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**Pulling the Food System Up by the Roots:
How do we build an equitable food system
in the Twin Cities?**

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Honors Thesis

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Macalester College Department of Geography

April 28, 2021

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Abstract

Prior to 2020, food insecurity was already a pervasive problem in the United States, with limited access to adequate, nutritious foods being linked to numerous poor physical and psychological outcomes. With the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic and civil uprisings in response to police brutality and state-sanctioned violence, the Twin Cities communities are facing overlapping crises that threaten individual and community wellbeing and food security. How do we build a just, equitable, and “crisis-proof” food system? Drawing from theoretical frameworks in social epidemiology and radical food geography, this paper assesses how the local food system and community food insecurity in the Twin Cities have been impacted by crises and the lessons presented by community responses to crises. Focus groups with community advocates and stakeholders in the Twin Cities are combined with PhotoVoice activities, a community participatory research method in which participants document their experiences with pictures and videos. Participants shared their knowledge on the interplay of socio-ecological and systemic factors that have contributed to both crisis and inequality in the food system, as well as their visions for transformative change in the local food system. Qualitative thematic analysis produced themes that link disparate impacts of crises and inequality in the food system to white supremacy, racial capitalism, state violence, and environmental apartheid. Participants co-created a vision for an equitable and sustainable food system that embodies an idea described as "the food circle", using local agriculture as a tool to build community, achieve transformative systemic change, and create a "Green" future.

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CHAPTER 1: Introduction

Who decides who gets to eat, and why? That might sound like a pointless question, since globally, enough food is produced to feed 1.5x the world's population (Erdman, 2018). Since there's enough to go around, everyone could, and should eat. This isn't the case, however, as evidenced by persisting household food insecurity in the United States that has now been exacerbated by ongoing crises (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2020). Food insecurity is defined as having limited or unreliable access to food, but Hecht et al. go further to frame food insecurity as the restriction of control over one's food (2018, 1962). The implications of having restricted control over food access and food choices are becoming increasingly graver during the global Covid-19 pandemic, as the virus lays bare the extent of systemic inequalities and injustice that result in not only food insecurity, but also disproportionate infection and death from Covid-19 (Liebman, Rhiney, and Wallace, 2020; Hecht et al., 2018).

Food insecurity is intertwined with sociopolitical and socioeconomic inequality, social disadvantage and stress, chronic health disparities, mental health disparities, and intergenerational trauma through a multitude of possible pathways of embodied inequalities (Hagen, 2020). Socio-ecological factors across multiple scales interact to co-construct food environments that are rife with unequal access to affordable fresh produce and culturally appropriate foods, grocery stores, green spaces and gardening space, housing, and healthcare access (James et al., 2021). It is no surprise that populations who live under these inequitable conditions experience disproportionate rates of chronic health conditions such as cardiovascular disease and diabetes and heightened rates of mental health conditions including anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Hecht

et al., 2018). Because of the complex and dynamic nature of food insecurity and associated negative health and social outcomes, crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic and state violence pose serious threats to household and community food security (Hagen, 2020).

Prior to the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, the USDA shared in their annual report that 10.5% of households, or 13.7 million households in the United States, experienced food insecurity in 2019 (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2020). Hecht et al. warned in 2018 that “food insecurity can be triggered or exacerbated by natural and human-made hazards that destabilize the local, regional or global food system, such as climate change-associated extreme weather events or social unrest. Recovering from such events and preventing escalated food insecurity requires strong pre-event food system functioning and advanced planning” (p. 1962). According to early projections, Feeding America has estimated that 15.6% of the national population experienced food insecurity in 2020, compared to 10.5% of households in 2019, suggesting that industrial food systems in the United States are not adept at preventing escalated food insecurity in the face of crises (Hake et al., 2020; Coleman-Jensen et al., 2020). In Minnesota specifically, the Wilder Foundation shared recent data on food insecurity rates from the U.S. Census Bureau’s Pulse survey, reporting that:

“Black and Hispanic/Latino Minnesotans reported food insecurity at more than double the rate of White residents (83% of Black residents and 70% of Hispanic residents, compared to 32% of White residents). Fifty-two percent of Asian residents and 55% of people of other races, including Native Americans, also reported some degree of food insecurity” (Hane, 2020).

The picture of food insecurity only worsens after the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, as “generations of exposure to poor air quality, food deserts, medical apartheid, and the collective social and emotional trauma of State terror have left Black and other people of color with high rates of asthma, high blood pressure, diabetes, heart disease, and other conditions that leave many immunocompromised and compound the chances of death upon infection with Covid-19” (Liebman, Rhiney, and Wallace, 2020, 333). Not only are Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) in Minnesota experiencing increased rates of food insecurity, Black Minnesotans are two times more likely to test positive for Covid-19 compared to white Minnesotans, and Latinx and Native American Minnesotans are both nearly three times more likely to test positive for Covid-19 compared to white Minnesotans (MN.Gov, 2021). In an already unfair playing field, the odds against BIPOC Minnesotans increase during the crises that have unfolded because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

In the Twin Cities, residents are experiencing compounding crises due to state-sanctioned violence by local police departments and the deployment of the National Guard to quell protests and grassroots resistance to police brutality (Georgiades and Schrieter, 2020). On May, 25, 2020, George Floyd was murdered in the streets of his own community by a police officer with at least 22 previous complaints on his record for excessive use of force (Lartey and VanSickle, 2021). Grief and trauma rippled throughout the Twin Cities communities, a metropolis known for its racial disparities and too familiar with state-sanctioned violence towards Black bodies and communities (Holder, 2020; Phelps, Powell, and Robertson, 2020). With the recent losses of Terrance Franklin, Jamar Clark, and Philando Castile to police violence still fresh in many communities’

memories, George Floyd sparked civil uprisings and social unrest in response to call for justice (Georgiades and Schreiter, 2020; Holder, 2020). Grassroots resistance and protests responded in righteous anger, and the Twin Cities witnessed the burning of the Minneapolis 3rd Precinct and property destruction throughout several neighborhoods within the first two weeks after the murder of Mr. Floyd (Georgiades and Schrieter, 2020). Local government officials responded to these calls for justice by enacting a curfew, deploying the National Guard, brutalizing protesters with tear gas and rubber bullets, and violently arresting people exercising their right to protest (Georgiades and Schrieter, 2020).

Amidst the unrest, communities organized themselves to sustain local movements and support families and neighborhoods most impacted by the destruction or closure of grocery stores and other means of food access (Liebman, Rhiney, and Wallace, 2020). Liebman, Rhiney, and Wallace describe the movement in the Twin Cities that ensued:

“Resistance through rioting, looting, mutual aid networks, dance parties, curfew defiance, and the reclamation of public space have reoriented vast swaths of the Left toward [police and prison] abolition and the materialization of a solidarity politics based on anti-racism and anti-capitalism. In a moment exposing the illegitimacy of bourgeois democracy, people have formed network support ranging from community self-defense to mental health services.” (2020, 334).

As described, a strong social movement coalesced as mutual aid networks, rural farmers, and neighbors came together to assist those that lost their local food source during the uprisings after grocery stores and convenience stores burned down, were damaged, or closed (temporarily or permanently). Even though mutual aid networks enabled a rapid

response to community members' immediate needs, many neighborhoods made up of predominantly low-income, BIPOC, and/or immigrant populations have been permanently altered, both physically and mentally (Holder, 2020). The co-occurring crises of the Covid-19 pandemic, police brutality, and other state-sanctioned violence are still ongoing and have already resulted in escalated rates of food insecurity (Hane, 2020). If the sign of a strong food system is its ability to prevent escalated food insecurity and recover quickly from crises (Hecht et al., 2018), the evidence from the Twin Cities highlights the fragility and weaknesses of local food systems.

With advanced agriculture technology and a highly efficient industrial food market, how could the food system have failed to feed everyone equitably? The answer is surprisingly simple: it wasn't really built to. Ricardo Salvador, a senior scientist and director of the food and environment program at the Union of Concerned Scientists, shared in his own testimony:

“I will begin by telling you without mincing any words that the agriculture sector in the U.S. is a reflection of the history of the country. It is the whitest profession and that is not an accident. It is based on a worldview that came from across the ocean and appropriated land and labor and is utilizing all manner of what are framed as natural resources in a consumptive extractive way. What it produces is basically enriching a very small set of monopolists and capitalists who are making a profit from making everybody sick... The cultural propaganda says that we don't have any choice – that there is a vector of modernization and technification of agriculture that will make us more efficient” (Levkoe et al., 2020, 298).

Despite the fact that this land was unjustly stolen from Indigenous people, and this country was built by enslaved Black people, agriculture remains a primarily white, and increasingly corporate, industry (Bullington, 2020). According to Gilbert and Williams, “land-related discriminatory practices and policies have significant ramifications today: the average white family has ten times the wealth of the average Black family in the United States” (2020, 231). With this context in mind, the problem shifts from solely food insecurity to interrogating long-standing inequalities in power and wealth, particularly land ownership, among communities of color. As Levkoe et al., says, “political and economic structures are at the root of why people are hungry in the first place” (2020, 299).

The food justice movement emerged in response to these class and racial inequities in accessing nutritious, sufficient, culturally appropriate food (Caspi, 2021). Radical food geographers understand food justice and food insecurity as spatial phenomena due to the multiscale nature of the socio-ecological interactions that perpetuate inequality and food insecurity (Reynolds et al., 2020). Framing food insecurity as a spatial phenomenon demands an investigation into the place-specific factors in the Twin Cities that perpetuate food insecurity and health disparities. In this paper, I apply the geopolitical concept of “place” as a way of contextualizing the physical and social landscapes that influence levels and flows of power (Pierce, Martin, and Murphy, 2010). When applied to studying food insecurity, social epidemiology’s theoretical frameworks link the causes of food insecurity to similar general causes regardless of place (Hagen, 2020). However, the socio-ecological factors interacting to co-produce food insecurity are place-specific due to the multi-scale, intertwined nature of structural determinants of

inequality (Hagen, 2020). Thus, place-based studies are informative for continuing to apply and develop theory in radical geography and social epidemiology as well as for local leaders and community activists to advocate for change (Hammelman, Reynolds, and Levkoe, 2020).

Food justice scholars Slocum, Cadieux, and Blumberg assert the relevance of analyzing “power-geometrics” of foodscapes to understanding and overcoming injustice in the food system (Slocum, Cadieux, and Blumberg, 2016). Explaining the concept of power-geometrics and its implications, Slocum, Cadieux, and Blumberg state:

“some people and locations have greater control over the flows of people, money, things and ideas constituting places. Greater control over flows cumulatively creates the forms of land, labor, and exchange relations of past, present, and future food spaces. Using Massey’s analytic framework, we suggest that the spatial politics of food justice would not characterize the problem as ‘lack of access’ in a ‘food desert’. Instead, it would see the socio-spatial processes involved in the food system for what they are – nutritional apartheid, abandoned bodies in sacrifice zones, or race war” (2016, 21).

As food injustices manifest due to political and economic structures through socio-spatial processes, some food justice scholars and practitioners prefer the term “food apartheid” over the term “food insecurity” (Slocum, Cadieux, and Blumberg, 2016; Caspi, 2021). This is because food apartheid emphasizes the racialized roots of disparities in food security in political, social, and economic structures, both historical and current (Akom, Shah, and Nakai, 2016; Brones, 2018; Caspi, 2021; Sbicca, 2012). Put another way, food apartheid more accurately describes the racial inequities in food systems because it

locates the structural causes of food injustices, rather than naming solely the condition of food insecurity (Sbicca, 2012). In order to understand the power-geometrics and place-based factors of foodscapes in the Twin Cities, this paper examines socio-ecological injustices that contribute to escalated food apartheid, violence, and Covid-19 experienced by marginalized communities.

Zooming in to the scale of Minneapolis and Saint Paul for this analysis, visible remnants of historical injustice are not only everywhere, but they have morphed into current day inequalities and disparities. From the interstates that were built to divide and segregate communities (Pike, 2020), to Enbridge's Line 3 pipeline project on Indigenous land permitted by Governor Tim Walz (Fraser, 2019) and redlining neighborhoods to block BIPOC families from home ownership (Holder, 2020), examples of dispossession and oppression are ubiquitous throughout Minnesota today. This is observable in the Black homeownership rate in Minneapolis, the lowest Black homeownership rate of the metro areas in the United States, where 25% of Black families own their own home, compared to 76% of white families (Anderson, 2020). At a glance, numerous sources of injustice and inequality exist just at the surface level in the Twin Cities. Systemic inequality runs deep and has compounded for BIPOC Minnesotans with the crises of 2020 (Hane, 2020).

While systemic racism and inequalities are pervasive in local institutions, the Twin Cities are home to vibrant communities of urban farmers, mutual aid networks, non-profit organizations, and neighbors looking out for each other. Slocum and Cadieux, scholar-activists based in the Twin Cities, offer their insights into local food justice movements addressing the crisis of food insecurity:

“Minnesota is the site of considerable work on sustainable food systems, vast acreages devoted to commodity agriculture and stark racial inequalities. The primary (and most often funded) Minnesota sustainable agriculture, food security and anti-hunger organizations are illustrations of the critique that the food movement tends to be more white, affluent, and educated than average Minnesotans, while farm and food chain workers are more likely to be people of color, undocumented, and/or newer immigrants” (2015, 34).

While Minnesota boasts some mainstream efforts to advance food justice and sustainability, there is progress to be made in co-designing and co-creating an inclusive, equitable food system (Slocum and Cadieux, 2015). In contrast to homogenous groups of organizers that make up a majority of those working in Minnesotan food systems, Cadieux et al. describe reparative food movements in the Twin Cities consisting of “highly networked groups of farmers, gardeners, and academic-activist organizers working in the Twin Cities [that] have facilitated the emergence of reparative agroecologies, repairing relations with land and across communities” (2019; 11). These reparative food justice efforts aim to minimize hierarchies and acknowledge “the need for negotiative collaboration, mutual recognition, and consent” (Cadieux et al., 2019, 12). While not without its own problems and inequalities, Cadieux et al., write that “the Twin Cities agri-food movement scene is unusual in its confluence of community-focused production and food organizing with critique and activism surrounding structural food system issues (2019; 12). Because of the unfolding public health crises of food insecurity and Covid-19 and the exceptional local agri-food movement, I undertook this research project in order to examine the roots of food apartheid in the Twin Cities, identify

transformative practices and efforts already underway, and illuminate pathways to transforming the local food system by documenting experiences and reflections from some of those most directly impacted by crises (Gilbert and Williams, 2020).

Research Questions

This research paper is a place study of the local food system in the Twin Cities from food justice advocates' perspectives and experiences during 2020. I invited Twin Cities community members engaged in food justice organizing to collaborate on this project in order to share knowledge and co-design our vision for an equitable, sustainable local food system. Community activists and scholar activists contend that "individuals and groups working on the front lines of resistance to the dominant capitalist food system provide knowledge and experience that is an essential part of research including design, data collection, analysis, and knowledge mobilization" (Levkoe et al., 2020, 294). In addition to providing essential research and knowledge, I rely on the reflections of local food champions to document experiences and amplify narratives from communities most impacted by the compounding crises. Finally, by synthesizing narratives from the food justice advocates that participated in this project, I aim to identify pathways to achieving transformative change in the local food system. With these goals in sight, my primary research questions are as follows:

- What personal and community impacts from Covid-19 and the civil uprisings in the Twin Cities did food justice practitioners observe?
- What are the historical and structural forces behind the outcomes of compounding crises in the Twin Cities food system?

- How did food justice practitioners and their communities adapt to the compounding crises, and what can we learn from these adaptations?
- Where do we grow from here – what are strategies and principles to achieve transformative change and a resilient local food system in the Twin Cities?

In order to answer these research questions, I use a qualitative research design based in the tradition of radical food geographies scholarship by “seeking out different epistemologies and honoring alternate voices” (Brown et al., 2020, 243). This research design incorporates collaboration with local food justice advocates in focus group discussions in combination with a PhotoVoice activity to form a vision of transformative change (Belon et al., 2016; Schuch et al., 2014).

This research paper and research design is inspired by calls from radical food geographers who are pushing at the bounds of academic traditions. Hammelman et al. highlight a call from scholars in the field of radical food geography for new research that utilizes “reciprocal engagements” with community activists, such as forming partnerships with those engaged in the community and applying academic knowledge and skills in practical settings (2020, 217). A shift in not only how we produce food, but also how we produce knowledge is necessary, as Reynolds et al. write:

“Academia is founded on the premise that scholars situated in a university are the primary producers and disseminators of knowledge, which can discount the knowledge of community-based activists, render invisible the multiple positions from which individuals think and act, and lead to erasure of non-Eurocentric knowledges” (Reynolds et al., 2020).

In this paper, I seek to present an alternative form of research and knowledge production, accomplished in collaboration with “food champions” from the Twin Cities. My first introduction to the term 'food champions' was in discussion with Michael Chaney, one of the participants in this project: and I use it here to include advocates for food justice, community agriculture, care, and mutual aid. My role in this project was to bring people together in community and to learn from their narratives. In the following sections, I attempt to synthesize their narratives and retell a collective story of the local food movement and food system in the Twin Cities during and after the Covid-19 pandemic and civil uprisings. These stories reflect the ongoing fight for self-determination for BIPOC communities in the Twin Cities, as the food champions who collaborated with me on this project continue to plant seeds of change and healing, feed their communities, and fight for an end to state violence and the right to food for all.

To identify weaknesses in the local food system and pathways to transformative change and food equity, I first review scholarship from the interdisciplinary fields of food studies, social epidemiology, agroecology, and radical food geography. Literature from these disciplines provides methodologies and fundamental theories for explaining the socio-ecological context of food apartheid. Next, I outline the design of my own research study for this paper, explaining how I apply theories from social epidemiology and radical food geography and contextualizing the decisions I made in designing this research project. I also describe the specific methods of this research study, involving focus groups and PhotoVoice activities with local food champions. In the following chapter, I present the results of the focus group discussions by synthesizing the knowledge, stories, and experiences shared by participants to re-tell a collective narrative.

The next chapter analyzes emergent themes from focus group discussions and contextualizes this knowledge within food systems scholarship and literature from social epidemiology and radical food geographies. Finally, I conclude with my research findings and recommendations for action and future research.

CHAPTER 2: Literature Review

In addition to exacerbating rates of food insecurity, the Covid-19 pandemic made visible the impacts of the problem, such as the lines of cars that stretched for miles outside of food banks, the pop-up food shelves that were formed during the summer of 2020, and the sanctuary encampments in public parks in the Twin Cities. With awareness of inequality in the food system possibly on the rise as visibility has increased, it's essential to have a clear understanding of the significance and intentions of food justice theory and work (Cadieux and Slocum, 2015, 3). In this chapter, I review literature from food studies and the fields of social epidemiology and radical food geography to provide foundational knowledge on the systemic causes of oppression and marginalization within the food system and beyond, identify symptoms of an unequitable food system, and introduce concepts and strategies for transformative change.

First, I define food security and explain the complex interplay of factors that contribute to food insecurity according to studies in social epidemiology. Subsequently, I describe how food insecurity is embedded in the pathway between inequalities and poor health outcomes, leading to an embodied cycle of inequality and disadvantage (Krieger, 2001a; Hagen 2020). I also provide definitions of food justice and food sovereignty from literature in the intersecting fields of radical food geography, agroecology, and social epidemiology. Cumulatively, these three disciplines interrogate the socio-ecological dynamics between food and agriculture systems, land, space, power, and population health, with differences in their respective focuses and approaches (Krieger, 2001a; Hammelman, Reynolds, and Levkoe, 2020; Gliessman, 2020). These disciplines share the key characteristic of multi-scalar analysis and systems approaches to understanding

inequality, such as food insecurity and health disparities (Krieger, 2001b; Reynolds et al., 2020; Gliessman, 2020). Radical food geography examines food and socio-ecological injustice from an explicitly spatial perspective, and increasingly contributes to food systems scholarship with “an emphasis on contributing to more just systems” (Hammelman, Reynolds, and Levkoe, 2020, 215). I use a “socially embedded interpretation” of agroecology in this research paper, in contrast to its simplified technological definition, to understand the socio-political and economic systems that form the industrial food system in the United States (Cadieux et al., 2019, 6; Gliessman, 2020). Finally, from social epidemiology I apply Nancy Krieger’s ecosocial theory of disease distribution to analyze “current and changing health, disease and well-being in relation to *each* level of biological, ecological and social organization as manifested at *each* and every scale” (Krieger, 2001b, 671). Theories and scholarship from these disciplines contribute knowledge to how food insecurity is produced by the interplay of socio-ecological factors stemming from imbalances of power, wealth, and freedom to self-determination in society.

Socio-Ecological Understanding of Food Insecurity

Food security is defined by the United Nations’ Committee on World Food Security as when “all people, at all times, have physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food that meets their food preferences and dietary needs for an active and healthy life” (World Food Summit, 1996). In 2018, it is estimated that 26.4 percent of the world population, or about 2 billion people, experienced moderate to severe levels of food insecurity (FAO et al., 2019). This means that 26.4 percent of the world’s population worried about running out of food, could not afford to purchase

adequate, nutritious food, cut down or skipped a meal entirely to make food supplies stretch, or even went full days without eating a meal because of lack of money or resources (Smith and Meade, 2019). While poverty is an obvious culprit and one of the main risks predicting food insecurity, Bartfeld and Dunifon point out that food insecurity and poverty are “distinct phenomena. More than half of poor households are not considered food insecure, and equally important, more than half of food-insecure households are not poor” (2006, 922). Because poverty is not the only predictor of food insecurity, it is clear that food insecurity is a complex problem to understand and solve.

Furthermore, food insecurity is a larger problem than not having enough to eat. Food insecurity is associated with a range of poor health outcomes, from chronic diseases such as diabetes to depression and poor cognitive, social, and emotional development in children (Seligman et al., 2007, Casey, et al., 2004, Rose-Jacobs et al., 2008). Thus, food insecurity is not only a dynamic and complex dilemma, it is also an urgent public health issue to address as it is implicated in pathways of embodied inequalities and associated poor health outcomes (Hagen, 2020). Nancy Krieger defines embodiment as “an idea that refers to how we literally incorporate, biologically, the world in which we live, including our societal and ecological circumstances” (2005, p. 351). This idea posits that stress, inequality, discrimination, trauma, adversity, and the like are social experiences that embed themselves in our biological outcomes and result in health disparities. In terms of food security, the concept of embodiment suggests that food insecurity is part of the pathway of embodied socio-ecological inequality that leads to chronic disease, poor mental health, and intergenerational trauma and adversity. Speaking specifically about embodiment in food research, Freedman writes “an embodied food studies explicates the

ways that disparate experiences, social and physical environments, social structures and culture, global political economies, and ecologies influence food practices, which in turn become embodied in our genome, cells, and organs” (2011, p. 89).

Hinrichsen (2017) and McClain et al. (2018) offer exemplary evidence towards the applicability of embodiment in food insecurity research, as the theory of embodiment links inequality, food insecurity, health disparities, and intergenerational transfer in a cycle. The association between food insecurity and dysregulated components of the primary allostatic load system discovered by McClain et al. not only supports the hypothesis that food insecurity contributes to the burden of chronic disease, but also demonstrates that food insecurity is part of the mechanistic pathway in embodying stress and inequality (2018). Hinrichsen writes in her analysis that “Childhood health disparities thus shape the long-term health of the individual as ‘biological expressions of social relations’. The intergenerational pattern of encountering work demonstrates how economic and social inequality degrade human potential” (2017, p. 82). In this statement, Hinrichsen further implicates embodiment in the cycle of inequality. Another study in this review by Knowles et al. (2016) evinces this perspective. In their research of food insecurity, trade-offs, and toxic stress in parents and their children, the authors find that

“Food insecurity, with its associated trade-offs and health consequences, creates a cluster of hardships corresponding to toxic stress for children and adults. Parent descriptions of families’ material hardships and harmful consequences of the resulting stress on their children suggest that parents recognize just how deeply adverse experiences can affect their children, even when they try hard to protect them” (Knowles et al., 2016, p. 31).

The phrase “cluster of hardships” captures the essence of the complexity of food insecurity. It is not that one problem leads to another, but rather that all of these hardships and problems are occurring at the same time, creating an entrapment of adversity and inequality that perpetuates itself and is increasingly difficult to escape. Not only does this revelation begin to explain why food insecurity is such a complex problem, but it also supports that food insecurity is caused by a multitude of intertwined factors, rather than stemming from a single origin.

Looking at food insecurity through the lens of embodiment reveals pathways in which food insecurity is created and subsequently manifested in poor health outcomes. Furthermore, this perspective provides clearer understanding of the complex conditions that construct inequality, leading us to the root causes of food insecurity and illuminating a path forward for change. Additionally, place-based analyses offer explanations of the contributions of the social-environmental context to food insecurity. For example, Whittle et al. examined how gentrification, a spatial process, in the San Francisco Bay Area exacerbated risk of food insecurity among people living with HIV (2015). Similarly, Jackson et al. found evidence that neighborhood risk factors, such as physical disorder, low social capital, and violence/danger, interacted to predict household food insufficiency, and another study found that neighborhoods with higher concentrations of affluent neighbors had a protective effect on child health indicators (2019; Carroll-Scott et al., 2013). These examples implicate the role of contextual factors in breeding food insecurity. Several studies explicitly invoked a geographic approach to social epidemiology and food insecurity by using spatial analysis to examine geographic barriers to food access among immigrant populations (Caspi et al., 2016) and clusters of

food insecurity and poor health outcomes in the United States (Leonard et al., 2018).

When investigating the causes of food insecurity, social epidemiology demonstrates that people and their experiences cannot be separated from the places and context in which they live.

Food Justice, Food Sovereignty, and Radical Food Geographies

Food justice efforts broadly aim to eradicate socio-ecological sources of inequality and ensure control over one's food supply as a part of the right to self-determination. Cadieux and Slocum identified four nodes of organizing that characterize food justice practice, explaining that "practicing food justice means intervening in the areas of trauma/inequity, exchange, land, and labor arrangements using processes that enable people to deal with power relations across relevant scales with the aim of effecting systemic change" (Slocum and Cadieux, 2015, 29). These four core characteristics of food justice evidence that food studies scholarship and activism are interdisciplinary by nature of the breadth of intersecting elements related to food production and food systems. Take, for example, the intersection of agricultural practices, land access and development, human health patterns, and climate change (Roman-Alcalá, 2020). Because food access is mediated by a wide range and scale of socio-ecological factors, disciplines that embody systems thinking approaches, such as geography, can help to better-conceptualize the problem. Based in radical geography theory and praxis, radical food geographies interrogate power, space, and place in relation to food justice. (Reynolds et al., 2020, 286). Reynolds et al. argue that:

"Situating food justice as a spatial phenomenon makes explicit the social relations that form and perpetuate uneven development and oppression, highlighting the

multiscalar nature of inequities within the food system, from interpersonal exchanges to global geopolitics” (279).

What do radical food geographers accomplish by framing food justice as a spatial problem? Explicitly connecting the dots between food justice and spatial dynamics reveals tangible pathways to reorganizing power and space, both figuratively and metaphorically (James et al., 2021). Aimed at interrogating the spatial dynamics of food apartheid, food sovereignty is defined as “the right of peoples and governments to choose the way food is produced and consumed in order to respect our livelihoods, as well as the policies that support this choice” (LaVia Campesina, 2009, 57). As BIPOC communities’ control over their food supply has been historically restricted by colonization and perpetually restricted by racial capitalism and settler colonialism, sovereignty over land (i.e. space and place) is a key starting point to addressing food injustice (Brown et al., 2020; Hammelman, Reynolds, and Levkoe, 2020; James et al., 2021; Liebman, Rhiney, and Wallace, 2020). The concepts of food justice and food sovereignty function in tandem to “explicitly connect food practices to other ways of conceptualizing and navigating structural exclusion” and advocate for “less dependency on capital-intensive inputs, greater attention to social and environmental contexts, and the creation of supply networks that contribute to systemic wellbeing, rather than those that merely extract value” (Brown et al., 2020, 244; Cadieux and Slocum, 2015, 3). Finally, Gilbert and Williams contend:

“analyzing the important role of space and place in healing from intergenerational trauma (such as food insecurity) demonstrates the relationships between land

justice, reparations, and food justice, and how they can be leveraged to imagine and operationalize new pathways for radical change” (2020, 238).

Thus, approaching food justice with a focus on spatial dynamics of inequality not only helps us to understand how the freedom of choice over food has been restricted in the past, but also reveals possibilities to overcome the shortcomings of the current food system.

Food justice and food sovereignty aim to overcome the root causes of inequitable food systems. The crises that unfolded in 2020 can offer insight as to what these root causes of food apartheid and inequality are. Liebman, Rhiney, and Wallace call the Covid-19 pandemic a “disease of racial capitalism”, going on to write that “capitalism’s necrophilia, its prioritization of economic growth far outweighing the preservation of human life, is on fully display” (2020, 332). A microscopic virus has caused disproportionate harm for communities that have been subjected to socio-ecological inequality and oppression, especially communities of color, migrants, and Indigenous people (Hammelman, Reynolds, and Levkoe, 2020, 212). However, it is not the coronavirus that originated these conditions, as the pandemic itself is

“(re)produced by systems of settler-colonialism, white supremacy, and patriarchy. Long histories of slavery and exploitation, colonization and genocide, dispossession and capital accumulation, and punitive regulation and policies have laid the foundations for (and continue to exacerbate) contemporary food systems inequities” (Hammelman, Reynolds, and Levkoe, 2020, 212).

These processes extract value from socio-economically disadvantaged communities in forms of both wealth and health (Cadieux and Slocum, 2015). Scholars agree that these

processes and conditions are at the root of both the Covid-19 pandemic, social unrest and civil uprisings in the Twin Cities after the murder of George Floyd, and inequalities in food systems (Cadieux and Slocum, 2015; Crane and Pearson, 2020; Hammelman, Reynolds, and Levkoe, 2020; Liebman, Rhiney, and Wallace, 2020). Ricardo Salvador explicitly states that “food production is incidental to the model of extracting wealth from land and labor, meaning that *everything but* profit is subjected to the minimizing rationale euphemized as ‘efficiency’” (2020, 299). The “everything but” includes human health and wellbeing, since food security and food sufficiency, safe and fair working conditions, housing, access to medical care, education, and clean air and water all become commodities for purchase under racial capitalism (Hammelman, Reynolds, and Levkoe, 2020; Liebman, Rhiney, and Wallace, 2020).

Food inequalities and health disparities are symptoms of a broken, extractive food system (Crane and Pearson, 2020). Crane and Pearson write that “health outcomes are not simply individual states of being, but are instead a product of power relations, individuals’ and groups’ social context, and the already existing socio-environmental injustices that they face daily” (2020, 315). Illustrating this point, Knowles et al. interviewed parents of food insecure households to understand the health consequences of food insecurity, associated trade-offs, and toxic stress:

“Parents described how trade-offs associated with food insecurity have a profound relationship with their mental health and home environment that strongly affects young children. Descriptions of hardships include anxiety and depression related to overdue bills and shut-off notices, strains with housing costs, and safety.

Parents described how their own frustration, anxiety, and depression related to

economic hardship have a negative on their children's physical health, and their social and emotional development" (2015, 25).

This example from Knowles et al. illustrates Crane and Pearson's argument, giving insight into the intertwined socio-ecological dynamics that construct poor mental and physical health outcomes in households experiencing low or very low food insecurity (2015; 2020). The Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in additional evidence of inequitable systems, including the food system. The fact that in the United States, the age-adjusted mortality rate from the Covid-19 virus for Black people is 3.6 times higher than the mortality rate for white people, illuminates myriad ways that systemic racism persists and is reproduced (Crane and Pearson, 2020). Nittle argues that structural racism, leading to poverty and food insecurity, has fueled the disproportionate rates of chronic health conditions that make BIPOC communities more vulnerable to health complications or death from Covid-19 (2020).

Wozniacka reports that food labor exploitation is nothing new, but labor rights advocates claim the pandemic made labor exploitation in the food industry more visible (2020a). Farmworkers, individuals working in meatpacking plants, and food service industry workers have all been severely disadvantaged during the pandemic due to unsafe working conditions, loss of employment and wages, lack of sick pay or medical leave, and increased exposure to the Covid-19 virus in the workplace, all while many other Americans have had the option to work from home (Tseng, 2020; Wozniacka, 2020a; Wozniacka, 2020b). Furthermore, these positions are commonly filled by migrant, undocumented, or other people of color (Wozniacka, 2020a; Wozniacka, 2020b). The "pre-existing condition" of labor exploitation in the food industry thus (re)produces

unequal access to food and restricted food choices, chronic health disparities, and disproportionate susceptibility to the Covid-19 virus for the disadvantaged groups that produce our food. Roman-Alcalá summarizes, “So here we are: a dysfunctional food system that works for capitalists, takes epidemiological risks, and operates on a baseline perpetuation of mass inequality, resulting in poorly nourished communities of poor people who suffer increased morbidity and mortality from diseases” (2020, 647). This dysfunctional food system is an urgent public health crisis that demands collective action and transformative change (Nittle, 2020)

Practicing Food Justice and Radical Geography Praxis

Diagnosing the root causes and symptoms of inequitable food systems allows food justice practitioners to establish the area that requires treatment and prescribe solutions. Hammelman, Reynolds, and Levkoe posit that to practice food justice:

“a strong political stance is required to call for food systems that are more equitable and sustainable along with a recognition of complexity and the ways that humans interact with food environments in interdisciplinary, intersectional, and interrelational ways. In doing so, such an approach makes clear that while food (in)justice is produced in particular places by particular structures, such places and structures are inextricably linked with others across distances and scales. Multiscalar analysis of interconnected food systems can be rooted within radical food geographies, emphasizing social and communal life, as well as approaches to food scholarship attending to intertwined social-historical structures that produce injustices” (2020, 219).

Hammelman, Reynolds, and Levkoe propose a radical food geography praxis that integrates theory, action-oriented research, relationship and community building, and geographic analysis to achieve the necessary foundation of socio-ecological justice for agri-food systems (2020; Slocum and Cadieux, 2015). An ecosocial approach to food insecurity tells us that food justice is inextricably linked to all other areas of socio-ecological justice (Hagen, 2020), and food justice scholars perceive that achieving food justice/sovereignty requires justice and transformative change across scales and systems (Slocum and Cadieux, 2015; Roman-Alcalá, 2020). Roman-Alcalá explains with an example:

“recent farmworker and food justice practitioner struggles for housing (rural and urban) indicate how housing access and affordability have *always* been problematic for working classes under capitalism. With coronavirus’s economic impacts, working people involved in food systems (and not) now face greater housing insecurity, and calls are growing for a ‘rent strike’. It is (past) time that people concerned with agriculture and human values also consider themselves concerned for housing and human values, and how these two issues are tied together and/or pitted against each other – and how they are linked fundamentally through capitalist relations of commodified land” (2020, 648).

Food justice advocates, practitioners, and scholars therefore call for not only an end to food insecurity and state-sponsored hunger (Liebman, Rhiney, and Wallace, 2020), but also an end to injustice and state violence founded on white supremacy and colonization (Slocum and Cadieux, 2015). In the context of the agri-food justice movement, an end to state violence includes:

“not only black deaths at the hands of the state, but all of the ways that racism has been institutionalized across housing, banking, employment, criminal justice, political representation, military service, wealth accumulation, health and, of course, growing, selling, and eating food. Such changes are needed for (climate and) food justice” (Slocum and Cadieux, 2015, 45).

Explicitly articulating that these socio-ecological inequalities and crises are violence at the hands of the state raises the stakes and urgency of transforming these systems and enacting change.

If the food system is inequitable, how should it be fixed? Clapp and Moseley suggest that “because the ‘old playbook’ for addressing food crises has played a prominent role in exacerbating the impact of the current crisis, it makes little sense to rely on it – let alone extend it – as a way to address the problems presented by the Covid-19 pandemic” (2020, 1411). Even extending the hunger relief model, on its own, is not enough, as James et al. theorize that “food banks nevertheless ‘prop up a broken system’ in which overproduction and waste are inherent features that benefit corporations while undermining the human right to food and dignity” (2021, 3). While food banks and food pantries are currently vital for alleviating food insecurity, we would not need, let alone rely on, hunger relief programs under an equitable food system.

As the pandemic unfolds, ongoing crises result in increasing trauma and grief, “yet times of crises provide opportunities for transformation” (James et al., 2021, 3). Looking at the ways communities have adapted to crises suggests potential pathways to transformative change. In the first spring of the pandemic, panic buying and fear of scarcity under the U.S. industrial food system led people to repeat “historic patterns of

responding to crisis by planting home gardens and seeking local food options” (Roman-Alcalá, 2020, 647). Reflecting on alternative models for food distribution, Penniman writes that historically:

“BIPOC communities have a rich history of providing food for our families and one another in a dignified manner. Long before and after Victory Gardens, people of color were growing food through provision and community gardens.

Organizations like the Black Panther Party fed over 20,000 children free breakfast every day, which became a model for school meal programs in the U.S. Food hubs, community supported agriculture (CSA), and cooperatives all have roots in Black farming communities” (2020, 522).

Many authors emphasized the historical and ancestral connections to agriculture and building alternative food systems for BIPOC communities (Bullington, 2020; Gilbert and Williams, 2020; Levkoe et al., 2020; Penniman, 2020; Wozniacka, 2021). Scholar-activist Xavier Brown quotes:

“We realized that we had to look at alternative ways to get food into many of these neighborhoods. We know that there are individuals who are very qualified to do this, who want to do this, who have incredible talent, and we don’t just need new neighbors coming in... Our ancestors have been doing this for a long time, and we are just the new iteration of it” (Levkoe et al., 2020, 297-8).

Communities directly impacted by restricted food choices and systemic oppression have both historical precedents and current efforts underway for informing and leading transformative change under a set of values for food production such that “food be produced in a way that is healthy, sustainable, fair, affordable, and humane to all sentient

beings” (Levkoe et al., 2020, 299). Clapp and Moseley suggest that fixing the food system requires throwing out the “old playbook”, containing neocolonial and capitalist market solutions (2020). The good news is that Roman-Alcalá says that we don’t have to start entirely from scratch to transform the food system (2020). Amidst the crises, he writes:

“The hopeful news is that change strategies promoted for generations (often, especially, by the most marginalized) are still, if not more, relevant today. I speak here of slow, relationship-based, constructive, propositional, autonomous organizing efforts that reduce rather than increase reliance on problematic state politics. It seems foolish to expect effective bailouts from an uncaring kleptocratic state. Instead, strategies like solidarity food economies, unemployed associations, and community land trusted farmland and buildings can meet existing needs while linking food and housing, and advancing the visionary values and demands the moment requires” (2020, 648).

In order to transform the future of the food system and food justice in the United States, it is time to imagine and create alternative possibilities by working collectively in support of communities who, through their resilience and continuous efforts for self-determination, are working to feed each other and take care of each other outside of divisive, neocolonial capitalist systems (Gilbert and Williams, 2020).

CHAPTER 3: Methods

Background and Positionality

I was born and raised in Lincoln, Nebraska, the heart of the Midwest. Several generations of my family have farmed on land that we know now as Iowa but was originally inhabited and cared for by the Dakota Sioux, Illinois, Ioway, Missouriia, and Otoe tribes before their land was violently seized by the United States government. I am a white cisgender woman attending a private academic institution, and my perspectives in this paper are inherently limited by my level of privilege and positionality.

Acknowledging my own positionality and privilege is only the first step, and I am committed to continuously reflecting on and unlearning my own biases and ways I contribute to harm as I seek to dismantle systems of oppression.

I moved to the Twin Cities in August 2017 to attend Macalester College, and I've lived in Saint Paul ever since. My experiences living in the Twin Cities have motivated me to be ever-more engaged in grassroots community organizing since becoming a student here. Much of my familiarity with the geography of the Twin Cities comes from the opportunities I've sought out to be more involved in local social and political efforts and from learning and research experiences that have brought me to new places.

One of the primary sources of my research experience and geographic knowledge of the Twin Cities is my time spent as a data collector for two studies conducted by Dr. Caitlin Caspi, a social epidemiologist. I started as an intern for Dr. Caspi in the summer of 2019 and have continued to assist with data collection since summer 2020. Dr. Caspi leads two community-partnered studies, the SuperShelf study and the Wages study, and I have had the privilege of learning from her and her research group about building

relationships and reciprocal engagements in community research. The SuperShelf study is a behavioral economics intervention that aims to address chronic health disparities among food insecure individuals by improving the availability and appeal of fresh produce and other whole foods in food shelves (Caspi et al., 2019). The Wages study is a longitudinal evaluation of the policy that will cause the Minneapolis minimum wage for large business employees to increase to \$15 by 2022. The Wages study is following a cohort of 974 low-wage workers for four years in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and the comparison city, Raleigh, North Carolina, to understand the impact increasing the minimum wage has on health equity (Caspi et al., 2021). As a data collector for the SuperShelf and Wages studies, I have the opportunity to see the importance of relationship building in practice while conducting research. I gained both research skills and a personal commitment to prioritizing community-partnered research that have informed my approach to this research project.

Theoretical frameworks

As this research is inherently interdisciplinary, this project draws from several theoretical frameworks in social epidemiology, radical food geography, and scholar-activism. Three key concepts of geography – space, place, and scale – help to structure qualitative analysis and link findings to tangible and feasible interventions for strengthening community and the local food system. Social epidemiology offers an approach to research that leads to not only unique understandings of the complex nature of food insecurity, but also identifies political and social interventions that could alleviate the prevalence of food insecurity by working within the web of relationships between food insecurity and other structural determinants of overall wellbeing (Hagen, 2020). I

draw from Nancy Krieger's eco-social theory of disease distribution to understand the multi-level nature of the socio-ecological factors that co-produce a cycle of oppression, trauma, food insecurity, instability, and lack of wellbeing for individuals and communities (Hagen, 2020; Krieger, 2001b). Central to the ecosocial approach is the concept of embodiment, which refers to "how we literally incorporate, biologically, the material and social world in which we live, from conception to death" (Krieger, 2001b, 672). Ecosocial theory emphasizes the roles of agency and accountability "expressed in pathways of and knowledge about embodiment, in relation to institutions (government, business and public sector), households and individuals, and also to accountability and agency of epidemiologists and other scientists for theories used and ignored to explain social inequalities in health" (Krieger, 2001b, 672). In the context of this paper, applying ecosocial theory calls into question the accountability of structures and institutions in the Twin Cities for their complicity or role in perpetuating food injustices. Additionally, I analyze how the sociopolitical structures of local food systems impact individual and community agency over their food supply. The ecosocial framework is well-equipped for studying the links between social and health inequalities, as it aims to incorporate all aspects of life in multi-scalar analysis (Krieger, 2001a; Krieger, 2001b). Applying the ecosocial theory of disease distribution in this project translated into selecting qualitative methods that gathered nuances and details across scales in food advocates' lived experiences, in particular the PhotoVoice activity described later in this chapter.

In addition to the theoretical frameworks of social epidemiology described above, I apply theories and best practices in action-oriented research, community-based participatory research, and radical food geography praxis (Hammelman, Reynolds, and

Levkoe, 2020). In a review of radical food geography scholarship, Hammelman, Reynolds, and Levkoe propose a radical food geography praxis including: “theoretical engagement with power and structures of oppression both inside and outside the academy; action through academic, social movement, and civil society collaborations; and analysis of food systems through a broadly defined geographic lens” (2020, 213). In this project, I aim to interrogate power relations and structural oppression in the Twin Cities food system as well as orient my research around action by collaborating with community leaders, urban growers, educators, and advocates focused on food justice.

Both frameworks of ecosocial theory of disease distribution and radical food geography praxis are relevant and crucial for this analysis. These theories are multi-scalar by nature and complement each other’s strengths and weaknesses. Social epidemiology as a discipline connects population health patterns to social causes (Wemrell et al., 2016). Specifically, ecosocial theory uses multi-level analysis to explain population health patterns that are produced by the interplay of socio-ecological factors (Krieger, 2001b). This framework essentially traces systemic inequality from the outcome to the source, linking health outcomes to the influences of environmental pollution, socioeconomic disadvantage, or food insecurity, for example. Applying the ecosocial framework assists in explicitly situating social and structural determinants as public health issues since it identifies causal pathways by which disease occurs (Krieger, 2001b). However, in food studies this framework can be limited by a lack of praxis and action-oriented approaches (Hagen, 2020). Radical food geography lacks the focus of linking power and structures of oppression to health disparities but offers scholarship and methods for orienting research towards meaningful and intentional collaboration with advocates and communities

seeking change (Hammelman, Reynolds, and Levkoe, 2020; Reynolds et al., 2020). Additionally, radical food geography explicitly frames food justice as a spatial phenomenon and emphasizes the roles of space and place in not only constructing identity and senses of belonging but also signifying processes of power, oppression, and exploitation (Hammelman, Reynolds, and Levkoe, 2020; Reynolds et al., 2020). Radical food geographies analyze power and space to understand how uneven development and inequitable systems trickle down to different scales and cause injustice and harm (Levkoe et al., 2020). Together, these frameworks provide complementary explanations of the interworking and uneven outcomes of food, health, wealth, and power.

The choice to use a qualitative, focus group approach was informed by the argument that “documenting narratives told by people directly impacted by systems of oppression can initiate the creation of alternative possibilities to those systems and subsequently illuminate pathways to dismantling them” (Gilbert and Williams, 2020). Applying the lens of geography allows me to interrogate uneven development and power in food systems and qualitatively “engage with (differential) relationships between people and their surroundings” (Hammelman, Reynolds, and Levkoe, 2020). Finally, I draw from the writing and organizing of scholar-activists in racial justice, Indigenous sovereignty, environmental justice, and food justice in order to create an intentional research design to create bridges between the theoretical conclusions from my research and real-world implications for the Twin Cities communities (Cadieux et al., 2020; Hammelman, Reynolds, and Levkoe, 2020; Hecht et al., 2018; Reynolds et al., 2020).

Research Design

One of my main objectives for this project was to create an intentional research design that reflects the values and principles of food justice – collaboration, co-production and sharing of knowledge, cooperative ownership, and strengthening community by building relationships (Cadieux and Slocum, 2015). While approaching my research design, I considered both what has already been established in food research and in the Twin Cities, as well as the gaps in the literature that I have identified in my own previous research. Within the field of social epidemiology, extensive quantitative studies have been conducted on the structural and socio-ecological factors that contribute to household and community food insecurity for a variety of demographics, regions, and contexts (Hagen, 2020). Previous research demonstrates that a multitude of socio-ecological factors, such as lack of affordable housing, the local food environment, poor public assistance, and neighborhood environments create conditions for and exacerbate food insecurity along with chronic health conditions and poor mental health (Whittle et al., 2015b; Carter et al., 2012; Garasky, Morton, and Greder, 2006; Bartfeld and Dunifon, 2006; Jackson et al., 2019). Although researchers have identified common primary factors that contribute to food insecurity, it is evident that food insecurity is not only a complex, dynamic problem but also place-specific (Hagen, 2020). Solving the root problems that construct food insecurity thus requires investigation into place effects and intervening at the appropriate scale(s) (Hammelman, Reynolds, and Levkoe, 2020; Gilbert and Williams, 2020; Levkoe et al., 2020).

While designing this research in the midst of the global Covid-19 pandemic and Black Lives Matter movement, I took into heavy consideration the benefits and risks of

conducting this research during ongoing crises and daily challenges. To reduce the risk of increasing stress or re-traumatization for people experiencing the worst impacts of systemic oppression and the crises (Slocum and Cadieux, 2015), I chose to conduct this research with people already immersed in this work - local community organizers, activists, scholars, and advocates with ties to food justice in the Twin Cities – in order to collect their insight, knowledge, and experiences (Hecht et al, 2018; Gilbert and Williams, 2020). Thus, my sampling frame broadly included advocates for food justice based in the Twin Cities.

I used a snowball recruitment method to identify and invite local advocates to participate in two, two-hour online focus groups using the platform Zoom. Throughout my years of residence in the Twin Cities, I have made connections through community engagement activities and my college campus, which served as my starting point for recruitment. I first reached out to my own contacts in organizing circles and asked my connections for additional organizations or individuals to reach out to, “snowballing” from there. Over the course of almost a month, I contacted 50 individuals/organizations through email, social media, and mutual connections, inviting them to participate or share my recruitment letter with others. My goal was to recruit between five to ten individuals to participate in this project. In total, six people were able to participate in research activities.

I chose to use a focus group format in order to allow individual participants to tell their own stories as well as craft a strong, dynamic narrative as a collective. In addition to the focus groups, I incorporated PhotoVoice, a qualitative community-based participatory research method, into my research design. PhotoVoice has been established as an

effective tool for community-based participatory research by other geographers as it “reveals visual, perceptual, and contextual information about both neighborhoods and the communities within them that is often underrepresented or inadequately understood using more traditional methods” (Schuch et al., 2014, 4; Belon et al., 2016). In Schuch et al., researchers utilized PhotoVoice with students in order to investigate “socio-spatial determinants of health in at-risk neighborhoods” (2014, 197). Belon et al. employed PhotoVoice and the socio-ecological framework to examine micro and macro community environments that influence food choices (2016). Both of these studies illuminate the applicability of the PhotoVoice method to geographic analysis of food environments and systems.

In this study, I asked participants to share images and media that illustrate what an equitable food system looks like to them. Because I did not have access to resources to provide cameras, participants used either their phone/personal camera, infographics, or pictures previously taken for their organization. Participants had approximately a month between focus groups to complete the activity before sharing their photos with each other. This activity was not prescriptive, meaning that participants were encouraged to freely interpret the prompt and respond with what had the most significance to them. Additionally, participants were not required to compile a minimum or maximum number of photos in order to minimize concerns related to energy or time.

Photos served as a gateway to discussion during focus groups and allowed us to gain insight into each other’s lived experiences and communities, which was especially welcome during the isolation of the pandemic. Using PhotoVoice in coordination with the focus groups helped participants share their experiences and stories through not only

their words but also the images everyone shared. By compiling and sharing imagery that related to the themes of our discussions, participants identified key components of a strong local food system to grow our food system, and subsequently our communities, stronger.

Methodology

Due to the ongoing pandemic, all research activities were conducted virtually or remotely, with no in-person contact or interactions. Both focus groups were conducted and audio-recorded online using the platform Zoom and lasted for approximately two hours. The first focus group was centered on the overarching question “how did we get here?”, and participants were asked to share their knowledge and reflections on the systemic roots of the crises of 2020, how their communities and the local food system have been impacted, and their personal experiences and perspectives from 2020.

At the end of the first focus group, participants received verbal instructions for the PhotoVoice activity, followed by more detailed written guidelines. While I gave a thorough explanation of the purpose and goals of the PhotoVoice research method, I provided several prompts and ideas to explore for inspiration but minimal directions for the content of the photos themselves, as I wanted participants to share what they felt was most important in their stories. The second focus group, incorporating PhotoVoice, was participant driven so that everyone could organically share all of their images and the significance behind them, comment on each other’s pictures and stories, and ask each other questions. To ensure adequate time for everyone to share while also remaining flexible, each person was allotted a ten-minute period to talk through the images they brought to share. Using Zoom again, images were screen-shared so that everyone could

engage with both the speaker and their images during the discussion. The PhotoVoice method was incorporated as a source of discussion, and images supplemented the knowledge and stories participants shared, creating an engaging and dynamic narrative for qualitative analysis. Images were collected from participants for reference during qualitative coding, but the images were not coded for this analysis.

Audio recordings from both focus groups and the interview were transcribed and then coded in Atlas.ti using phronetic iterative data analysis, a qualitative analysis method that “alternates between emic, or emergent, readings of qualitative data on the one hand, and etic use of existing models, explanations, and theories on the other” (Tracy and Hinrichs, 2017). This analytical method is well-suited for praxis-based research that seeks to result in action to address the problem (Tracy and Hinrichs, 2017). This analytical method involves creating first a primary descriptive code and then a secondary analytic code. Primary-cycle codes focused on the explicit content present in the data, identifying emergent terms and topics of prominence within focus group discussions, then primary codes were combined with theory and previous literature to create analytical secondary-cycle codes that synthesize the data and theories and creates a formal critical framework for this analysis, which will be discussed in more detail in the results.

Remote Research: Covid-19 considerations and challenges

This project was started and completed during the Covid-19 pandemic. Thus, all research and data collection occurred remotely, using electronic forms of communication and meeting. Adapting research to remote methods presented both pros and cons: while forming connections and establishing relationships with individuals can be more difficult without face-to-face contact, organizing a meeting was both easier to accomplish with the

flexibility of online meeting rooms and provided much needed time in community with others during the Minnesota winter. Through my recruitment process, I discovered that making new connections was dependent on having a mutual connection or affiliation as well as clearly communicating the goals of my research. I also gathered from my own observations and participant's comments that forming networks and evolving them is an essential component of both community-based participatory research and the food justice movement. While growing a network and social distancing for a pandemic can be challenging, forming relationships and being in community together is well worth the effort. It is apparent that we are strongest when we are united, whether in the streets calling for justice, in the garden growing food and community care, or in conversations imagining transformative change.

CHAPTER 4: Results

This research design culminated in a collaboration amongst six food justice advocates based in the Twin Cities and myself, positioned with the role to facilitate the discussion and to listen and learn from the cohort. In total, six individuals participated in the study; there were five people present at each focus group, and four individuals were able to participate fully in both focus groups. In addition to the focus groups, I conducted one individual interview with a participant who could not attend the first focus group. This interview was also conducted over Zoom and included the same questions that were asked in the first focus group.

<i>Table 1: Collaborators (participants) in focus groups and their affiliations and goals related to food justice</i>
Brian Boyer is the community leader of Bikes and Bites Minneapolis, a neighborhood-based mutual aid organization distributing food and household needs to mutual aid hubs via bike to promote regular giving and collective care in the community.
Valentine Cadieux is the director of Environmental studies and director of Sustainability at Hamline University in Saint Paul and the chair of the board of the Twin Cities Community Agriculture Land Trust, a non-profit organization consisting of volunteer community members working for agricultural land permanence in the Twin Cities.
Michael Chaney is the founder and executive director of Project Sweetie Pie, a non-profit organization that seeks to inform, infuse, inspire, and instruct the community of North Minneapolis through initiatives and with strategic partners to co-create and co-design urban policy, urban planning, urban farming, and urban by design. Michael is also a partner of Growing North Minneapolis, among numerous other collaborations.
Dina Kountoupes is the owner of Harvest Moon Edible Landscapes, a women-owned business that partners with food shelves, schools, religious centers, and community centers to create community gardens that improve access to fresh produce and facilitate education and relationship-building through gardening. Dina received her bachelor's degree from Macalester College and a Master of Science in environmental education with a minor in sustainable agriculture at the University of Minnesota.
Patsy Parker is the co-director of Growing North Minneapolis, a community-driven collaboration with the University of Minnesota and based in the North Minneapolis Neighborhood. Growing North Minneapolis focuses on intergenerational mentorship, youth development, and community building through urban agriculture to advance environmental, social and racial justice in North Minneapolis and beyond.
Clara* is a grower and food educator in Minnesota. *Pseudonym used to maintain confidentiality at participant's request

Each collaborator brought a different perspective and background to the table but found themselves telling parallel stories during the focus groups. Although participants were not screened or selected based on where they lived, multiple neighborhoods in both Saint Paul and Minneapolis were represented in the cohort, constructing a diverse knowledge of geography and space in the Twin Cities. Two collaborators were based in and focused on North Minneapolis, historically and currently “overpoliced and under protected, exposed both to police and community violence” (Phelps, Powell, and Robertson, 2020). One collaborator is located in South Minneapolis, the neighborhood where George Floyd was murdered by police. Finally, three collaborators are based just across the Mississippi River in Saint Paul, with massive and visible wealth inequalities similar to Minneapolis (“Racial equity metrics”, 2019). Everybody in the cohort is familiar with the Twin Cities as long-term residents and members of their neighborhoods as well as advocates for their communities. Several collaborators already knew each other as friends and/or from collaborating on another project together, and several new connections were formed as well. This also illuminated the heavy presence of networks organizing around food justice in the Twin Cities and the ways food connects us to each other.

Each collaborator works with food in some capacity - growing and producing food, distributing food, and/or teaching about food preparation and nutrition. The majority of the cohort is experienced in gardening and growing food for themselves and their community, whether it’s a part of their job description or not. Collaborators have ties to urban farming, youth education and development, mutual aid, revenue and

workforce development, nutritional education, and the environmental movement. Accordingly, collaborators have a broad range of experience organizing their own networks and communities, building community infrastructure, and growing food for and feeding the community. Most participants are involved in several roles or projects, leading to a mix of affiliations with non-profit organizations, universities, food banks and food shelves, and local agriculture.

Impacts of Covid-19 on Community Organizing and Food Justice

As have most conversations in the last year, our discussion began with the topic of Covid-19 and how the pandemic has impacted our lives, work, and communities. It goes without saying that social distancing created organizational challenges and barriers to connecting with people and maintaining community engagement. Valentine noted that for organizations that had limited capacity and resources already, the pandemic significantly cut off their communicative infrastructure. On an individual and organizational level, participants shared their feelings of disconnect and isolation, with Dina describing feeling a “void of community.” However, many groups found ways to adapt some activities to ensure everyone’s safety while also fulfilling the need for community and relationships with others in a time of distance and isolation from “normal” life. For example, one participant’s organization, which they began in response to the civil uprisings, organized group bike rides to deliver food and supplies to those impacted by the loss of several grocery stores in Minneapolis. Initially nervous that no one would attend group rides or community events, this participant found that people were eager to find alternative ways to connect that reduced risk of Covid-19 transmission, such as safely socializing around an outdoor firepit. While people were eager to connect

from a safe distance, Brian also shared his observations of the difficulty of maintaining continued engagement:

“One thing that we found very difficult is because of our inability to really connect with people in the way that we would like to if safety measures weren’t in place. We’re really struggling to get like a repeat, repeat relationships with people. For people to come back. The way that we’re living right now is like, you’re into something and then two weeks later you’ve moved on. Just like if you look through my garage all the projects I started doing in March are a direct reflection of how my year has gone, and we’re noticing that with people as well. They get really fired up, they’re really into giving back, they’re really into mutual aid, and then the news cycle shifts just the slightest bit, and then it’s on to something different. So, I think that lack of being able to really deeply connect with other people and form deep relationships, which we would like to be doing, is what’s hindering people from staying as engaged as they’d like to be.”

Despite the challenge of maintaining engagement, Brian spoke optimistically about how people, including himself, have been awakened this year to the urgent needs for mutual aid in their neighborhoods and have come together in support of their communities’ needs.

Participants all experienced different obstacles to continuing with their typical work but demonstrated exceptional adaptability, creativity, and dedication to supporting those in their communities. When local food shelves and farmers markets shut down operations due to Covid-19, Patsy, an urban farmer, opened and operated farm stands in North Minneapolis to be able to continue distributing the fresh produce they grow locally to the community. Patsy shared how important it is to her to “figure out how to have longer relationships with the kids” her organization works with, as she adapted youth

education programming and cooking classes to an online format, delivering the ingredients to kids ahead of time and teaching over Zoom. Similarly, Clara, an experienced grower, used Zoom to instruct and advise friends and family on how to start their own gardens when they could no longer meet in person. Despite ongoing crises and obstacles, the stories focus group participants shared illustrate the importance of relationships and local agriculture in sustaining individuals and communities in the Twin Cities.

Underlying Inequities in the Food System

Participants reflected on underlying sources of the crises and food insecurity in the Twin Cities. Specifically, I asked the group if they felt the crises created new barriers to food access and food security, or if pre-existing inequality and food injustice was exacerbated by the pandemic and civil uprisings. Participants identified several circumstances of the crises that created new barriers to food access during 2020. According to Clara, the high transmissibility of the Covid-19 virus itself created additional barriers, such as safely obtaining food from the grocery store and preventing organizers and activists from gathering in person or working as closely with people. Patsy observed ways that the pandemic both created new barriers and exacerbated pre-existing problems, saying that “when all the grocery stores burn down, it’s not a very common thing, but it certainly does change the situation.” However, beyond unexpected variables, such as grocery stores burning or closing down or the transmissible nature of the virus, the group largely agreed that this crisis had been lying in wait beneath the surface of systemic inequality and injustice. Michael shared an analogy that resonated with others in the group, stating:

“I came to realize for me that the pandemic was a truth serum. And it really hit a nerve, that we were sitting on a fault line between two. And so, the pandemic, in terms of the vulnerability of communities of color... we realized that in order for us to survive we couldn't talk about gardening, we had to talk about urban farming. And that for me, kind of the epiphany was that *we're not just talking about food access, we're not just talking about food insecurity*, that if we want to play, if we want to get out of the kiddie pool, we really have to start talking about national food security, food supply.”

Dina echoed this perspective, saying that the pandemic “exposed the truth of exactly what was going on” in regard to inequality and food insecurity. Valentine agreed that crises have revealed the “thinness in the system”, explaining that it has become much more apparent how institutions pull community wealth away. Similarly, Clara responded that the crises of 2020 unveiled problems and persistent inequalities that have systemically oppressed communities of color in the Twin Cities. One example of this Clara observed is the disparities in technology and internet access to be able to attend remote classes online or work from home. This is an example of a classist inequity that already disproportionately affected low-income groups before the pandemic and has already directly resulted in disparate outcomes for employment, education, and health in households and communities without access to these resources. Michael echoed his concern for this problem:

“even in terms of those in this whole pandemic, those who have the luxury to work from home to those in comparison, to those who had to go out there every day and face the possibility of becoming infected. So we're really looking at a classist inequity that affords people the luxury to not have to be peddling commodities, but have the luxury to be able to think, to create, to configure, to articulate.”

In addition to classist dynamics, the group spoke to the role of systemic racism and colonization in oppressing and extracting from marginalized communities. Valentine spoke about her observations of institutional and bureaucratic responses to the crises, noting that “existential threats are not showing the good sides of institutions”, as she has observed institutions failing to step up to their responsibility to address systemic racism and be accountable for the harm they have perpetuated in low-income and BIPOC communities. Valentine shared this example:

“Existential threats are not showing the good sides of institutions. Institutions have doubled down. So like the good nationwide example, I don’t know if any of you saw the High Country News did a really, really great project called LandGrabU. It’s about the colonial origins of the land-grant university system. And they came out with a piece in the spring... They connected every treaty to every land grant, there’s a visualization and you can go and you can say, like there are 38 land grant universities connected to land grabs in Minnesota. And that this is part of the funding and reproduction of this education system that people generally think is a net positive, and they don’t have any idea how to do a reparation system for this. And half of those institutions wouldn’t even respond to the phone calls, or were like ‘not our problem.’ And so I think that the call in that’s needed to get people to see that like, ‘Yes, yes you. Yes this crisis, yes we have to be in relationship’, is something that the generation - that currently are the majority of the gatekeepers - have not figured out gracefully. And one of the things from my university perspective I’ve been noticing, there’s this naturalization of poverty... in the way that people are living on the coattails of the poor... people are like “oh well I was poor in college too.” And it’s very hard to get people to understand the demographic shifts that have happened and the degree to which the 1% extractivism is happening. When you actually lay this out, it’s staggering, and everyone is surprised... These are students who

haven't eaten in days, and many of whom are on the verge of homelessness. It's a different scale of problem, and I don't think that that was necessarily related to Covid, but I think that Covid has revealed the thinness in the system, that you know as more people are basically, like this predatory debt mechanism, trying to get more people to get college loans. Like these are people who are becoming, I guess more visibly in need of the kind of services we're talking about, but kind of the tip of the iceberg of pulling community wealth away. And I feel like universities and other big institutions aren't being real about addressing that."

Expanding on how colonization is perpetuated by institutions in the food system, Clara and Valentine both told stories of individuals and groups being blocked from accessing land or using land to produce their own food. From Valentine's work on public land access, she has observed that the way people are prohibited from foraging for parks, for example, or receiving land to garden to feed their communities, is a "100% colonial mindset" that perpetuates settler colonial notions of property and individual ownership, as it keeps people away from the food system and sustaining themselves (Gilbert and Williams, 2020;). Clara shared a story from her community that corroborates Valentine's observations:

"There was a community member here who literally like, tried to make his whole front yard into a mini community farm. And people pushed back and he had to go through so many hoops, and I don't even know if he can even do it, but he had already gotten his whole yard started, you know? He got the wood chips and the soil, started putting seedlings and things down, and all of the sudden they told him to stop, he couldn't do it. I don't know if he went through a legal battle, but I just think that issues like this, and he was a person of color. He's very skilled in gardening, but issues like this really just stop people from being able to do things that gives them the right to feed themselves."

This colonial mindset is as pervasive in our food system as it was in our focus group discussions. Patsy shared her reflections on colonization in the local food system and frustrations with the codependent system she has experienced:

“basically, the whole system is screwed. Like one of the things that’s clear to me is that the North Side is absolutely full of people giving food away, every single day, every single week. You can get a meal made, you can get a box of food for your kids at school, they’ll give me boxes even though I don’t have any kids in school I just say “Oh I got a kid!”, and so there’s, it’s like flooded with food, most of which is fake and will ultimately kill us, you know it’s really a place where, and then there was one of the big events I remember is there was a semi-load of ice cream that was coming. We were all supposed to get organized and come and pick up this ice cream, it was a wonderful, charitable donation. Well, it turned out to be peanut butter, it tasted terrible, and nobody liked it. So, the reason that it was there was so some grocer could dump a semi-load of something they couldn’t sell anyplace. And I feel like there’s this way in which the whole idea of how things end up in these free giveaways situations is really, really problematic.”

Dynamics like the ones shared in the group reveal how the current system blocks people from feeding themselves with accessible, adequate, nutritious, culturally appropriate food. Individuals and communities are resilient and adapt to continuing challenges and barriers, but the system is set up to have the upper hand. Clara expressed her concerns about the circumstances that lead to people relying on cheap, processed foods that are typically most commonly available to low-income households struggling to make ends meet:

“My husband and I, we are very supportive of one another and we have a really great village of people that just love on us, and if we are ever struggling we know that they will help us and care for us. But can you imagine a family that doesn’t have any of those

support systems? And they, all they do is work, right? And then they can barely feed their kids, their family. Oh, let's not even get into healthcare, that's a whole different beast. But you know those different things where people are like 'I would rather have money to pay for healthcare than to buy quality food'. But we don't understand that both things play off of each other. You're not eating healthy food, then your healthcare bill is going to be higher. But people don't understand those different dynamics, and it's totally capitalistic."

Clara's example illustrates how these factors interplay and perpetuate a cycle of inequality and food insecurity. Furthermore, she makes the point that social support is essential to surviving and navigating these systems before, during, and after crisis. These observations and stories reveal that the problem is much wider than food insecurity, and thus will not be solved by merely giving more food away under the current system. The problems and barriers specified by focus group participants evidence that food insecurity is a symptom of expansive systemic racism, colonialism, and capitalism.

Adapting to Compounding Crises by Building Community

One of the core questions addressed during the focus groups was asking how people in the Twin Cities communities are adapting to and surviving the crises. It has been clear to participants that we must look after each other in order to sustain our communities and ourselves. The void of community during the pandemic is just one indicator that we all need relationships and community to survive and live full lives. However, participants mentioned a few silver linings that they observed during the summer of the civil uprisings and the pandemic, particularly that more people seemed to be mobilized to support and show up for others. Brian shared from his personal

experience that he himself was motivated by the urgent needs failing to be addressed by local government:

“And it was something that was just awakened in me and a lot of other people, which was if we can’t get together and do this to help out our community and the people that need the most help who’s going to come in and who’s going to lend a helping hand? Because it’s clear that it’s never happening. It’s exciting to think about the future of Minneapolis, and the community that can be created. Also very frightening as well to realize how much of this is hanging by threads. Because if a few mutual aid organizations should cease to exist, there are hundreds of people relying on a lot of this.”

Clara also commented on the local movement that grew out of the lack of a coordinated response from government or larger non-profit agencies:

“It also created a movement with people where there are local leaders who started doing food shelves or pop-up food shelves throughout the cities because obviously government entities and bigger non-profits weren’t meeting the needs of the people in an immediate sense, so there’s people who are local leaders and local organizers and local organizations started coming together and they started creating these pop-up food shelves that were meeting, hitting immediate needs. Because at this point, so many people have lost their jobs, and so many people are being introduced to food shelves or getting free food. And food shelves always have this stigma to it, right? But right now, this country, *we are all starving*. There’s no shame in doing this, and so, so many people have gathered and came together and did it.”

Continuing with her reflections of the movement of people unifying to provide immediate aid throughout the crises, Clara shared how people in her own community circles similarly rallying to distribute direct support and resources through their own creative means and networks:

“Even though 2020 sucks, there’s also a lot of things that, like you said, mobilized people, who would have otherwise just not known. There are people who, even though they’ve lost jobs, they had time to give, so they were able to help with going to the food shelf and getting extra food for people in the community. And because I knew some people who worked at different food shelves and whenever there was excess amount of like corn or watermelon or things like that they would send, when I was on social media they would send a social media post and say “Hey! We have this amount of food left, please come and get it because it’s just going to go bad.” Or you know “The weekend is coming and it’s not going to be good anymore.” People would come up or post and say “I’m going to, I live in this area, I can go pick this food up and if you live in this area by me let me know and I can drop off whatever you need. So I think that, it’s just really, it started a different kind of movement from the layman being able to mobilize and help other people.”

Participants repeated the necessity of prioritizing being in relationship with others, in order to ensure support systems and to feed everyone. Michael called for an ideological shift not only the individual or community level, but throughout the socioeconomic and sociopolitical systems in the United States, especially at the highest levels of power and wealth. Michael expressed the harm of the capitalist mindset to enacting systemic change.

He stated:

“And I’ll go as far as saying that capitalism in and of itself is divisive, and whether not we want to acknowledge it or not, it pits us against the rugged individualist, pull yourself up by the bootstraps, you know that actually pits us against each other. That’s why entrepreneurs and businesses fail at the rate that they do, because we’re not working in unison. We may not be doing anything overtly to destroy each other, but we’re certainly not doing anything consciously to help support each other.”

Pondering what could be accomplished if we were all more intentional in our own relationships and partnerships, Michael went on to say:

“You know the power is in our hands, and unfortunately oftentimes we surrender our power, we become hopeless, helpless, and hapless when indeed we have the strength of community. We have the intellectual capacity. We have to really be able to make change, and I think people are starting to realize that, that we need to aggregate resources and mitigate risk... why don't we become more intentional? If we do that, and we start figuring out how we cannot operate within a sphere of fear and scarcity and realize that somehow or another they come up with resources when they want to. Then why, every time we go to them, do they cry poor? Or they cry “there's just no money to do that”? Well, they're always redefining the borders. And there's always redefining the debt, so let's hold them responsible. That's the organizing work, and the collaboration building that we've been trying to do is really approach this from, I'm saying start all these brush fires, so that we can create one big bonfire.”

Building community is not only essential for practicing collective care and building support systems to endure crises, but for aggregating power and social support for widespread change and holding institutions accountable for the extraction and oppression they have profited from.

Stories from Dina and Valentine support the need for people to come together to hold institutions accountable and circumvent the inertia of bureaucracy. Dina shared about overcoming bureaucratic pushback to installing community gardens by persisting and pushing right back until it was done. She expressed hope that people inside of these institutions could help open a path to leaping over bureaucracy by identifying all the questions that bureaucratic institutions want to be answered so that organizers and

advocates can be proactive in their initiatives, instead of bureaucracy off-roading even the best laid plans. Valentine later said that she felt inspired by Dina's attitude to push through "bureaucratic non-facilitation":

"And part of what was exciting to me about that conversation that I thought really spoke to a lot of the themes that we kept revisiting last time we talked was just, like this real encouragement from the bureaucracy to say like 'You need to keep banging on the doors. They need to keep hearing from you. We can't, we don't actually have the power inside the system to change it, but if you come in knowing what to do to demand that change, like we've got a toe in the door, trying to hold it open for you to do that.' And I really appreciate that strategic thinking about how to change the bureaucracy."

It is evident that people must come together to harness power and demand change.

However, lived experiences in organizing show that this will not be easy to accomplish without substantial social and political support. Reflecting on mutual aid work this summer and fall, Brian shared the necessity of consistent community support for and engagement with mutual aid initiatives in order to help organizations sustain distribution efforts. Organizers like Michael and Patsy experience discouragement from the lack of support from well-resourced institutions to create beneficial, not extractive, collaborations with their community partners:

"How can we talk about food security when we have that kind of dysfunction? And we'll never grow a food system if one institution in and of itself has five stepchildren that never really talk to each other, and don't operate in a functional way so that they can see the success and growth of each other. We're expected as, Patsy and I, as community good guys, operating in partnership with the university, *we're expected to work for food*. The universities have to be responsible; they have a history of extraction sitting in communities and not building an equitable partnership, but an extractive partnership. And

we cannot, we can't allow them as a mainstream institution to continue that because we are exhausting all of our resources. We have to get over ourselves and come together."

Michael was not the only one to criticize the mentality projected upon us to "work for our food." Clara shared her deep concerns about this current mentality and system:

"It's heavy because like I said, right now everybody, we operate under 'We have to earn our food.' You know? It's not just something that is given to us because we need it. Even though it's something that's essential to our lives, we still have to earn for and earn it. And the quality of our food depends on the affordability and the accessibility, so there's so many systems in place that just really impacts the ability for people to be able to access those things.... Like we literally can be talking about this all day, to hash it out and it's got to be bigger than just community leaders talking about it. It's also about bringing in people who are in the community to have this conversation. Because they're the ones who are going to be impacted. It's got to be beyond just conversations and creating programs, it's about policies."

Clara's statement connects all these ideas together and shows the need for these goals to be accomplished concurrently: we must be in community with each other to make equitable change happen, and we must co-design a new system within community to provide for everyone's basic needs and rights, including food.

The Future of the Food System: Where do we go/grow from here?

The closing question of the first focus group asked: Is the current food system sustainable long term? A report from the High Level Panel of Experts (HLPE) Committee on World Food Security defines sustainability as a dimension of food security, in addition to the traditional core dimensions (access, availability, utilization, and stability) (HLPE, 2020). The authors of this report define sustainability as:

“the long-term ability of food systems to provide food security and nutrition today in such a way that does not compromise the environmental, economic, and social bases that generate food security and nutrition for future generations” (HLPE, 2020, 9).

While no one in the group claims to be able to predict the future, the consensus was that an extractive system such as this is not sustainable for our communities currently or in the long-term. Clara stated simply: “No it’s not sustainable now, and it’s not going to be sustainable long term. I don’t even know if reform is the right word, it might need to just be replaced.” Patsy shared some of her concerns about the future of the earth itself – pointing out that climate change presents a lot of uncertainty within the food system:

“One of the things that’s going to happen as we go forward is we’re going to have to figure out some way to move into that transition of how we honor the earth in a whole different way, because otherwise the whole climate thing is going to fall apart. We’re not going to just be able to do efficient buildings, and deal with climate change. You know, we’re going to have to have a whole new way of looking at the earth. And that’s one of the things that I think as urban farmers, I mean maybe it’s not the top thing people talk about, but it’s a reality that that, that figuring out how to re-value the earth is part of what has to happen.”

Michael echoed these concerns, sharing how he has transitioned from focusing on explicitly food insecurity to seeing himself as a part of the environmental movement:

“I really am one of those who really has started to move away from actually even framing the conversation around food, that really what we’re talking about is we’re talking about an environmental movement. Once we start moving away from food, we start running into the realization that what we’re experiencing is environmental apartheid. And environmental apartheid controls the projection of thought, action, and more importantly,

public dollars that come with all of that crafting of systems thinking. And so as long as we're over here in the kiddie pool, talking about food, then we're taking ourselves out of the real fruitful development of seeing ourselves as people who are working in food as folks who are building food supply chains... as long as we do that then we're not really at the cutting edge of the green movement, the environmental movement, which is where we know the great existential threat of global warming and climate change, we know that all of the future resources that are going to be deployed are going to be addressed at green infrastructure, green enterprise, new and global warming and climate change, so we need to jettison ourselves over some of this stuff, these pitfalls and these traps that keep us on the low end of the food chain, rather than taking us at the interlands, at the really bludgeoning movement around food, food supply, and agriculture as an enemy to the environment. We are all environmentalists. We are either good stewards or poor stewards of those natural resources... now we have all of these tributaries that come together at an apex and now we've created synergy and now we can all grow together, we can all craft our narrative together around food supply, not food insecurity. Food insecurity presupposes what they want us to believe – that there's a scarcity of resources, and yet they keep us at arms' length as poor, you know the rich get richer, but the poor be damned. And so if we allow them to keep us out of the game, off the court, then we've only acquiesced to this narrative of scarcity of resources, when indeed we should be thinking about how do we expand our bandwidth so that we can look at resources that are out there.”

Looking at the current circumstances of our communities, the food system, and the planet, Michael's perspective suggests that not only is the food system unsustainable, but that focusing on protecting the environment and fighting climate change could provide a pathway to reclaiming our food supply, power, and future on this planet.

The second focus group and PhotoVoice activities encompassed the following question: What is your vision for the future of the food system? Participants were encouraged to use the PhotoVoice activity to capture images that embody their vision for the future and transformative change in the local food system. Additionally, this activity served to document lived experiences from 2020 and build individual and group narratives by adding pictures to their stories.

PhotoVoice Results: Envisioning Alternative Food Futures

Clara expressed that engaging in this activity both energized her and made her sentimental as she felt she was “telling stories with pictures.” The first story that she shared came from one of her children, who exclaimed “Mommy, we made this!” when looking at the photos she took of food they made together. Clara said one of the most important values that her parents instilled in her, which she is passing down to her children, is the importance of the connection to the earth and where our food comes from. Not only educating about growing practices and agriculture but involving youth and others in the process of producing locally sourced food displays the importance of stewardship and sustainability through hands-on experiences. Clara’s first photos included a visit with her children to a local goat farm, where they got to watch the goats being milked before taking home the milk with them. Following Clara’s examples, Dina and Patsy echoed the vitality of creating a connection between the community, especially youth, and the source of their food, as it fosters community building through gardening and a sense of place. Dina shared a story of a child who picked up a bell pepper and proclaimed that “it looks just like a real pepper from the grocery store!”, prompting her to

conclude that “this is what it’s all about, connecting people to their food, to the land, and to a sense of place.”

Every collaborator shared pictures or spoke about gardens and community-led agriculture. Gardens and agriculture were a large component of our discussion in that they led to other conversations and themes. For example, Patsy and Michael shared many pictures from urban farms and garden sites, but the stories they told illustrated that these spaces are much more than just growing food to them. Patsy stated that growing food is one part of the cycle, which further includes educating and learning how to grow and prepare different foods, cooking meals together, eating together, distributing food, and the last step – composting, which leads directly back to the beginning of the cycle.

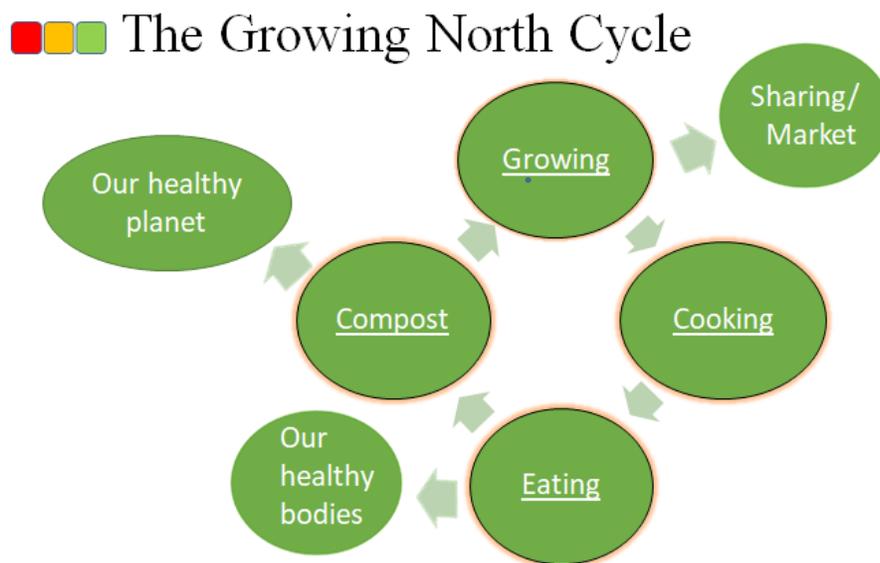


Figure 1: This figure was shared with me by Patsy Parker of the organization Growing North Minneapolis. This depicts the general “Food Circle” as described in focus groups.

Michael explicitly stated once again that he has come to believe that framing the problem as food insecurity is not broad enough, that the local food movement must aim

to create green infrastructure and revenue streams in order to create economic empowerment in the community. Several of Michael's pictures showed people coming together to plant trees, garden, distribute food in the community, and advance initiatives that restore history, restore cultural heritage, invest in youth and career development, and create intergenerational and cross-cultural connections. Similarly, Valentine brought up the LandBack campaign, which is connecting Indigenous land recovery and agriculture together to address food insecurity at a systemic source. She also provided examples of a restorative agriculture project in process by the Mille Lacs band of Ojibwe in Minnesota that embodies many of the values of community-led agriculture, using agricultural land to grow food and foster youth education. These initiatives show how food justice initiatives overlap with other local social movements and goals.

Michael emphasized that one of his main goals has always been to work more effectively together as a collective in order to overcome the divisiveness of capitalism. Clara, Patsy, and Dina shared how gardening, cooking, and eating together builds community and brings people together into a functioning collective. Clara shared pictures from her family's and friends' gardens that she assisted with by teaching and planting along with them, showing that gardening is often a collective effort. Additionally, Clara shared how sentimental she felt looking at pictures of food people in her community had given to her and her family, and she expressed that this made her sentimental because she feels strongly that one of the purposes of food is to be able to celebrate together and share joy and love for each other through meals. Patsy stated that being in the garden is really about being in the community and connecting through food, whether by learning new growing techniques and gardening together, growing culturally appropriate foods for the

community's requests, cooking in community, or sharing meals. Dina talked about the concept of "social permaculture", defining the term as a framework for humans to mimic in our own lives how plants and animals grow together in natural ecosystems.

Envisioning an interactive ecosystem of people, plants, and urban areas, Dina expressed that permaculture promotes building community and interacting through gardening, connecting to land and cultures by growing and cooking together, eating as celebration and joy (not just physical sustenance) and using food to come together.

Valentine shared her insights on ways that bureaucracy and institutions might be experiencing a much-needed shift in structure and focus. She included a screenshot of a Zoom meeting with other food justice advocates working in the Twin Cities to show that many people are coming together to work on these questions within and outside of bureaucratic systems. Valentine pointed out two new government employees in the meeting, both in Vista positions for the county and city, respectively, to share that the county and city are finally working together across scales in collaboration on this issue with an increased focus on community engagement. Although Valentine was encouraged by institutional messaging and small structural shifts she has noticed, she also expressed frustration that bureaucracy is still struggling to embrace new strategies that would get food to people. Rather than redistributing resources that would allow communities to establish alternative modes of food production, bureaucratic aid has still been limited to giving away meals instead of providing organizers and communities with land.

According to Valentine, local government still needs to be convinced that providing people with land *is* providing people with food. However, she also expressed that now is

the time to continue applying pressure and banging on bureaucratic doors to demand change.

Collaborators centered community-led agriculture in their vision for the future food system. According to collaborators, community-led agriculture is multi-purpose. One of the obvious purposes is to grow fresh produce and feed the community. Additionally, Dina voiced that community-led agriculture provides an alternative to monoculture, which weakens the soil and diminishes healthy plant growth. Dina shared that by creating community-led agriculture in visible neighborhood spaces, residents can both interact with the garden and each other to build community as well as provide input as to what should be grown for cultural and health needs. Michael emphasized that community-led agriculture offers pathway to individual and community economic development and empowerment, remedying historical injustice and preserving a green future. Clara and Dina testified that community-led agriculture brings nature closer to our own doorsteps, leading to connections with the earth and nature and creating beauty and a stronger sense of place in our communities. Patsy shared a reflection that encapsulates what gardens could provide to the community as they have to her:

“I think of myself as being in the garden – as where we’re living, being in the garden. Especially this summer, it was a place of safety.”

This quote from Patsy highlights a nuance of urban agriculture that other participants mentioned or alluded to – creating a sense of place, belonging, and safety that everyone has access to. In this way, gardens and community-led agriculture reflect values that a strong local food system could be founded on in order to extend food security, health and wellbeing, belonging, and healing to all.

CHAPTER 5: Discussion

In addition to documenting experiences and narratives from the crises, this study contributes to the understanding of the local food justice movement and place effects on food insecurity in the Twin Cities at the community scale. As collaborators identified how socio-ecological factors interplay and construct an inequitable local food system, several themes emerged from our focus group discussions. In this section, I contextualize the main themes of the focus group discussions in literature and theory on socio-ecological sources of health and food inequality from social epidemiology and radical food geography. These multi-scalar frameworks offer insight into how food apartheid and health disparities have been (re)produced during the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic by systems of oppression, as well as suggest strategies to heal communities and inequitable food systems (Hagen, 2020; Hammelman, Reynolds, and Levkoe, 2020; Krieger, 2001b; Reynolds et al., 2020).

Fault lines, Repair, and Reparations

To those living through the governor's stay-at-home order in the spring of 2020 followed by civil uprisings during the summer, life was far from normal. Were these events and experiences, and the impacts they had on food security, truly unprecedented? Collaborators expressed that some circumstances were unexpected or exceptional, such as the high transmissibility of the coronavirus and local grocery stores burning or being shut down in June. However, collaborators responded that inequity and vulnerability in community food security preceded the novel coronavirus and civil uprisings. Many food systems scholars have hypothesized that while rates of food insecurity skyrocketed throughout the United States, the industrial/commodity food system thrived during crises

because it was built to profit off of events such as these (Bullington, 2020; Liebman, Rhiney, and Wallace, 2020, 333). From one perspective, it could be argued that the global food system succeeded in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic, if one measures success by profits and the full stomachs of the wealthy and powerful (Clapp and Moseley, 2020, 1394). However, after imagery of the lines of cars miles long waiting outside of food banks in the U.S. during the pandemic was seen around the world, it doesn't take an expert to realize that "the industrial food system is a marvel of efficiency – until something goes wrong" (Bullington, 2020). Thus, the Covid-19 pandemic and civil uprisings in the Twin Cities represent triggers for the chain of reactions that continue to unfold, as "the pandemic lays bare generations of racial violence, oppression, and environmental injustice" (Liebman, Rhiney, Wallace, 2020, 333).

The murder of George Floyd is not the only violence at the hands of the state that the Twin Cities witnessed and experienced in 2020. Focus group participants as well as other food champions and scholars have argued that lack of adequate, nutritional food itself represents violence (Bullington, 2020; Liebman, Rhiney, and Wallace, 2020; Slocum and Cadieux, 2015). Liebman, Rhiney, and Wallace describe food insecurity under racial capitalism as "state-sponsored hunger" (Liebman, Rhiney, and Wallace, 2020, 331; Bullington, 2020). Previous research has found that food insecurity is frequently associated with exposure to unsafe conditions and violence, such as being unhoused or engaging in sex work or crime to buy food (Knowles et al., 2016). Shania Morris, an organizer in Philadelphia, shares how violence is experienced on a daily basis, "Black people are not only dying at the hands of police. They are dying because of lack of access to healthy food and healthcare, and because they're being overworked"

(Bullington, 2020). Thus, while these sources and experiences of violence may have been amplified or more visible since 2020, they are not new to the communities that are disproportionately most impacted by these traumas (Slocum and Cadieux, 2015, 32). Describing the conditions of food insecurity and starving as a form of state-sponsored violence parallels Clara's sentiment that food, including the choice over what you eat, is a right. If food insecurity and hunger are violence, then in a just society, all individuals and communities should have the choice and control over their food supply.

To identify sources of injustice and inequity in the food system, we can start by looking at the history of the United States. As described in the intertwining stories of local food champions, the violence, inequity, and trauma experienced under the current food system is the result of “long histories of slavery and exploitation, colonization and genocide, dispossession and capital accumulation, and punitive regulation and policies [that] have laid the foundations for (and continue to exacerbate) contemporary food systems inequities” (Hammelman, Reynolds, and Levkoe, 2020, 212). Simply put: contemporary food systems inequities are largely the “extended crisis of extractive racist (neo)colonialism” (Cadieux et al., 2019, 4). Furthermore, agriculture in the United States has its own strain of historical and current injustices created and perpetuated by settler colonialism and White supremacy (Levkoe et al., 2020, 298). Despite the fact that Black people were enslaved and violently forced to work on plantations to feed and grow this nation in very recent history, only 1.7% of farms in the United States were owned and operated by Black farmers in 2017 (Bullington, 2020).

Oppression and violence towards marginalized communities are historical and ongoing crises. Repair and reparations are demanded and required for “the wealth

extracted from our communities through environmental racism, slavery, food apartheid, housing discrimination, and racialized capitalism” (Gilbert and Williams, 2020, 234). These same mechanisms of extraction were cited in examples from focus group participants along with calls for repair of relationships, wealth and power redistribution, and transformative systemic change at multiple scales of the food system. Not only did participants provide ample evidence for the imminent need for reparations and agroecological repair (as defined by Cadieux et al., 2019), scholarship across disciplines supports and echoes these demands in order to forge a pathway towards healing from traumas associated with systemic injustices, including food insecurity (Cadieux et al., 2019; Levkoe et al., 2020; Hammelman, Reynolds, and Levkoe, 2020; Reynolds et al., 2020; Gilbert and Williams, 2020). Repair functions as the antonym to extraction, as Cadieux et al. contend that “Focusing on repair in engaging these narratives helps differentiate political ecologies of claims around land loss, vulnerability, and harm from losses suffered by privileged commodity farms and their investors. Agroecological framing of repair points advocates toward more socioecological, rather than merely symbolic, modes of repair work” (Cadieux et al., 2019, 6). Thus, the concept of repair intends to provide a more tangible framework for reparations and transformative systemic change related to the food system by prioritizing the formation of targeted solutions, whether policy, land redistribution, or restructuring the food system, by and for those who have experienced harm and trauma from the food system. In other words, transformative change in the food system to eliminate food insecurity must be guided by communities that have experienced food insecurity, systemic oppression, and inequality.

Repair to Relationships and Community

While more conventional approaches to addressing food systems inequities and injustices would likely focus on developing more agricultural technologies, making repetitive policy recommendations, or directing more funding to charities and food banks, participants kept coming back and doubling down on the importance of relationships to creating equitable food systems. While relationships may not have an obvious role in transforming extractive systems, they perform a dual service in advancing food justice goals. Firstly, relationships, similar to food, provide individuals and communities with strength and sustenance. Community organizing, urban farming, food distribution, and mutual aid, just a few examples mentioned during focus groups, all require partnerships, collaboration, and the strength of community. Beyond furthering social movements and creating community support infrastructure, intentional relationships contribute to our survival and wellbeing. Reflecting on his own experiences as a scholar activist, renowned food champion M. Jahi Chappell shared his being struck with the revelation that “just being with people, engaged in their work alongside them, is essential” (Levkoe et al., 2020, 299). Furthermore, this intentional collectivism is a counterattack on the divisiveness of capitalism (Liebman, Rhiney, and Wallace, 2020). Finally, it is worth noting the recurring theme in collaborators’ narratives that food, whether via growing, cooking, or eating, is one way that we can connect with each other and engage in intentional relationships and community building. Food is a powerful tool and starting point for growing community and social movements. Xavier Brown, another food champion, said, “For me, getting into the food movement, it was really about trying to be in my community” (Levkoe et al., 2020, 297)

In addition to being essential to building strong communities, relationships are a focal point for identifying and repairing historical and systemic harm. Reynolds et al. argue that “creating a more just food system requires an examination of relationships, positionality, knowledge, and power hierarchies” (2020, 278). Collaborators referred frequently to interpersonal relationships but also included in their conception of the term the relationship to history, ancestors, culture, the earth, nature, land, and place. As collaborators shared observations or experiences of oppression and apartheid, they described ways in which their communities’ relationships to their history, ancestors, cultures, land, and the earth have been harmed. These relationships require repair not only in order to make progress in the future, but more importantly to heal from injustice and trauma (Brown et al., 2020; Cadieux et al., 2019). Our relationship to the environment and the earth, nature, and land is at the forefront of food justice advocates’ minds, as urbanization, gentrification, deforestation, corporate farm expansion, and climate change all currently threaten the potential for less-privileged communities to achieve and/or sustain these relationships. As current capitalist industrial systems extract not only from people but also from the planet itself, Jabari Brown ponders, “My family holds a worldview that honors being in relationship with the land, as opposed to having domination over the land. How would our relationship to land as a country be different if this was our collective understanding?” (2020, 245).

BIPOC communities are consistently denied the privilege of having relationships with the earth and nature, and subsequently with the source of their food, through inequitable land access (Brown, 2020, 245). In addition to wealth and power, land access promotes a sense of place and belonging by enabling communities to engage in the

aforementioned relationships. From this perspective, achieving land access and being in relationship with the land offers a powerful mechanism to transform the food system, as academics argue that “a just and sustainable food system requires active participation by those in relationship with the land, who adhere to processes of giving back” (James et al., 2021). Furthermore, redistributing land only partially reconciles the problem since individual, versus collective, ownership and notions of property contradict Indigenous land stewardship and growing practices (Wozniacka, 2021). Collaborators and scholars both emphasize the colonial notion of property and land ownership as a barrier to an equitable food system and call for a shift towards collective ownership and redefining public space/land commons, an idea described as “unsettling’ notions of property built on settler colonial logic” (Brown et al., 2020, 244). As a collective resource, public or commonly owned land provides a space to build community as well as to grow (food, revenue and wealth, support systems, infrastructure, sociopolitical power), which provides a pathway to radically transforming food systems by forging community centered food production.

Growing Food: Healing, Growing, and Sustaining Community Care

Multiple people in the focus groups noticed that a silver lining of the pandemic was the heightened interest in gardens, community supported agriculture (CSAs), and urban farming, likely due to fear of fragility in the industrial food system and fear of scarcity (Bullington, 2020). CSAs exemplify how agriculture can promote collectivism and equity, as this model shares the inherent burden of financial risk equally amongst shareholders. Additionally, CSAs have roots in Black farming communities, allowing Black farmers to reconnect with their history (Penniman, 2020, 522). In focus groups,

Clara told about a group of Black women farmers and their newly formed organization “Divine Natural Ancestry” (or “DNA”). These women started a CSA program in the Twin Cities during the summer of 2020 to provide fresh produce for free to households and communities in need. This is one example of scholars’ observations that risk-sharing, community care, and resilience are key features of community-centered agriculture, as Emmad and Penna explain that:

“farm workers are always saving up for that rainy day and neighbors always care for each other. We have managed to stay connected to each other and our foodways through mutual reliance even as food has changed under colonialism, slavery, and the modern exploitation of farm workers. Food is a last line of dignity for humans. It is what leads to revolutions.” (2020, 565)

While some people might have been seeking a safety net and/or alternative to the industrial food system, others may have been attracted to the refuge of gardens during the Covid-19 pandemic. Patsy shared that gardens were her place of safety during the summer of 2020, as they provided space to continue to connect and interact with others while observing social distancing guidelines. Similarly, Dina, Valentine, Clara, and Michael all spoke to how community gardens contribute to a collective sense of place, community building, and connection to the source of peoples’ food – the earth. When created for the community, by the community, gardens can provide a way to build stronger community, connect with the land and its histories, decarbonize the environment, and share knowledge and different ways of knowing (Levkoe et al., 2020; Gilbert and Williams, 2020; James et al., 2021).

Focus group participants noticed that interest in community gardens spiked at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, but gardening is a practice as old as time itself. Indigenous and Black communities have rich histories of “providing food for one another in a dignified manner” and passing down traditional growing skills and knowledge for many generations (Penniman, 2020, 522; Levkoe et al., 2020; Wozniacka, 2020a). This demonstrates another way in which gardens can provide a means of reconnecting with culture, history, and ancestral knowledge. For example, agriculture can provide Black communities a means for reconnecting with their ancestors and history “through the skills and knowledge that were passed on from generation to generation, brought with them to the US, and are continually being passed on” (Levkoe et al., 2020). The goal of this work is much broader than growing more food or eliminating food insecurity, Xavier Brown is quoted saying “We are really working to heal people from the traumas that happen in the city. I was trying to figure out a way to make the land that healing mechanism for people. That is how I got into gardening. It was like a spiritual experience for me” (Levkoe et al., 2020, 297). While local agriculture provides physical sustenance to feed people, the symbolic sustenance it offers through healing and being in relationships is even more bountiful.

Furthermore, community-centered agriculture offers routes to economic and workforce development, youth education and career development, green infrastructure, agroecological repair, and more resilient food systems (James et al., 2021; Cadieux et al., 2019; Clapp and Moseley, 2020). Bullington reports that “the main barriers that keep people from farming are a lack of access to affordable land and a lack of capital to start” (2020). Agriculture appears a logical starting point for implementing transformative

systemic change, as regimes of agroecological repair could be “potentially corrective to the extractive regimes that have dominated agrifood-related environmental governance” (Cadieux et al., 2019, 2). During a focus group discussion, Michael shared the Leveling the Fields policy report from the Union of Concerned Scientists, included below:

“Farming offers a powerful path to build community wealth and resilience to challenges such as water pollution, droughts and floods, and lack of access to healthy food. However, US agriculture— particularly the pursuit of sustainable agriculture—is rife with obstacles for Black people, Indigenous people, and other people of color (BIPOC), including immigrants, migrants, and refugees. These obstacles include difficulty securing capital, credit, land, infrastructure, and information. For these groups, such challenges are compounded by longstanding structural and institutional racism. We review opportunities for governments, the private sector, philanthropies, and others to contribute to simultaneously building socioeconomic equity and sustainability in US food systems. To begin overcoming the history of racist policies and exclusion, it is our primary recommendation that solutions be developed by and with—rather than for— Black people, Indigenous people, and other people of color.” (Union of Concerned Scientists, 2020)

This report emphasizes that agriculture can be a multi-faceted strategy to achieving reparations and agroecological repair by following the leadership and knowledge of BIPOC communities in forming solutions to historical and current injustices perpetuated within the food system. It is not that gardens are the immediate answers to all of society’s problems, but rather that gardening and agriculture can foster grassroots movements that

address inequity and extraction in the food system and beyond. This is visible in the history of the Farmers Holiday movement during the Great Depression, when farmers banded together to prevent land dispossession and debt enforcement (Cadieux et al., 2019). The Black Panther Party also demonstrated the political and cultural significance of food and food access through the Black Panthers Breakfast Program of the 1960s (Cadiux and Slocum, 2015; Hammelman, Reynolds, and Levkoe, 2020). In recent years, the Council of Minnesotans of African Heritage coalesced a large network in the Twin Cities that led to the formation and implementation of urban agriculture policy, such as MN bills [HF 1461](#) and [HF 2076](#) (Cadieux et al., 2019). This legislation “retained a broad platform of community development, positive environmental impact, and economic justice, promoting a progressive populist platform – without collapsing into single-leader or single-issue simplifications” (Cadieux et al., 2019, 9). As one of the champions of the urban agriculture legislation, Michael spoke emphatically that he believes that local food production and urban farming are the latest iteration of the Civil Rights Movement because of their capacity to harness community power for transformative systemic change and equity. The movement towards food systems equity and agroecological repair has so much potential because it is centered on collectivism and coming together to challenge the status quo and transform systems.

The report from the Union of Concerned Scientists also cautions the regenerative and reparative agriculture movements against perpetuating power imbalances and spatial inequalities (Wozniacka, 2021). Community gardens are often spaces that (re)produce urban gentrification and environmental apartheid, thus perpetuating inequalities (Wozniacka, 2021). Additionally, while reparations and land redistribution are necessary

components of healing injustices and harm to Indigenous people, non-Indigenous people must be cautious of appropriating Indigenous knowledge or placing the responsibility/burden of decarbonizing the planet or “reverse engineering” climate change on Indigenous communities (Wozniacka, 2021). These goals will not be achieved by shifting the burden and all of the work of undoing years of damage to the environment on BIPOC communities. Rather, these efforts must be accomplished by working together to listen to the guidance of those directly impacted by oppressive systems and to co-design and co-create equitable, inclusive systems for the future (Levkoe et al., 2020; Wozniacka, 2021)

While there are tangible steps to be completed in the process of transformative change, part of the most necessary progress is in an ideological shift across society to unlearn and dismantle white, Eurocentric institutions and knowledge systems (Reynolds, et al. 2020). This requires both collaboration and transformational shifts in “how knowledge production is understood in white, Eurocentric society” (Reynolds et al., 2020, 283). Repair is an ongoing process, and we cannot pretend that there is a clean slate to return to in terms of the historical and current violence towards BIPOC people or the planet we inhabit (Cadieux et al., 2021; Garvey, 2016). Repairing relationships and repairing the land, much like transforming systems and fighting for justice, is an ongoing commitment to those who have been harmed, not a checklist to complete. On the potential for local agriculture to reshape the food system after the Covid-19 pandemic, Roman-Alcalá writes:

“Meanwhile, gardening itself contains no inherent politics, with motivations from panic and patriotism to revolutionary antagonism. Movements must continue to

actively shape why people garden, how they access land, and who can take part or benefit, if break-downs are to result in positive transformation. They must also carefully consider their understanding of and approach to the state” (2020, 648).

From a geographical angle, local agriculture can provide *space* for people and communities to engage in these values and practices. However, without leadership from people who are most impacted by food inequities and intentional design of the space and infrastructure to serve the community’s needs equitably, community gardens will not inherently achieve the radical goals laid out in this discussion. It is worth noting that while BIPOC communities have a long history of urban farming, urban farming and community gardens have also been co-opted by the “alternative” food movement (Hammelman, Reynolds, and Levkoe, 2020). The alternative food movement has received valid criticism for being “racially and economically exclusive, perpetuating neoliberal ideologies, and ignoring intersectional systems of oppression” (Hammlman, Reynolds, and Levkoe, 2020, 218). This is an additional reason as to why those most impacted by food apartheid must have a primary role in co-designing policies and new food systems. Without the experiential knowledge of community members, reproduction of inequities and power imbalances is inevitable in foodscapes.

While this work is not accomplished overnight, it is not impossible if we open our imaginations to it. In order to achieve healing, equity, and justice, we must look to shaping new realities that are founded upon these principles. Accordingly, in order to transform the food system, we must “open ourselves to our imaginations, and embrace the idea that we can accomplish more than our analyses may lead us to believe – if we build the connections and the work and the new spaces to accomplish it” (Levkoe et al.,

2020, 300). The local food movement can continue to grow if we give it the space in our collective conscience to take shape and take hold in our communities. This requires reshaping both the terrain of our communities and power-knowledge to promote BIPOC knowledges and self-determination (Reynolds et al., 2020). Transitioning from Eurocentric dominant society and reshaping of power-knowledge must happen across systems and institutions, but especially within academia (Hammelman, Reynolds, and Levkoe, 2020). Academics, including radical food geographers, are not immune to perpetuating inequalities and reproducing power imbalances and Eurocentric ways of knowing (Reynolds et al., 2020). Explaining these uneven power dynamics, Reynolds et al. invoke Foucault's (2008) notion of power knowledge to "understand how Eurocentric concepts of knowledge render invisible Indigenous knowledges that emerge organically from Indigenous cosmology and conceptualizations of place and space" (2020; 278). This highlights the essentiality of academics and scholar-activists to engage in dismantling racist institutions and embrace alternative ways of co-producing and sharing knowledge in order to form non-extractive partnerships between scholarship and social movements and advance the goals of agroecological repair (Hammelman, Reynolds, and Levkoe, 2020; Cadieux et al., 2019).

Transformative Change and Self-Determination

"Every effort to see things through a different lens is ultimately a claim on our right for self-determination at the community level" (Ricardo Salvador, in Levkoe et al, 2020, 298).

I (nor other food justice scholars/advocates) do not intend to oversimplify the solution – while a shift in both epistemology and control over land is necessary, it is incomplete

without concurrent transformation in institutions and systems founded on white supremacy. Gilbert and Williams caution,

“Yet access to land does not ensure opportunities for wealth accumulation and self-determination, and thus does not equate to land justice. Many institutions in the United States are based in ideology of Black inferiority and thus preserve racial injustices; until these institutions are transformed, race-based uneven development will continue to be (re)produced.” (2020, 231)

The primary objective is not to turn every lawn into a garden or for every household to grow its own food. In the words of Ricardo Salvador, “the primary objective is to improve health, environment, agriculture, and labor by destroying the nation’s structural racism and building an equitable, inclusive, and representative economy” (Levkoe et al, 2020, 298). While an intermediary step is land, and thus wealth, reparations, the ultimate goal is to transform this current “space” - our society and systems - into a space for self-determination and reconnection with ancestors and cultural traditions (Gilbert and Williams, 2020, 237). Growing spaces and practices (gardening, agriculture, urban farming, foraging, etc.) can foster community care, permaculture and regenerative lifestyles, equitable and sustainable local food systems, steps toward reparations and transformation, and healing from traumas. Community-centered food production and collective care are viable strategies in the Twin Cities for transformative change, following a framework of food justice centered on repairing trauma/inequity, exchange, land, and labor (Cadieux and Slocum, 2015, 2).

James et al. describe one of the primary objectives of transformative change as creating a food system built on respect, in contrast to the current demeaning system that:

“relies on food banks to feed people. While providing critical services, the reputation of food banks as ‘dumping grounds’ for less desirable food is deeply concerning. In contrast, respectful food governance requires a dignified way to distribute food; indeed, on-the-ground examples can already be found in places where communities take on the work of feeding their members” (2020, 12).

This echoes sentiments of the codependent and problematic nature of the hunger solution model shared from collaborators in focus groups. Since the philanthrocapitalistic hunger solution model not only fails to prevent food insecurity but also perpetuates disrespect in the food system, where does that leave us in terms of solutions? The food security crisis symbolizes to food justice advocates that not only is it necessary to transform global and local food systems, but new solutions and strategies are required to heal from past crises and protect everyone against future crises:

“Because the old ‘playbook’ for addressing food crises has played a prominent role in exacerbating the impact of the current crisis, it makes little sense to rely on it – let alone to extend it – as a way to address the problems presented by the Covid-19 pandemic. Producing more food for global supply chains guarantees neither markets for vulnerable producers nor food access for people who have lost their employment and livelihoods. Instead, there is a need to invest in more diversified production and supply networks, and more robust social protection measures, to build greater resilience, not just in the face of the present crisis triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic, but also against future crisis.” (Clapp and Moseley, 2020, 1411)

The time for transformation is yesterday, not only because it's critical, but also because it's already happening (Levkoe et al., 2020). Many BIPOC-led communities already promote these transformational practices and strategies, and many are already finding ways to create new realities outside of capitalism (James et al., 2021; Bullington, 2020). While it may require some imagination to see that system-wide transformation and alternative food systems are possible, people most impacted by food insecurity and other state violence have always been making resilient alternative food systems a reality as they fight for the right to self-determination (Bullington, 2020; Gilbert and Williams, 2020; James et al., 2021; Penniman, 2020; Roman-Alcalá, 2020).

As alluded to previously, food systems transformation is not about returning to the past or attaining a clean slate – we cannot undo the harm and violence that has been committed, so we must engage in ongoing repair as a collective (Garvey, 2016). Giving guidance for the future we must come together to create, Michelle Garvey writes:

“In the Anthropocene, there is no clean slate with which to begin; colonial and racist injustices have given rise to neocolonial injustices that climate change exacerbates. In these times, we must ask, what lessons have we inherited, and what skills can we hone, from our participation in both Earth-destroying, and Earth-regenerating, activities? With increasingly fewer opportunities to employ history to “turn back the clock,” *which* values and ecologies we choose to restore, and *how* we choose to restore them, will make all the difference in how environmentalism will not only be sustained, but also help secure the resiliency, first and foremost, of those unduly affected by climate change. If we are to create an ecologically viable world for as many humans and nonhumans as possible,

then justice-oriented restoration should be one of our valued responses to climate change” (2016).

CHAPTER 6: Conclusions

In this paper, I have applied a geographical lens to analyze the food system and local food movement in the Twin Cities during and after crises that unfolded in 2020. Local food champions shared their knowledge and stories with me, which I have tried to synthesize and retell here. Collaborating with food justice advocatess allowed me to preserve local histories from 2020 and gain their nuanced insight into systems of oppression in the Twin Cities that perpetuate food apartheid. Employing the focus group format and PhotoVoice activity facilitated knowledge sharing and organic connections amongst participants and myself and demonstrated the value of “research through reflection”, which emphasizes that research is a reflexive process (Gilbert and Williams, 2020, 230). Research through reflection functioned to highlight other important ways of knowing outside of academia and as a means to develop understanding of “personal identity, relationship to ancestry, and positioning within food justice initiatives to surface broader social and political issues” (Gilbert and Williams, 2020, 230).

Stories from collaborators described barriers to achieving food equity and community wellbeing, the significance of food justice work in their lives and communities, experiences and challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic, community efforts to self-determination, and their personal connection to food and growing. From these stories, it is clear that food is a tool of joy, celebration, and connection – with ancestry, history, identity, culture, community, and nature. These stories and this research paper emphasize the potential of food justice initiatives to foster grassroots movements and accomplish system-wide transformation (Cadieux et al., 2019).

This project aimed to apply the radical food geography praxis proposed by Hammelman, Reynolds, and Levkoe, which includes interrogation of power and uneven development, action through collaboration, and spatial analysis of food systems (2020). Qualitative analysis revealed that the commodity food system, local government and bureaucracy, and well-funded, private institutions extract wealth and health from systemically marginalized communities in the Twin Cities. Focusing analysis on the Twin Cities specifically provided insight into the socio-ecological dynamics that perpetuate injustice, inequality, and food apartheid. Neocolonialism and racial capitalism are two notable factors responsible for restricting individuals' and communities' control over acquiring food, which then leads to increased stress, exposure to violence, health disparities, and intergenerational trauma (James et al., 2021; Hagen, 2020).

Collaborating with local food champions fulfilled many purposes. First, these collaborations established new connections and linked networks in the Twin Cities, increasing our collective awareness of the strength and power of our numbers. Focus group discussions not only established connections, but also accomplished community building through storytelling and knowledge sharing. These connections have already led to additional partnerships between participants and potential new initiatives, showing that we grow and bloom even more vibrantly when we come together.

Local food champions demonstrated that investing in community-led agriculture is a powerful option for bringing about transformative change in the food system and broad socio-ecological justice, since food is inextricably linked to all other forms of justice such as housing, environmental, and health justice (Roman-Alcalá, 2020; Slocum and Cadieux, 2015). Their stories of intersecting efforts to increase economic

empowerment, education, investment in youth, community health, equitable urban design and development, and land reparations also emphasized food scholars' arguments that:

“as far as food security goes, ‘you can’t do just food security. People are concerned about their communities, schools, about globalization and saving their farms’. In addition to an analysis of institutionalized inequity in the food system, antiracism advocates argued that the food movement should connect analyses of race across multiple socio-economic areas of peoples’ lives... transform how groups work with communities, allocate resources equitably, and rectify historical injustices, all of which we suggest should figure prominently in work that calls itself food justice” (Slocum and Cadieux, 2015, 31).

Transformative change is both necessary and possible, as advocates in the agri-food movement in the Twin Cities are already working strategically to feed their communities, dismantle sources of systemic oppression, and co-create alternative, equitable models to the commodity food system. Communities most impacted by food apartheid and systemic oppression in the Twin Cities have the necessary knowledge and expertise to transform the food system (Levkoe et al., 2020), and achieving transformation foremost requires the collective action and intentional collaboration of the people united to dismantle injustice and heal together (Crane and Pearson, 2020).

Limitations, Recommendations and Future Directions

As alluded to throughout this paper, this research was conducted during the fall of 2020, in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic in Minnesota. The nature of conducting remote research during a time of heightened stress and fatigue limited some of the methods and extent of this research. The focus group format was chosen for collaborative

reflection and facilitating connections during the pandemic, but it is worth noting that focus group dynamics among participants have the potential to introduce or re-produce power imbalances in research. This was an exercise in crafting a group narrative through reflection and storytelling, and it is not without its imperfections. However, this methodology advances the practice of research through reflection as a form of autoethnography - exploring ancestry, identity, history, culture, place, community, and power (Gilbert and Williams, 2020).

Patsy observed a key limitation of this research project during a focus group conversation: this story is incomplete without youth testimony. Many young people, especially BIPOC youth, are creating change in their communities in the Twin Cities and leading resistance efforts to engage in production of shared knowledge and practice new ways of living in community. Their voices are necessary for co-creating future food systems and social policies. This limitation of my project serves as an invitation to other community scholars to continue this line of research and expand the conversation with more community members who want to co-create better food systems. Although the experiences and reflections of the six collaborators in focus groups are not representative of the entire food movement in the Twin Cities, they noticed how their stories paralleled and echoed each other, validating their community expertise as a source of more general knowledge. This further confirmed that we need to hear and uplift more stories from people across scales who are experiencing food apartheid and working towards transformation in order to build solidarity and achieve healing through justice and collective efforts.

One conclusion that I have illustrated through this research is that community members outside of academia provide priceless grounded experiential knowledge for addressing structural oppressions (Levkoe et al., 2020). Food scholars (and scholars in general) must seek out collaborations not to harvest the knowledge of community experts and perpetuate exploitation of marginalized communities, but to strive to reduce power-knowledge disparities between communities and individuals living through food apartheid and scholars engaging in food research, whether action-oriented or not (Reynolds et al., 2020). Partnerships between scholars and food justice advocates can create “space for co-learning and unlearning about what constitutes relationships between people, communities, and the places in which they are situated”, disrupting conventional approaches to knowledge production and leading to new possibilities (Reynolds et al., 2020). I am inspired and motivated by the words of M. Jahi Chappell calling to scholar-activists, “So why not open ourselves to our imaginations, and embrace the idea that we can accomplish more than our analyses may lead us to believe – if we build the connections and the work and the new spaces to accomplish it” (Levkoe et al., 2020, 300).

In order to achieve food and health equity, the way we conduct research about public health, food insecurity, social determinants of health, and food systems must transform as well as systems themselves. Applying radical food geography praxis requires taking both the risk of contradicting conventional academic traditions and a strong political stance to fully engage the objectives of this epistemology (Hammelman et al., 2020; Levkoe et al., 2020; Reynolds et al., 2020). Levkoe et al. further explain that, for community-partnered food scholars:

“It also means ensuring that scholarship goes beyond reports and articles, to engage in knowledge mobilization that contributes to social and ecological justice efforts. This might involve working alongside activists to contribute to existing struggles, documenting success and limitations of efforts, developing new tactics and strategies with movements, taking strong political stances to demand the transformation of unjust systems in society and the academy, and/or working toward food justice as a part of a larger social responsibility” (2020, 302).

Establishing trust and building relationships are ongoing processes that require a commitment of time and energy, of which many people in academia understandably feel too stretched thin to provide due to the demands of their many roles and tight budgets that limit their capacities. In order to begin to dismantle these systems that currently limit us, we must initiate and provide further support to scholarship that is committed to relationship and community building with the aim to re-invest in communities at the university-level and advance systemic change. Research on food justice and efforts to transform food systems are meaningless absent relationship and community building, as we must strive to repair the relationships that have been broken, learn from each other, and work as a collective to create alternative futures.

Transforming the foodscape of the Twin Cities offers the potential to grow unity and coalitions throughout communities, fostering social power that can be channeled into grassroots change and dismantling systemic racism, colonization, and oppression. Darcy Freedman writes, “food as a universal experience may be one of the most powerful tools for creating *uncommon* grounds, for establishing hierarchies in society, for producing and reproducing valued and devalued bodies, and for perpetuating health disparities among

socially marginalized populations” (2017, 90). I compel us to open our imaginations to the new possibilities that arise when we work collectively to both feed ourselves and free ourselves (Penniman, 2020).

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