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Author(s): Gretchen Sneegas

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“Sustenance Out of Refuse”: Detroit, Invisible Capital, and the Search for Food Justice

abstract | *In recent years, Detroit has been largely portrayed by mass media as a site of desolation and desertion. The city’s citizens, however, have another story to tell. This paper examines the Detroit Food Justice Task Force (DFJTF), an organization designed to improve food security within the city. DFJTF seeks to empower native Detroiters by helping them to discover their own “invisible capital,” or existing resources hidden from view. Using qualitative discourse analysis to examine DFJTF’s website and social media content, this paper analyzes the overlapping categories of race, space, and capital as they intersect with food justice work in Detroit. This paper argues that DFJTF uses these categories to challenge mainstream, racialized depictions of Detroit as a barren landscape, instead describing the city as rich in invisible human and spatial capital.*

Detroit is widely portrayed by the mainstream media as a hotbed of crime and urban decay. In 2012, Forbes listed Detroit as America’s Most Dangerous City with the highest national rate of violent crime for the fourth straight year (Fisher), while articles in the New York Times and Reuters describe a financial crisis so appallingly bad that the city cannot pay for enough streetlights, ambulances, police or fire fighters to meet its needs (Davey and Walsh; Neaving and Woodall). According to the U.S. Census, Detroit’s population decreased 25% since 2000 for a total population of 713,777 in 2010. Of those remaining residents, one in three lives below the poverty threshold (South-east Michigan Council of Governments 1).

The appearance of “ruin porn,” or pictures of decaying and abandoned buildings, is perhaps most suggestive of what Detroit has come to embody in the popular imagination. In 2009, Time Magazine published a series of pictures by French photographers Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre, titled “Detroit’s Beautiful, Horrible Decline.” The collection portrays shattered windows in Michigan Central Station, the decrepit remains of a grand piano in the Lee Plaza Hotel, discarded textbooks and overturned desks in unused schoolrooms. In one recent article in the New York Times Maga-

zine, the author demonstrates how Detroit’s ruins have come to define the city – a lesson he comprehended after encountering European tourists in the long-abandoned Packard plant who had come “to see the end of the world” (Binelli).

The picture of Detroit’s foodscapes is similarly bleak. According to a food systems report by the Detroit Food Policy Council, the city has long experienced a dearth of national grocery store chains, with the last one closing its doors in 2007 (Simon and Gabriel 3). While the opening of a Whole Foods broke this trend in June 2013, critics argue that the store is too expensive, claiming it remains out of the price range for Detroit’s poorer residents (Abbey-Lambertz; Sachteleben). What’s more, one lone store is not much use to the two thirds of Detroit households that do not own personal vehicles, particularly in a city where, due to slashed budgets, public transportation is already “abysmal and getting worse” (Simon and Gabriel 3). A food desert analysis of Detroit by the Mari Gallagher Group contends that, given the lack of accessible, full-service grocery stores and few remaining independent groceries, more than half of the USDA Food Stamp retailers in Detroit are so-called “fringe” retailers such as liquor, party and convenience stores (8). Thus, for Detroit’s poor, access to healthy food

choices such as produce, whole grains and lean meats is a significant challenge.

Detroit residents, however, are pushing back against what they see as a one-sided portrayal of their home as a blighted, post-industrial city. A number of Detroit-based blogs, photography projects, and articles have begun to publically question the assumption that Detroit is empty and abandoned. Among these efforts are a multitude from food justice organizations that have sprung up in the Motor City, among them the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network, the Detroit Food Policy Council, Grown In Detroit, Corktown Community Kitchen, Brother Nature Produce, D-Town Farm, and many more.

Some of the above-mentioned organizations have either conducted their own studies regarding food justice in Detroit, such as reports published through the Detroit Food Policy Council, or have been the subject of academic analyses. Kami Pothukuchi, a member of the Detroit Food Policy Council and Professor of Urban Studies at Wayne State University, has published multiple studies examining food justice initiatives. In one Detroit-specific example, Pothukuchi describes the SEED-Wayne Campus-Community Collaborative, a program “developed to build sustainable food systems on Wayne State University’s campus and in Detroit communities” (193). Another Wayne State University faculty member, Monica M. White, has developed case studies on Detroit-based organizations such as D-Town Farm and the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network. Looking at D-Town Farm specifically, White argues that the organization uses urban agriculture as a method of agency in a landscape characterized by what African American community members perceive as the abandonment of political and industrial leaders. The farm workers “assume control of their food-security movement” by “challeng[ing] the government’s capacity to provide a safe and clean food supply” (189). By focusing specifically on the Detroit Food Justice Task Force as a prominent voice of the city’s alternative food movement, this paper contributes to an existing body of academic work being conducted at the intersection of community

development and food access work within Detroit.

The Detroit Food Justice Task Force, or DFJTF, was launched in 2010 through the East Michigan Environmental Action Council as part of a grant awarded by the Kresge Foundation to begin “implementing recommendations to improve food security in Detroit” (The Kresge Foundation). According to its website, DFJTF began as a collaboration between eleven founding member organizations, which include “local growers, social, environmental and media justice organizations, schools, churches, food educators, restaurants, caterers and restaurant suppliers, the City of Detroit, representatives from the Michigan Environmental Council, community activists, residents and stakeholders.” Its founding members have ties to a variety of Detroit food justice institutions. In one example of the embeddedness of DFJTF within the broader Detroit food justice network, one founder is a co-creator of the organization as well as a founding member of the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network and the Detroit Food Policy Council, where she helped draft Detroit’s 2008 Food Security Policy.

Although DFJTF does not provide an explicit definition of food justice on its website, the group’s mission statement is a close approximation:

The Detroit Food Justice Task Force is a consortium of People of Color led organizations and allies that share a commitment to creating a food security plan for Detroit that is: sustainable, that provides healthy, affordable foods for all of the city’s people; that is based on best-practices and programs that work; and that is just and equitable in the distribution of food and jobs.

Additionally, DFJTF relies upon the Principles of Food Sovereignty, defined broadly as “the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through sustainable methods and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems” and included on the website’s home page, to inform its food justice work through community and youth outreach (La Via Campesina).

In its outreach to Detroit communities, DFJTF holds regular gatherings such as “Cook Eat Talk” and “Food Justice Fridays” community dinners and discussions, as well as monthly film showings. DFJTF has also published three “cookzines” which share local resources such as “recipes and food justice resources,” has produced a 45 minute documentary highlighting the “Cook Eat Talk” gatherings, and has organized the Detroit Youth Food Justice Task Force. Such activities are highlighted in DFJTF’s communication strategy, for which the organization utilizes a website and social media platforms as methods of outreach. By examining the language DFJTF uses on its website and through social media, this paper argues that the organization is challenging the mass media portrayal of Detroit as a city abandoned by businesses and residents alike. Instead, DFJTF describes Detroit as a city rich in hidden and under-utilized resources, or “invisible capital,” just waiting to be tapped.

THEORY/ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK This paper analyzes DFJTF’s communications within the context of a post-Marxist critique of capitalism, building in particular upon Nathan McClintock’s food desert analysis of Oakland, California. In his paper “From Industrial Garden to Food Desert,” McClintock examines the devaluation properties of urban capital in Oakland. McClintock argues that certain types of capital, when “visibly inscribed on the landscape in the form of buildings and infrastructure,” play a role in the devaluation of spaces in an urban landscape (94). This process contributes to the development of devalued spaces such as food deserts:

During historical moments of capital over accumulation following economic booms, surplus capital is invested in this kind of fixed or immobile capital, transforming the urban environment. During economic downturns, as capital retreats from urban industrial zones, the postindustrial city nevertheless retains its industrial character, albeit devalued, dilapidated, and scarred by pollution, often to such a great degree that it precludes future investment. (McClintock 94)

The physical alterations on the urban landscape of these “boom and bust” cycles is an example of what Julie Guthman describes as the “spatial fix” of capitalism in her 2011 critique of neoliberalism, *Weighing In*. By “spatial fix,” Guthman refers to how capitalism traditionally responds to problems of overaccumulation. Says Guthman, “When there is too much capital in circulation and not enough profitable investment opportunities, capitalism stagnates, sometimes profoundly” (165). Capitalism seeks to solve this issue with “the displacement of the problem of overaccumulation elsewhere in space” – or the “spatial fix” (165). In Detroit’s case, the “spatial fix” manifested itself as expanded infrastructure development around the city.

Although Guthman is referring to the human body as the site of a spatial fix in which capitalism solves the problem of food overproduction through obesity, the concept meshes nicely with McClintock’s scrutiny of urban space devaluation. Buildings and infrastructure provide the spatial fix of capitalism’s excess accumulation, as urban planners expand beyond Detroit’s limits when space becomes less available within the city. While this strategy may work in the short-term, capitalism must expand outwards with every successive overaccumulation crisis. As a result, urban centers such as Detroit, once mid-century bustling hubs of commerce, gradually ceded their primacy to the suburbs as manufacturers sought virgin spaces upon which they could satisfy their next spatial fix. This practice leaves the urban interior covered in outdated infrastructure, which, as it decays, becomes even further devalued in a cycle “of capital accumulation and devaluation, a palimpsest of building, decay and renewal” (McClintock 94).

At the same time, these processes contribute to a racialized delineation within such urban spaces. Numerous scholars have examined the history of racist hiring and housing practices in the U.S. food system, many of which still exist and continue to impact present-day communities. For example, Green, Green and Kleiner examine structural barriers and institutional racism facing black farmers in the American south, saying, “From their beginning days in the United States, black farmers were de-

fined institutionally as being less worthy than white farmers...Even today, black farmers are viewed with indifference at best and contempt at worse by the mainstream agricultural establishment" (50). Another examination of agriculture and racism by Adams and Gorton argues that New Deal resettlement projects through the Farm Security Administration displaced sharecroppers in an effort to "modernize rural America," permanently altering many communities as a result (326). Such barriers have not been confined to African-American populations - the course of agricultural industry in California has witnessed the exploitation, abuse, and exclusion of immigrant communities up to the present day (Minkoff-Zern et al.; Brown and Getz).

In the case of Oakland, California, McClintock illustrates that as jobs left the cities, so too did white populations. McClintock argues that this trend was the product of practices such as "zoning, redlining, and neighborhood covenants" that were used to "demarcate and quarantine devaluation to prevent its impacts from bleeding over" into majority white areas (95). The end result was a "suburban workforce [that] was largely white," in what appears to have been a common trend in post-industrial American cities (McClintock 103). As a result, devalued urban spaces such as food deserts "disproportionately impact people of color," a trend that holds true in Detroit (McClintock 89). According to the Detroit African-American History Project from Wayne State University, African Americans made up just 16.1% of the city's population in 1950. This percentage increased to 44.5% by 1970 and 76% by 1990. Today, Detroit's population is 82.7% African American, compared to 14.2% in the rest of the state (U.S. Bureau of the Census).

It is fair to say that in Detroit, as in many American urban areas, people of color are unevenly affected by the negative effects of capitalism and the decay of the urban environment. Within the alternative food movement, a number of solutions have been offered to combat such outcomes. The organization Just Food, based in New York City, is representative of this approach within alternative food movements. The Just Food website defines food justice as "communities exercising their right

to grow, sell, and eat healthy food. Healthy food is fresh, nutritious, affordable, culturally-appropriate and grown locally with care for the well-being of the land, workers and animals." Just Food advocates Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), farmers markets, and urban gardens as methods to combat food insecurity, and provides community outreach programming to educate communities about the benefits of local, organic food.

Numerous critiques have been made of the alternative food movement and organizations such as Just Food. While the scope of these commentaries is far too broad to summarize here, a few points should be emphasized, particularly around race. As Guthman describes in her article "'If They Only Knew': The Unbearable Whiteness of Alternative Food," the alternative food movement is largely a "white" space, in which whiteness is seen as "'normal' or unmarked." The spaces and practices of alternative food are coded as "white cultural spaces" in which whiteness is normalized through "colorblindness," or "refusing to see (or refusing to admit) race difference," and "universalism: the assumption that values held primarily by whites are normal and widely shared" (267). Such assumptions and practices erase community differences, including dissimilar histories, experiences, preferences, and ideals.

Nicole Dawkins finds similar practices at play in her critique of the Detroit "Do-It-Yourself" or "craft" movement. Dawkins begins by examining the abandonment discourse surrounding Detroit. Such discourse ignores and therefore alienates the communities of color currently living and working in Detroit through descriptions of the city "as a dystopic wasteland but also as a kind of utopic 'blank canvas': an empty space waiting to be inscribed and transformed by artists and the arrival of a new creative class" (266). Needless to say, this "new creative class" happens to be mostly white. According to Dawkins, such interlopers are attempting to "recolonize" the "empty" Detroit, despite "the fact that the city is still home to at least a million people and a wide spectrum of hopes and desires for a more 'liveable' city" (267). These tensions - between communities of color and

“colonizing” white residents, between the popular imagery of an abandoned “urban prairie” and the lived realities of an existing and vibrant population – define the space in which organizations such as DFJTF must operate.

Furthermore, both Guthman and Dawkins place their respective critiques within the context of neoliberalism, arguing that many food and DIY activists are perpetuating neoliberalist barriers. Dawkins demonstrates that “craftwork” discourses engage in “reproducing neoliberalist rationalities and limiting the political potential” of its participants, by promoting “pleasure and fulfillment” as compensation for creating and selling handmade goods, which “might be otherwise felt to be unstable, precarious, and even unstable work” (261-62). Although DIY participants may promote “anticorporate” viewpoints, Dawkins notes that solutions championed by “Makers” to create a “handmade Detroit” are in actuality placed “within the mechanism of the creative market,” beholden to the logic of capital (279). Meanwhile, Guthman laments over-used phrases such as, “If people only knew where their food came from...” as “idioms” that are “insensitive or ignorant (or both) of the ways in which they reflect whitened cultural histories and practices” (275). What’s more, such sayings also place the onus of responsibility upon the very groups food activists are attempting to assist, by implying that any rational being with enough sense and a little education would surely make the “right” choice to eat locally and organically grown produce. The acceptance of these assumptions parallels the central premise of neoliberal logic, in which individuals are held responsible for their own successes and downfalls, and structural explanations are downplayed or ignored.

As this paper will demonstrate, the Detroit Food Justice Task Force employs similar tactics to other food justice organizations through their community outreach programs, including promoting local agriculture and community gardening as sources of fresh food, publishing educational materials, hosting film screenings, and planning neighborhood events such as their regular “Cook Eat Talk” discussions. A less noticeable role that the organization

has assumed, however, is countering the largely negative mainstream media portrayal of Detroit and its communities as blighted and abandoned. Additionally, DFJTF embraces racial narratives and weaves them into its website and social media content, rather than suppressing or ignoring them. A discursive analysis of DFJTF’s website and social media sheds light on how this organization views Detroit and its own role within the city’s food system, as well as how DFJTF is working to shift portrayals and perceptions of the Detroit’s community.

METHODOLOGY This paper investigates how the Detroit Food Justice Task Force views Detroit and food justice through its website copy, Facebook account, and Twitter feed. Given that DFJTF objects to the mass media portrayal of their community, discourse analysis of the organization’s own communication strategies is used to shed light on its position and attitudes regarding the city. Discourse analysis, or the “study of language in context,” is a methodological approach that qualitatively studies spoken and written discourse as methods of producing “versions of the social world” (Bloor and Wood, 53). Loosely, discourse can be defined as “a particular way of talking about and understanding the world (or an aspect of the world)” (Phillips and Jørgenson 1). Past studies using discourse analyses have examined a wide range of media, such as newspapers, radio shows, and television interviews (Potter; Torck; Wood and Kroger). The use of social media, however, is a recent entrant to the field.

By utilizing DFJTF’s website copy and social media accounts such as Facebook and Twitter, this paper contributes to a small but expanding field of academic work that treats social media as an analytical medium that is rapidly growing in relevance. According to one article, “Social media... [has] profoundly changed the way that information can be shared online. Now, almost anyone with a broadband internet connection or a smart phone can share ideas, data, and opinions with just about anyone else on the planet” (O’Connor 470). O’Connor’s article, published in 2013, mirrors a mounting awareness of social media, which he defines as “digital technologies and platforms

such as blogs, wikis, forums, content aggregators, sharing sites, and social networks like Facebook and Twitter” (470). Clearly, content derived from social media platforms is starting to be viewed as rich matter for exploration.

O’Connor’s article adds to a plethora of recently published work relating to social media as a space for content analysis. The increased social media presence in political arenas prompted one study to examine “1.42 million social media units on Facebook and Twitter to provide broad insights into dominant topics and themes that were prevalent in the 2012 U.S. election campaign online” (Groshek and Al-Rawi 563). The role of social media within the broader context of political engagement is a relatively common theme within this form of discourse analysis, indicating rising rates of social media and internet outreach as a political strategy (Holt et al.; Skoric and Poor; Valenzuela). Social media content analysis is not limited to exploring political engagement, however. Other academic fields investigating social media include public health, epidemiology and journalism studies (Lehmann; Madianou; Rueter and Kok).

Because websites and social media outlets such as Facebook and Twitter are publically available on the internet intended to represent DFJTF’s activities and viewpoint to the public, they provide a valuable source of discursive data for exploring the organization’s representations of community food justice issues. Although DFJTF’s website and social media accounts are not always updated on a regular basis (with the exception of the DFJTF Facebook account, which is updated daily), they are nevertheless useful tools for examining how DFJTF depicts both itself and the city of Detroit.

The text analyzed in this paper covers a wide range of dates representing the different sources. The website does not provide publication dates for its text, but it is probable that the majority of the copy was written when the website went live in 2011. Tweets were analyzed dating back to February 2011, a little over a year from when the data was originally collected in March 2013. Due to the significantly larger amount of material available on DFJTF’s Facebook account, data collection was lim-

ited to February and March 2013, which provided a comparable amount of material to the Twitter feed.

Analysis revealed three primary categories within DFJTF’s discussion: race, space, and capital. These categories are used to identify how DFJTF views mainstream portrayals of Detroit and how the organization chooses to combat these depictions. However, these categories are not mutually exclusive. As DFJTF’s discourse illustrates, they are inextricable within both the mainstream media rendering of Detroit and DFJTF’s own representation of the city and its residents.

ANALYSIS In March 2013, Detroit was embroiled in a controversial resolution by Michigan governor Rick Snyder to appoint an Emergency Financial Manager for the city. Despite the fact that Detroit was over \$14 billion in debt with a history of financial mismanagement and political corruption, organizations such as DFJTF were far from pleased with the decision (Davey and Walsh; Neavling and Woodall). The articles posted on DFJTF’s Facebook and Twitter accounts, as well as the language surrounding this topic, illustrate the racialized undertones of the decision to hire an Emergency Financial Manager as well as mainstream media portrayals of the controversy specifically and Detroit as a whole.

In one example, an article posted on March 27 titled “Majority white communities avoid Emergency Financial managers with help from Republicans Denby and Rogers” began with the following quote: “[M]ajority African American communities in Michigan are forced to live under the rule of unelected dictators...called Emergency Financial Managers.” A comment on the post says, “The whole EM thing [is] suspiciously confined to black & brown communities... as Cindy Denby [Republican Michigan State House Representative] put it, Emergency Managers aren’t for places like Livingston County [majority white, wealthy county west of Detroit].” A quote from another article posted on March 21 exclaims, “With the appointment of an EFM, Governor Snyder is transforming Detroit into an occupied colony within the State.” The article itself is titled, “Detroit Citizens Prepare to Fight

Their Corporate Master," calling to mind echoes of America's history of slavery.

The underlying message of these posts and comments is that the appointment of an EFM would subvert the democratic process, putting communities of People of Color under the power of white political figures such as Governor Snyder and Representative Denby. A comment dated March 27 reads, "it [sic] feels like somebody has plans that we've not been allowed to see or be a part of creating." This comment expresses the desire to be part of a transparent, Democratic process, and reiterates earlier posts to "support Democracy" by signing and sharing online petitions requesting federal intervention. It also echoes the organization's website, in which DFJTF chides the mayor for "say[ing] he wants to hear from communities, [but] his actions thus far leave community organizations in the dark."

Although race and space are linked together through histories of race-based urban planning practices in such cities as Detroit (McClintock; Zenk et al.), the two categories also overlap in discussions of environmental and food justice. Just as spaces designated as food deserts are unevenly populated by people of color, so too are areas with higher than average ecological contamination. According to Alkon and Agyeman, "Low-income people and people of color bear a disproportionate share of the burden of environmental degradation [and] are more likely to live in neighborhoods dominated by toxic industries and diesel emissions" (7).

On its website, DFJTF acknowledges these links, which include the Principles of Environmental Justice drafted and adopted by the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in 1991. A number of parallels exist between environmental justice and food justice movements, with the focus on "protection from environmental pollution" in the former mirrored by "ensur[ing] equal access to the environmental benefit of healthy food" for the latter (Alkon and Agyeman 8). Furthermore, both movements "rely on an institutional concept of racism" in which "institutions such as government agencies, the military, or the prison system adopt policies that exclude or target

people of color either overtly or in their effects" as opposed to the popular belief that racism arises from individuals making conscious decisions (Alkon and Agyeman 8). This focus on racial equality and justice is reflected in the Principles of Environmental Justice included on the DFJTF website:

We, the People of Color, gathered together at this multinational People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, to begin to build a national and international movement of all peoples of color to fight the destruction and taking of our lands and communities;...to respect and celebrate each of our cultures, languages and beliefs about the natural world and our roles in healing ourselves;...and, to secure our political, economic and cultural liberation that has been denied for over 500 years of colonization and oppression, resulting in the poisoning of our communities and land and the genocide of our peoples...

Thus, the "spatial fix" of Detroit's industry is not only inscribed on the landscape via infrastructure, but also through the dispersal of toxic and harmful pollutants. In this way, DFJTF connects the spatially located pollution of Detroit's communities and urban areas to a racialized history of disempowerment.

The term "food desert," a common phrase in food justice discourse, carries with it similar racial associations. The 2008 Farm Bill defined food deserts as "an area in the United States with limited access to affordable and nutritious food, particularly such an area composed of predominately low-income neighborhoods and communities" (Agricultural Marketing Service). Detroit, with 36.2% of its residents below poverty level and a median household income of \$27,862, would seem to fit the bill as a community rife with food deserts (U.S. Bureau of the Census). In fact, several areas of Detroit have been identified as food deserts in past analyses and studies (Zenk et al.; Gallagher).

Despite such studies and the ubiquity of the phrase within popular media, "food desert" is conspicuously absent from DFJTF's language. The term does not appear once on the website, or in

the material collected from DFJTF's Facebook or Twitter feeds. DFJTF does, however, use language reminiscent of "food desert" discourse. The website describes Detroit as "abandoned by major supermarket chains," saying, "We don't have major grocery stores, but we do have plenty of junk food, fast food and processed food in the city." DFJTF recognizes that food access and food security, phrases which appear multiple times, are hurdles for many residents. The website reads, "We are certain that if the majority of people in this city could count on healthy regular food, the impact would be a healthier, more vibrant, creative city... Imagine the solutions and energy this city could have if everyone who lived here had access to good healthy food regularly."

Since DFJTF uses language suggestive of food deserts, the complete absence of the term likely suggests a deliberate avoidance. The key to its conspicuous absence lies in what the phrase "food desert" implies, particularly when described in mainstream media outlets. As McClintock notes in his history of Oakland, California, "Some...reject the image of a bleak and parched urban landscape... Others hope to throw out such sensationalist taxonomy altogether, with its potentially racialized subtext linking people of color to exotic and/or depraved environments" (113). The phrase "food desert" evokes a barren space, void of anything life-giving or useful. It also calls to mind "desert" as a verb, as in a space that has been deserted or abandoned.

Such language of desolation runs directly counter to how DFJTF hopes to portray Detroit. The organization speaks of "approaching Detroit as a vibrant city with tons of resources and skills and proposals, rather than a blank canvas to paint our dreams on." This attitude recognizes the presence and history of established Detroit communities, with their own ideas and solutions to offer. To DFJTF, Detroit is no desert, but a community buttressed with rich networks and untapped resources, or what DFJTF calls "invisible capital."

On its website, DFJTF cites author Chris Rabb in its description of invisible capital. In his book *Invisible Capital: How Unseen Forces Shape Entrepreneurial*

Opportunity, Rabb defines "invisible capital" as "the toolkit of our skills, knowledge, language, networks, and experiences...unseen forces that dramatically impact business viability." As evidenced by material from their website and social media, DFJTF has appropriated the term and made it their own. DFJTF defines invisible capital on their website as "the unseen skills, networks and relationships that can exist and make the difference between success and failure in the business world, and in life." Rather than using invisible capital as a tool for business opportunities or entrepreneurship, however, DFJTF employs it as a strategy for achieving food and social justice within Detroit communities. In this manner, DFJTF distances itself from the criticisms of other food activism movements and "DIY" organizations, which locate

the solution to the city's social problems entirely within the mechanism of the creative market. Just as in food activism, this entrepreneurship has the (unintended) effect of depoliticizing the structural socioeconomic problems in the city by rendering them as individual responsibility. (Dawkins 279)

DFJTF wrests the concept of invisible capital from its original context, which is embedded within the logic of capitalism, and makes it a tool for asset mapping and community renewal. Using such community events as the "Cook Eat Talk" gatherings as a starting point, DFJTF employs the premise of invisible capital "to map the unseen food justice skills, networks and relationships in Detroit."

From this point of view, areas such as vacant lots cease to be unsightly eyesores or spaces devalued by the capitalist cycle of growth and decay. Rather, they become part of the hidden system of available resources present throughout Detroit, a precious source of underutilized spatial capital. A tweet from a "Cook Eat Talk" gathering summarizes this shift in thinking: "in my neighborhood we don't have vacant lots. i used to think that was good - now i see those lots as a luxury, a food source [sic]." The vacant lot, once a symbol of urban blight and abandonment by capitalist interests, from this

perspective comes instead to represent rebirth and renewal, empowerment and vitality.

The vacant lot also encapsulates DFJTF's overall relationship to the local in a further expression of spatial awareness. DFJTF's attitude towards localism is summarized in the following quote from its website: "We wanted to do two things - connect Detroit to healthy local food resources, and help develop an economy of small local businesses providing this healthy local food to the city, so that Detroit's dollars flow back into the city." For DFJTF, localism becomes a strategy for sparking economic growth and job opportunities in Detroit. DFJTF envisions a food system run and owned by its own communities, a "cooperative economics for food systems." The website links the lack of access to healthy foods with residents' financial woes:

We do have plenty of junk food, fast food and processed food in the city to waste our money on...In a city that doesn't have nearly enough jobs for all the people here, why do we keep spending our money on food shipped in from elsewhere, pouring our money out of the city? We want to re-direct those funds into our local economy, while making ourselves healthier.

In DFJTF's approach to localism, "local" is associated with health. Food justice organizations have been criticized for conflating "local" with "organic" or "sustainable" (Born and Purcell). DFJTF does approach local food as a healthier alternative to the highly processed junk foods available for much of the city. It is worth noting, however, that the word "organic" does not appear in any of the written material analyzed for this paper. Rather than simply assuming "local" is preferable, as Born and Purcell censure other alternative food organizations for doing, DFJTF seeks to use localism as a scalar and spatial strategy to achieve health and justice goals by reclaiming devalued spaces, providing economic opportunities, and increasing access to healthier food options through such tactics as community gardening programs.

However, DFJTF's use of localism as a strategy is not so much a deliberate choice as it is a defensive

approach dictated by Detroit's preexisting political and economic structures. DFJTF's language on their website and social media illuminates a lack of trust between Detroit residents and those with political and economic power who are not embracing local resources. DFJTF accuses politicians and decision makers of deciding to "prioritize outside proposals... over those that come from lifelong Detroiters" and "leav[ing] community organizations in the dark." The "Cook Eat Talk" gatherings, on the other hand, celebrate and discuss the "thousands of people in Detroit who are taking matters into their own hands." These citizens approach localism as a survival strategy, using it as a tool to tackle "feeding their neighbors, organizing rides to grocery stores, joining emergency food kitchens [and] community gardens, [and] holding liquor stores accountable for the food they sell." DFJTF describes these tactics as the beginnings of an "economic rebirth that really feeds Detroit," in comparison to the current strategy of "economic growth that displaces and disempowers the city residents." In short, where city officials and funds have been found wanting, the residents themselves have been forced to find within their own communities the hidden resources, or invisible capital, that they need to survive.

DFJTF makes a distinction here between the neoliberal definition of economic growth, which requires an ever-expanding "spatial fix" to survive, and their vision of "economic rebirth" that makes use of Detroit's invisible capital. This is also a noteworthy difference compared to the "creative class" described by Dawkins, for whom "pleasure, autonomy, (consumer) choice" are drivers of the DIY movement participation (263). Dawkins notes, "In this context... doing-it-yourself may in fact serve the interests of post-Fordist capitalism and reinforce the city's deep-rooted structural inequalities" (263). In other words, DIY groups and food activists, by focusing too heavily on the importance of individual agency as opposed to structural solutions, may end up circling back around to the conditions that prompted their actions in the first place. As noted earlier, however, DFJTF does not approach concepts such as localism or invisible

capital by choice, but rather by necessity. The failures of both industry and government to alleviate structural flaws have prompted DFJTF to seek solutions from other quarters.

In a city that has been devalued and abandoned by corporate, capitalist interests, the premise of invisible capital helps DFJTF uncover the value within hidden and marginalized communities in Detroit. One section of the website illustrates perfectly the contrast between mainstream, corporate “solutions” and this homegrown, marginalized resistance:

The mayor continues to prioritize outside proposals and plans for how to address the real disparity and resource gaps in the city over those that come from lifelong Detroiters, and while he says he wants to hear from communities, his actions thus far leave community organizations in the dark. But movements are like mushrooms – we grow well in the shadows, underground, making sustenance out of refuse.

The symbol of the mushroom is especially apt, considering that mushrooms grow in dense networks underground, only developing fruits above the soil in order to spread their seed. Like the underground networks of mushrooms, DFJTF notes on their website that “Detroit, like many inner city communities, has rich social and environmental capital that has been largely untapped or underutilized in addressing food security.” As described earlier, DFJTF blames politicians that keep “looking beyond our city borders for solutions to our *apparent scarcity*, instead of looking into the soil and people of Detroit to see the *true abundance*” (emphasis added). The choice of such phrases illustrates DFJTF’s viewpoint that the portrayal of Detroit as abandoned and decaying is an illusion – the potential of Detroit’s people and communities, their hidden capital, is hidden just beneath the surface.

When discussing the city’s invisible capital, DFJTF directly contrasts the language of blight and abandonment used by mainstream media with a language of birth and renewal. While describing invisible capital and its importance for the “Cook

Eat Talk” gatherings, DFJTF describes their own role as that of “midwife,” saying, “We wanted to come in as midwives for food justice networks....We just wanted to lift that network up into the light so more and more Detroiters could access and celebrate it.” This theme appears earlier in the same website section, when the founding members of DFJTF “started working together to birth something that was 100% Detroit in people and practice.” Even the previously mentioned image of the social movement as mushroom calls to mind the constant cycle of reuse, rebirth, and renewal that fungi facilitate. This language of birth, fertility and vitality reinforces not only the story of the city’s food justice movement, but also the narrative DFJTF tells of Detroit’s regeneration – that food justice can usher in a new, socially and economically responsible dawn for Detroit and its residents.

CONCLUSION Although Detroit is represented in the popular media as a deserted urban landscape with few (if any) redeeming qualities, the residents of Detroit have another story to tell. Detroit is a city with a history, with thriving communities and rich, hidden caches of resources waiting to be tapped. Rather than relying on far-away politicians to fix the city’s problems, the Detroit Food Justice Task Force seeks to find and celebrate those individuals and communities that are establishing creative solutions on their own, using the networks and capital already present in Detroit’s neighborhoods. The efforts of mainstream politicians to look for solutions outside of Detroit not only devalues the existing urban spaces and disregards the city’s invisible capital, but also carries distinct racial undertones, leaving Detroit’s residents feeling disenfranchised, disempowered, and displaced. DFJTF seeks to inspire Detroit residents to take back this power and invest in themselves and their communities, using invisible capital they may not even realize they have.

This is the story that DFJTF tells through its website and social media platforms. As sites intended for outreach and communication with a broader audience, DFJTF’s website, Facebook and Twitter accounts provided rich material for study. By ana-

lyzing these communications, it becomes clear that race, space, and capital are three intersecting and overlapping categories used by DFJTF to navigate the alternative food movement, establishing their own meanings and context within it and challenging what they see as a one-sided and inaccurate depiction of their community.

While mainstream media dismisses Detroit as a decrepit and abandoned cityscape, such negative and racialized depictions only obscure the community-based work being performed by organizations such as DFJTF. Such reporting misses the efforts of community groups to increase healthy food access for city residents, dismantle racism within the food system, and build upon Detroit's "invisible capital." By ignoring these stories, mainstream media outlets are only perpetuating the problems DFJTF and other alternative food organizations are trying to solve.

The ways in which DFJTF approaches portrayals and perceptions of the Detroit community, and how it has chosen to counteract them, provide broader implications for the food justice movement as a whole. DFJTF emphasizes the importance of transparency, and of working with communities rather than ignoring or painting over them like a "blank canvas." DFJTF also emphasizes the search for resources within the city, instead of inviting themselves to "come into communities with cookie cutter trainings on food justice, which many of our members could offer in their sleep." Clearly fed up with outsiders who treat its communities as one-size-fits-all without regard for the individual histories and experiences of the members who live there, the solutions presented by DFJTF offer important lessons for any food activist seeking to work in a community not her own.

DFJTF's use of language also creates chances for alternative food movement practitioners to learn through its example. Discourse can be a powerful tool for food activists, who find themselves struggling within a pre-determined discursive environment created and perpetuated by groups such as mainstream media, government bodies, and industry representatives. For example, by appropriating the term "invisible capital" from its original

capitalism-oriented context and adapting it to a community development tool, DFJTF provides an example of how food activists can extricate themselves from the logic of neoliberal rationality and challenge preconceived ideas, perpetuated through mainstream media portrayals, of the nature of their communities.

Despite these barriers, food justice groups are laboring to counter corporate industry's Goliath with their own small yet carefully aimed stones. In DFJTF's case, the food justice movement is focusing on Detroit's abandoned spaces and infrastructure and working to reinvigorate them for the city's inhabitants. Such social movements often begin from the fringes of society. This is a narrative DFJTF knows well and embraces. "Detroit is hungry for food justice," they tell us. Detroit's residents may be marginalized and abandoned by mainstream, corporate America, but as DFJTF notes, movements like theirs "grow well in the shadows, underground, making sustenance out of refuse" – adding value back into that which was once forsaken, and renewing their community in the process. ■

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