between 2.5 and three million agricultural workers in the U.S. Yen Liu (2019) reports that 34% of the general U.S. population in 2008 identified as people of color, but more than 42% of food system workers identified as people of color. The latest National Agricultural Workers Survey found that the 95% of immigrant farmworkers were from Mexico, three percent were from Central America, and two percent were from other countries. In total, 76% percent of all farmworkers identify as Latino/Hispanic (Farmworker Justice, 2014). Liu continues: Latinxs, who represented 15% of the general population in 2008, were disproportionately represented as 25% of food system workers. Latinxs are the largest racial and ethnic group working in the U.S. food system and are disproportionately hurt by it.

Latinx purchasing power as consumers within the food system is also rising, from $1.2 trillion in 2012 (The Selig Center, 2014) to $1.7 trillion in 2018 (Morse, 2018) and projected to reach $1.9 trillion by 2023 (Acevedo, 2019). This population growth makes the already interwoven Latinx community an even more vital part of U.S. political economy, culture, and food system. Arlene Davila (2012) states that both Hollywood and Corporate America are taking note of the marketing power of the growing Latinx population in the U.S. The significant growth and youth of the Latinx population is altering markets, changing the way not only Latinxs but non-Latinx communities and people think about U.S. food and the food system (Arellano, 2013). Laboy and Hirsch (2013, p. 4) state that
Salsa is overtaking ketchup as America’s Number 1 condiment, tortillas outsell burger and hot dog buns; sales of tortilla chips trump potato chips; and tacos and burritos have become so ubiquitously ‘American,’ most people don’t even consider them ethnic.

Within this collection of small food changes, they continue, exists a larger “rewrite of the American menu at the macro level, an evolution of whole patterns of how people eat.” Latinxs are encouraging a rethinking of food productions and consumption. People participating in food justice activities have brought to the forefront issues of workplace safety, pay, citizenship, human, and environmental rights.

Latinxs in the U.S. have always played a role in shaping and reshaping cultural norms or understandings; however, their struggles and strengths are often overlooked in studies of resistance and food justice. What happens to the Latinx community affects the larger community. This influence makes their voices and experiences increasingly critical to researchers, policy makers, health providers, and the broader public. My examination of Latinx voices, experiences, perspectives, and knowledge demonstrates an emergence of Latinx leadership and practices that challenge food system inequities.

The examination of everyday forms of Latinx resistance is critical to the study of low-income Latinx communities. The community members featured here acknowledge the disproportionate inequities faced by those struggling within the food system, while placing historically marginalized and exploited groups at the center of discussions about transforming it. My research demonstrates the way low-income Latinx communities are rethinking the food system and reforming its current principles, replacing individualism with community, profit with well-being, destruction with sustainability, and inequity with justice. It contributes to a rethinking of multiple academic disciplines, including the political economy, food system, and
resistance studies, but also other sectors involving charity, volunteerism, non-profit work, and policymaking.

Resistance is diverse, representing symbolic behavior that includes alternative narratives, redefinition, and meaning-making. Castells (1990) explains that urban issues have become central to this body of research because of growing evidence of consumption meeting its limits. This is evident in the U.S. food system as its inequities increase. Buechler (1995) argues that resistance is triggered by new sites of conflict and within everyday life, underscoring the importance of community, cultural identity, and autonomous decision-making in opposition to neoliberalism. I find that new conflicts after the 2008 financial crisis have triggered resistance to inequities such as homelessness, low wages, workers’ rights abuses, increases in diet-related disease, and everyday food insecurity.

My work contributes to food justice and resistance studies by diversifying resistance to food system inequities, working beyond social movements and direct action, to reveal more subtle daily acts, related to food, local economics, representation, self- and community care, and well-being. This closer examination reveals how individuals and groups regard their own localized food histories and systems, centering on culture, race, and ethnicity, not as an afterthought but as an essential factor in exposing neoliberal restructuring (Alkon and Agyeman, 2011). This dissertation emphasizes the way resistance is not just about direct action and systemic change, but inclusive to it. The interviews and personal stories used here illuminate the way that those most harmed by the food system are not just victims, but also active agents.

Resistance is a process, filled with overlapping ideas, practices and alternatives for moving forward. Oppression and resistance are a multiform production of relations (Butz & Rimpmester, 1999). Both, over time, in a constant, fluid, ever-changing process, adapt, respond,
and react to one another. Latinx resistance strategies are innovative, experimental, and creative. Practices I have observed include storytelling, poetry, music, art, gardening, preparing and sharing food together, CSAs, farmers’ markets, education, and training programs. However, these practices are temporary and at times flawed, sometimes simultaneously challenging and replicating neoliberal logic, forming and reforming under and in response to changing dynamics of power.

The 2008 financial crisis and recession forged a new terrain in which not only a new version of capitalism but new forms of resistance could take shape. It crystallized the need for food security among vulnerable populations and reignited the food justice movement. The Great Recession reprioritized U.S. food justice, not just focusing on middle-class white food choices, but centering racialized communities as leaders and vital contributors to justice practices. Latinx resistance, perspectives, and strategies are critical to revealing unjust components of austerity. They allow for a clear, more meaningful, and holistic examination of how the government, local organizations, and communities define, implement, adapt to, and resist austerity.

Everyday practices of Latinx resistance examined here expose the contradictions in the neoliberal agenda, while offering transformative potential to create an alternative moral economy grounded in justice and sociability, in workplaces, gardens, communities, kitchens or schools, promoting equity and community rather than the “free” market (Tulumello, 2016). Within the Capital District, everyday practices and cultural acts of resistance, adaption, and collaboration in face of economic hardships allow individuals, community groups, and organizations to continue their work in a time when they are needed most. Davies and Blanco (2017) assert that “studies of austerity and those who resist are of great importance as cities are critical actors in setting the tone for national and international politics. My research begins to answer this call, highlighting
the political imaginaries of local individuals and groups experiencing changing pressures under austerity.

This dissertation fills a gap in studies of austerity, detailing how cities, in particular the residents, rescue themselves by means of community organizing (Glasmeir & Gray Lobao, 2014). My work contributes to the literature on rescaling the state that predicts that policy responses under austerity will be more geographically varied, complex, and contingent on local governments (Lobao, 2011, p. 4). State rescaling focuses on individualistic adaptations (Brenner and Theodore, 2002), emphasizing that internal institutional attributes play a stronger role than longstanding political geographies in policy strategy. This work shows that like local governance, local communities too have more flexibility to experiment with new forms of challenges after the 2008 financial crisis. My work supports Lobao’s (2011) call for a rethinking of longstanding perspectives about local government in the U.S., as they and their communities experience highly differentiated pressures due to the neoliberal refocusing of the state.

My analysis of everyday forms of Latinx resistance illuminates the varied nature of austerity in its application at the local level depending on time, location, and group of people. Hackworth (2011) explains that this inconsistency makes it difficult to identity and unify across different geographies; however, it also opens holes and weaknesses in its application that can be exploited. I’ve demonstrated the way Latinx resistance inserts itself into these holes at the local level in myriad ways. However, the pervasiveness of the neoliberal agenda is always apparent and a constant threat, a push and pull with resistance practices.

Latinx resistance strategies are built upon firsthand perspectives and lived experiences of food system inequities. This familiarity with the embodied experiences of injustice amplified by austerity provides some leaders and participants with specific knowledge and histories of social
inequities that can be used to expose structural violence in the food system. Taina Asili commented, when asked about the difference between white led and POC led food justice initiatives, that

as a board (Soul Fire Farm) we all have a very personal connection to this work, it is not just a volunteer experience or a job. We all see it as our intimate contribution of the betterment of ourselves communities and world. Many of us come with our own stories of why we are there and how we have been impacted by food injustice and lack of access to healthy food and medicine and traditional ways of cultivating food and more how it has hurt us. When you bring such passion and intimate connection you see that ripple out into the work itself and its meaning, people feel that. It is also about how we connect with one another. We are very loving board community and how we run our board and communicate with each other is very different than other boards I have been on before. We are coming from a social justice lens and an understanding of oppression in a very personal way, we bring that into the work and figure out how to improve it.

Race, culture, ethnicity, and class play a central role in the production, distribution, and consumption of food (Alkon & Agyeman, 2011). Latinx resistance offers personal and intimate knowledge of food system inequities and because of this unique solution to that oppression.

This work demonstrates why low-income Latinxs need to play a central role in solutions, ideas and organizations that address food system inequities. I find everyday forms of Latinx resistance to be uniquely equipped to address food system inequities because of their interconnection and inspiration from a historical legacy connected to land, farmworkers, food production, socio-cultural perspectives, and first-hand accounts of food injustice. Latinx resistance strategies create and build community and solidarity among seemingly desperate generations, classes, and ethnic groups. These strategies are defined by historically rooted critical race and class approaches that expose food system inequities.

This dissertation provides a more extensive and holistic understanding that informs responses and solutions to food system inequities, compared to an outside, top-down approach. Food system inequities can be found even in the very solutions meant to address them, such as
food programming led by government, nonprofit, and charitable entities. These create obstacles to food equity by imposing restrictions, such as requirements to provide a license, proof of address, bill payments, or proof of work. Other obstacles include inconsistent funding and quality of programs, prioritization of efficient and best practices, capitalist models, individualistic approaches, and biased assumptions about low-income communities, the economy, and politics. Even when they are well-meaning and provide short term relief for some, these practices can further retrench neoliberal approaches, preserve racism, and undo justice.

Food Justice initiatives are often criticized for propping up neoliberal restructuring (Tornaghi, 2014; Walker, 2016) or for overlooking race, class, and cultural dynamics that tend to limit participation and reinforce existing inequalities (Guthman, 2008; Hoover, 2013; Reynolds, 2015). This work calls out neoliberalism’s manifestations in attempts to address injustice in the food system. By focusing on a specific time, area, and everyday acts, Latinx resistance practices criticize the faults, contradictions, and shortcomings of government, nonprofit, and charitable food programming. Everyday forms of Latinx resistance expose institutionalized racism and power structures based on white privilege that perpetuate the marginalization of racialized communities. Latinx resistance offers constructive criticism, alerting policymakers, state workers, volunteers, and private organizations to inconsistencies within their own attempts to address food system inequities. This is not to say Latinx strategies are perfect, but instead of putting the market, food, or profit first, the Latinx strategies outlined here place people, culture, race, and the environment at the center of their solutions.

The everyday rethinking and reorganization of priorities, placing people, culture, well-being, and life above profit, undermines policies of austerity and the neoliberal agenda. They contradict privatization, standardization, capital accumulation, and environmental degradation.
From my observations, the gains from these everyday practices need further study to prove their longevity and impact in alleviating food system inequities. Localized, everyday practices of Latinx resistance may not instigate direct or systemic change, but they do provide adaptations, alternatives, or alleviated circumstances for those who are struggling. This research identifies how vital seemingly small but meaningful changes are to everyday people, and highlights the need for further research into their lived effects.

This dissertation builds upon current discussions and theoretical foundations within the discourses of food studies, resistance studies, and neoliberalism. My research demonstrates how the structural violence of food system inequities manifests in federal, state, and local governance. It also reveals the process of normalization and justification that contributes of why people of color disproportionately suffer from food system inequities. Everyday forms of Latinx resistance alleviate difficult conditions, encourage dignity, celebrate culture, and prioritize solidarity. These practices contextualize and ground today’s efforts to promote food justice, humanize and distill complex structural violence, emphasizing the power, ingenuity, and resilience of those thought to be subjugated and give deeper meaning to the bodily, spiritual, and emotional devastation caused by food system inequities.

In a Capital Roots community garden, Stephanie shared gardening provided her something else in addition to food, community, knowledge, socialization and feeling a part of something. She explained it was important to her to grow her own food, to have control over what she eats but also knew she couldn’t do it and didn’t want to garden alone. She explained it’s not just about the end result of having fresh, healthy food but how you got the food, the process, the experiences along the way and what you learned about yourself and others. She stated,

Food is memory. Memories are powerful reminders of who we are as people, where we come from, and what we can do.
Stephanie’s statement speaks to the power of food, but also the power of people, community, culture, and what can be done when one knows oneself and where they come from.

My analysis reveals the way communities intentionally rework everyday practices to respond to changing implementations of power. These strategies, moments of everyday resistance, illuminate the micro-scale aspects of food system inequities while providing insight to larger economic changes and social movements focused on food, health, environmentalism, and land rights after the 2008 financial crisis. Latinx resistance restructures the way individuals and communities relate with food, including the growth, purchasing, and consumption. They are shifting the conditions that perpetuate and hold food system inequities in place. The everyday practices of Latinx resistance examined here only begin to encompass the myriad ways in which low-income Latinx communities promote justice in the food system.
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