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**Subversive and interstitial food spaces:
transforming selves, societies, and society-environment relations through
urban agriculture and foraging**

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By way of introduction, we turn to an excerpt from Ryan Galt's field notes from a field trip taken by his undergraduate food systems class in November 2012: In a neighborhood park in Oakland, in the East San Francisco Bay Area of California, we stand waiting for Max, a member of Phat Beets Produce, a collective of people dedicated to promoting food and social justice through food provisioning, activism, organizing, and popular education. Max shows up, has us identify ourselves and tell everyone our favorite band and a favorite vegetable that starts with the same letter. He then explains to us the historical origins of the Black Panther Party in the neighborhood, their role in creating what is now the nationwide school lunch program, and how some of the current efforts of the collective are aimed in part at creating a cultivated landscape that is literally carved out of the city park's former lawns of Bermuda grass. This example of "guerrilla gardening" includes diverse vegetable beds, an area for compost, and planting fruit-producing (not just ornamental) trees that community members harvest.

The produce here looks great, is well-cared for, and absolutely free to anyone who wants to harvest it. And want it they do: vegetables and fruits are being utilized by people coming from around the park. Max tells us stories about what this newly cultivated space has done for people in the neighborhood. He then takes us to a building being renovated into a community kitchen at the Crossroads, a centrally located former commuter light rail junction next to main street. He tells us that its parking lot already hosts a regular farmers market and swap meet, and that the renovated building will serve as a community gathering place, a restaurant, and as infrastructure where local food artisans can create, sell, barter, and/or share their wares. Already a local seafood CSA has asked to use the space in the before-dawn shift, when little other use of the space will be occurring.

This example illustrates a shift happening in many urban food systems, where millions of people are re-thinking and changing how we use contemporary urban spaces in relation to food. In contrast to patterns of urban development over the past few decades, where generations of city planners have been blind to or even discouraged primary productive activities within urban boundaries, gardeners, farmers, and foragers are once again investing their work and resources into their communities, and in the process, (re)making urban spaces (see Hynes 1996 and Lawson 2005 for a broader discussion of past movements). And these actors are getting a great deal out of it — food, relationships, well-being, economic savings, jobs and wages, a sense of self-efficacy, (re)new(ed) green spaces, environmental connections, and many other things. These practices and spaces are transforming selves and relationships, social and socio-ecological, at multiple levels.

This special issue of *Local Environment: The International Journal of Justice and Sustainability* is dedicated to identifying and understanding spaces like these and their surroundings that are appearing in urban and suburban neighborhoods around the country, and the world. The authors in this special issue productively wrestle with making sense of what we call *subversive and interstitial food spaces* (which we'll refer to, rather awkwardly, as SIFS). SIFS are a subset of alternative food networks (AFNs), a term that encompasses a wide array of new linkages between agricultural production and food consumption that differ from "conventional" processes and routes. Interstitial spaces are those spaces between more commonly acknowledged and observed uses and categories — as metaphors,

think plants growing in the cracks between sidewalk concrete, or light filtering through the gaps in the canopy of a tree. These spaces are on the margins of spaces dedicated to “conventional,” “private,” authority-sanctioned, or “normal,” activities. Interstitiality runs the gamut from intentional to unintentional. On the intention side, those working on these projects often have good reasons for wanting to remain unseen and uncontested, but on the other side of the continuum, very often being interstitial is a result of marginalization processes that push certain practices out of the mainstream. In still other instances, people creating these interstitial spaces want to expand them to become more mainstream, more common, or at least more visible, as beacons of hope and light. Thus, many struggle to create something that works not just for the local context, but also something from which everyone can learn, whether it be the practical “how-to” knowledge of creating a garden out of concrete, identifying a wild edible species in a park, or the broader knowledge of how to engage a community around food system change. The resulting networks of solidarity that bring like-minded people together, often across lines of social difference, have the potential to transform the sites, places, and ways of doing things beyond the local environments surrounding these spaces and their activities.

The focus of this special issue is on spaces, places, and practices — and the people, organizations, institutions, and structures shaping them — that subvert or skirt the logics that drive the conventional agrifood system. Some interstitial spaces and the people that create them aspire to be subversive. Subversive spaces are those that seek to undermine the authority and power of established norms, discourses, interests, and institutions — they are intentionally counterhegemonic. Some spaces and practices are both interstitial and subversive, some are interstitial without necessarily being subversive of broader structures (e.g., a hippie commune focused on self-sufficiency), and some, though perhaps more rarely, are subversive of many dominant ways of doing things but are no longer interstitial (e.g., Wikipedia, The Cooperative in the United Kingdom). Other spaces that were once in the mainstream have become interstitial as local and global commons are enclosed (e.g., through processes such as land-grabbing and privatization). Urban and peri-urban agriculture itself, a very common way of provisioning cities during the industrial revolution (Kropotkin 1998), is now interstitial because the geography of agricultural production shifted dramatically as world markets were constructed and urban agriculturalists were outcompeted by large-scale horticultural production regions like California (Freidberg 2009; Steinberg 2002).

SIFS that are being intentionally built — like Phat Beets Produce — offer many things, including, most importantly, *hope*, which is often in short supply these days, especially in places where SIFS are arising. They offer hope to those who participate in and build them, and those who want to study and help them in the ways academics might be able, i.e., with applied research that meets the needs of research partners, as articulated and expressed by them. Part of the hope also stems from the social relations behind SIFS, where activists, community members, and partners create bonds of trust and understanding, in the process sharing knowledge and learning, both formally and informally. They often also (re)connect people to a tangible and more accessible “nature” (ecosystems and non-human organisms) within the city. In the end, people coming together for something greater than the “day-to-day struggle” produces hope about their communities and future, particularly when the transformations, both material and ideological, are visible and meaningful.

These sorts of efforts at change are often critiqued, and sometimes dismissed, if they fail to uphold the values of their critics on all accounts. In the way that the industrialization of organic agriculture has been critiqued because of exploitative labor practices or Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) portrayed as not meeting the needs of low-income families (Galt in press), urban agriculture has likewise been assessed critically as a neoliberal project that takes root in communities abandoned by the rolling back of social safety nets and that often employ neoliberal rhetoric of self-reliance and market-based solutions (McClintock, this issue). While these critiques are valid — for example, we

are not saying that exploitative labor relations in organic agriculture should be allowed to stand — solving every problem at once is usually not possible through everyday practice. There is a common paralysis among the traditional left in which oppositional politics leads to the constant deferral of non-capitalist/transformational initiatives since they are seen as standing little chance to actually be structurally transformative (Gibson-Graham 2006a). The problems of these initiatives should not be glossed over, but they should also not be used as imperfections that justify the dismissal of these actually-existing alternatives. Easy academic dismissal of alternatives belies the fact that within interstitial spaces, particularly in cities, new types of urban agricultures are working toward social change. Indeed, dismissal in this way can be a manifestation of a debilitating politics of perfection that will not create widespread change, and that can hide and perpetuate hegemony (cf. DuPuis et al 2011; Gibson-Graham 2006a, b).

Subversive and interstitial in relation to what?

While we recognize difference and complexity within the concept of the conventional agrifood system, here we use “the conventional food system” as a heuristic. Fundamentally, the conventional food system is characterized by the subjugation of the essential processes — social, ecological, and socio-ecological — that create food to capital’s laws of motion (Marx 1990) based on formal rationality (Weber 1968). Capitalist production results in the alienation of a producer as wage earner from the objects produced through her/his labor, as well as from the biophysical environment that s/he is metabolizing through her/his labor. This undermines important parts of our humanity, including the self-provisioning and pleasure derived from “craftship,” the unity of conception and execution in the production process (Mooney 1988), and the conscious understanding of our integrated relationship with the biophysical environment (or “nature”) (McClintock 2010, Ollman 1976).

While the consequences of capitalist rationality and capital’s laws of motion are enormous and far-reaching (even if greatly uneven geographically), one of the most important consequence is the unprecedented concentration of market power within (1) the middle section of the food system (Hendrickson and Heffernan 2007, Levins 2000, Patel 2007), including the purchasers of raw agricultural commodities, food industry processors, grocery retail outlets, chain restaurants and (2) the agro-input firms that produce seeds, agrochemicals, fertilizers, and other inputs. Through analyzing the boards of directors of the ten largest food processing industry firms, Lyson and Raymer (2000) found that only 138 people set the agenda for half of the food sold in the U.S. This is enormously concentrated power.

While concentration at the farm level has proceeded with agricultural industrialization, it is much less than in the other sections of the food system (Galt 2010, Goodman et al 1987, Mann and Dickinson 1978). In short, agricultural industries have found numerous ways to accumulate wealth from agricultural processes without having to take direct ownership of the means of production. One of the most prominent is contract farming with peasants and small-scale simple commodity producers: “What they produce, how they produce, and for whom they produce are decided by the agro-food corporations (or their subcontractors). Here production is carried out by the peasantry (who may own a portion of the means of production), but not for the peasantry” (Araghi 2000: 151).¹

Yet, capitalism is not the only material and discursive formation that alternative practices seek to subvert or circumvent. bell hooks (2003) refers to “imperialist white-supremacist capitalist

¹ We note, however, that because many small-scale producers are outside of corporatized commodity chains, this is an arena for potential subversion of circumvention of the dominant food system.

patriarchy” to highlight the multiple interlocking hierarchies that subjugate different people and social groups, often based on skin color/ethnicity/race and gender, but also extending to nationality/residential status, age, religion/spirituality, sexual orientation, and other lines of social difference. These hierarchies intersect with capitalist processes to create large consequences, as they largely determine both where social surplus and social provisioning — health care, education, and other essential services — flow, and where the negative consequences of industrialization concentrate, as environmental justice scholarship has long shown. Entire sections of the U.S. population — based on unjust hierarchies determining who is worthy and not — have experienced marginalization and/or disinvestment in their neighborhoods with capital flight, white flight, ghettoization through processes like deed covenants and redlining, and abandonment by the state (McClintock 2011, Pulido 2000, Self 2003).

It is in such places that alternative food practices often emerge (Alkon and Agyeman 2011). Despite all of the concentration in the food system and its dominant place in the foodways of the industrialized world, the production of food has low barriers to entry compared to other sectors of the economy. After all, it relies on biological and ecological processes that have occurred for millions of years, and have been actively domesticated by humans for 10,000 or so years, and which capital has not been able to fully stop in order to commodify (though there have been numerous incursions of commodification, including hybridization and the as-of-yet-successfully contested "terminator technology" of non-germinating seeds, see, for example, Kloppenburg 1988). With a bit of land, water, sun, and seed, agriculture/gardening is open to everyone. What’s more is that urban and peri-urban spaces can produce a surplus of food without intensive management. “Wild” or unmanaged areas have berries — a sugary surplus created from sunlight, other essential inputs and the plant’s infrastructure — and other types of non-timber forest products (McLain et al this issue). Just as peasant households around the world have had intensive and extensive strategies depending on household goals and labor and land availability (Hanks 1972, Netting 1993), urban and peri-urban spaces offer similar possibilities of intensive production (e.g., garden) and extensive production (e.g., actually existing edible landscapes) based on people’s, households’, and communities’ goals, labor, and land availability. Functions can be stacked upon one another — a fruit tree provides fruit, shade and its urban cooling properties, and greenery that absorbs pollutants and pleases the soul by reminding us of connections to other organisms and ecosystems.

We think of SIFS as spaces of production driven by rationalities that diverge from capitalist rationality in one or more respect. Sometimes these rationalities maintain the drive for efficiency of production and profit generation but couple it with a number of other values, such as providing adequate wages and decent jobs (Bradley and Galt this volume). Other rationalities reject high instrumentalism — the selfish taking advantage of circumstances for one’s economic self interest — in order to create food systems that are about environmental conservation, social justice, and other values (Galt in press; Harris 2009; Jarosz 2011). Still other rationalities actively contest all forms of oppression. Thus, there is a polyculture of rationalities giving rise to alternative food production systems and spaces, and production systems and spaces run by these different rationalities have a very different look than industrial monocultures, with often high diversity of plants, animals, and other organisms in these systems. They also have different social consequences, dialectically related to production practices and their organization. Rather than driving a competitive wedge between communities as is common in large-scale, single-commodity-focused agriculture (cf. Bell 2004), AFNs can bring them together, or create spaces of self-determination and autonomy long denied by systems of oppression (McCutcheon 2011, White 2011).

These changes fostered through the manifestations of these alternative rationalities will not in and of themselves make the industrial food system more sustainable nor more just — that essential project will require a much larger merging of research, activism, and other political processes that deliberate upon and create consensus around shared/unified values, learn about the various leverage points for

change, and build pressure to pull the right levers for change (this is an enormous and absolutely necessary task, see Holt-Gimenez 2011). Yet, relegating neoliberalism and its underpinning ideologies to the dustbin of history is asking too much of urban agriculture (McClintock this issue), and too much of subversive and interstitial food spaces *in and of themselves*. That does not mean we can ignore the ways in which the neoliberal project might be supported or extended by these practices and spaces, but it does mean coming to terms with the contradiction that much of what we see is “both/and” — often radical, and, at the same time, not a necessarily a direct challenge to the larger neoliberal project. These contradictions may play out differently at different scales, making them more difficult to recognize, making coordinated action across scales all the more important. As Minkoff-Zern (this issue) and McClintock (this issue) note, urban agriculture can act as a relief valve that releases pressure to increase wages that would better provide for social reproduction. But it is not *just* “releasing pressure” — it is also making people’s lives better within the locality, increasing their social ties to each other, and empowering them as they build self-reliant communities and new spaces for social change (Bradley and Galt this issue, Gray et al this issue). It is also clear that alternative subjectivities — more communal and less individualized — are being cultivated in many of these projects, and that this is an essential part of a post-capitalist politics (Gibson-Graham 2006b). Additionally, reducing SIFS to a single explanation of them expanding the neoliberal project is too tidy of a theorization. As Hayes-Conroy notes, “articulated relationships to food cannot possibly be one thing — whether ‘bad’ or ‘good’, ‘neoliberal’ or ‘anti-capitalist’, ‘junk’ or ‘healthy’” (2010: 72). And as Goodman and DuPuis note, “[A]ll eating—like all human action—is imperfect and contradictory” (2005: 362). We need to subvert binary thinking, and embrace paradoxical thinking: “a view of the world in which opposites are joined, so that we can see the world clearly and see it whole. Such a view is characterized by neither flinty-eyed realism nor dewy-eyed romanticism but rather by a creative synthesis of the two” (Palmer 2007: 69).

Special issue themes: recognizing possibility through complexity

The articles in this special issue share a number of themes related to SIFS: an engagement with sympathetic analysis and critique, articulated and disarticulated economies, neoliberalism, transformative food politics, and the social relations underpinning these food systems. Each of these is an important part of understanding SIFS and their limitations and possibilities.

1. Sympathetic analysis and critique

Very few AFNs and even SIFS initiatives can take on *all* of the problematic relations identified by critical scholars — i.e., “imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (hooks 2003) and “prevalent relations, systems, and structures of capitalist exploitation, oppression, imperialism, neoliberalism, national aggression, and environmental destruction” (Moss et al. 2002: 3). Although each of these ideologies, relations, systems, and structures have their own logic, there are meta-logics that serve society’s elite and are based on hierarchy leading to oppression, division based on difference, social construction of scarcity, forced competition when none is needed, hegemonic discourses of *Homo economicus* that create highly individualized subjectivities, the domination of people and other organisms to extract surplus value, and knowledge and value systems based on objectivism that pretend to be neutral while upholding the vastly unequal and unsustainable status quo (Buttel 2006). It is these logics that SIFS subvert and/or contest, but not necessarily all at once. Different SIFS have their own leverage point(s) for change, so that one, or very many, of these problematic ways of (1) thinking, (2) relating/valuing, (3) managing landscapes, and (4) engaging in consumption/exchange, are challenged and/or circumvented (Figure 1). Thus, while we approach societal and societal-environment relations critically, we believe that the multifaceted nature of the problems that SIFS seek to overcome means not dismissing, and even supporting, those that don’t do it all, since nothing can do it all. In other words, we believe in refraining “from interpreting failure in one dimension (gender equity, for example) as failure of the whole” (Gibson-Graham 2006b: 102-3).

The authors of the articles in this issue share this stance as they advance our understandings of SIFS. For this reason, we note that all engage in critique and critical inquiry that comes from a place of support and compassion for those doing the work of building SIFS as provisioning systems, including emergency food and foraging. Gibson-Graham (2006b: xiii) note that the gift economy of academia “is neither a pleasant nor productive place to be without an open affective disposition and a desire to relate to, rather than dismiss or colonize, the work and specializations of others,” and the authors in this special issue extend this affective stance to practitioners and praxis. Part of this sentiment and analytical approach comes from the authors’ methods and deeper commitments underlying them, most of which — including participant observations and in-depth interviews, usually in participants’ environments — involve a great deal of time in the places they seek to understand. These deep understandings often allow for feelings of empathy and grounded understanding to develop. This takes the form of understanding that people are usually doing the best they can with their resources and within their particular situations and constraints. Another part of this empathy comes from attention that all authors pay to the structural conditions that surround the SIFS that they seek to understand. This ranges from locating corporate dynamics within the market to the role of ideology within the planning approaches that operate within urban, suburban, and peri-urban areas. This means acknowledging that there are diverse, powerful forces that constrain SIFS, but that everyday practice can, often slowly, overcome these.

This kind of engagement — long-term, empathetic, and with a structural view — allows for extended practitioner-researcher dialogue that can be productive, both for the researcher and, hopefully, for those building SIFS, if insights can be exchanged in a non-hierarchical and respectful manner. We have noticed that through this kind of dialogue and the consequent sharing of knowledge and perspective, new understandings frequently emerge. In this and other ways, academics can be allies in thinking about how SIFS practice works and can work better.

2. Articulated and disarticulated economies: SIFS in the Global South and Global North

A disarticulated economy, a concept from development economics, is the opposite of Fordism: it refers to a lack of connection between the effective demand of workers and/or the poor, and the consumption that occurs in an economy. As inequalities increase, economies become more disarticulated. When wages are low and/or unemployment is high, the poor cannot effectively demand locally/regionally/or nationally produced goods. Instead, the economy is driven by elite consumption, often of imported goods, and does not meet the actual needs of a large proportion of the population (de Janvry 1985). In the US, the decline in real wages since the late 1970s for the working and middle classes has had specific effects for food retail outlets: “Cheap goods made by cheaper labor (including the superexploitation of Third World labor) prop up the declining wages of the middle class; their spending keeps the economy plodding along. In other words, contra Fordism, which had at its core a social wage that upheld demand for Fordist manufacture, the low-wage economy actively produced by McDonald's and its ilk makes people dependent on fast, cheap food” (Guthman and DuPuis 2006: 441).

As urban regions in the US, West Oakland and Ashland/Cherryland, like many places profoundly shaped through state-led ghettoization and disinvestment, suffer from deeply disarticulated local economies because of high unemployment rates and low wages. Bradley and Galt (this issue) note that rather than encouraging self-provisioning as a stop-gap measure, Dig Deep Farms and Produce is working to create an articulated economy by creating jobs and paying workers an almost-living wage that is substantially above minimum wage. This examples, and those from West Oakland (McClintock this issue), show the kinds of interventions at local levels that can create more articulated economies. Although the efforts are currently small-scale, that is not reason to dismiss them or find them inadequate (cf. Gibson-Graham 2006b).

In the case of farmworkers in California, their wages are not high enough for them to meet their basic needs, and what is left of the social safety net is largely designed to let them fall through. This situation requires a number of strategies on their part and their allies, including self-provisioning through gardening, as well as emergency food supplies. Minkoff-Zern (this issue) notes that neither of these will solve farmworker hunger arising from disarticulation, but it does point to the truth that self-provisioning can be a way of filling in the gaps in food needs before articulated economies can be built through higher wages, possible through both state intervention (raising minimum wage to a level where workers can meet their needs), and/or worker organizing to demand a living wage. SIFS are an important coping mechanism for rural farmworkers who have no access to social safety nets due to their status as “undocumented” workers (Minkoff-Zern this issue). Similarly, Gray et al’s (this issue) work on scaling up of gardens shows another strategy for subsidizing a low wage (and/or high unemployment) through increased self-provisioning. In these ways, “poverty and seeing powerlessness become the base from which daily action is sustained, rather than a grounds for its postponment” (Gibson-Graham 2006b: xxv).

In the realm of food self-provisioning through foraging, this pressure from declining wages and a disarticulated economy is expressed through practices that, as others have noted (Emery and Pierce 2005, Robbins et al 2008), might wrongly be interpreted in isolation simply as continued forms of subsistence employed by a cultural or ethnic “other.” The reality, however, is more complex — the case of wild plant foraging, as discussed by McLain et al (this issue), points to the complex relationship of this practice to disarticulated economies, highlighting the role that this type of provisioning of “free food” can play in the lives of foragers — who are racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse — in a post-Fordist era. At the same time, this food provisioning practice still may be viewed more as a recreational food gathering strategy for those doing just fine economically.

3. Neoliberalism as state roll-back and as foodie logic

Through the articles that follow we see similarities and differences in how SIFS play out in the Global North and Global South in relation to neoliberalism. While many in the Global North see SIFS practices such as urban agriculture as novel, counter-cultural or subversive, for much of the Global South SIFS are an essential and everyday livelihood strategy. Residents in urban areas of Africa, Latin America and Asia have widely depended on growing food to supplement diets and incomes. With recent food shortages and rising global food prices, this coping strategy takes on new importance. In urban and peri-urban Africa, IMF-imposed structural adjustment has led to recent land privatization schemes in African cities, marginalizing the customary rights of African farmers. This recent phenomenon illustrated in Mali by Caneff and Moseley (this issue) shows how structural adjustment policies have led to the grabbing of urban land holdings by private entrepreneurs under the guise of economic progress and modernization. In contrast, urban and peri-urban farmers with strong customary use rights to land have had their land expropriated by the state for urban development. This reflects a trend in many Southern cities where agricultural has gone from the full light of day to becoming an illegal activity (Bryld 2003). Urban farmers in the Global South are becoming squatters like many guerilla gardeners in Northern cities.

The Global North/South divide is further blurred by transnational migration which links North to South, both in terms of migration streams of people and in terms of Northern policies of “free trade” producing marginalized Southern communities. Minkoff-Zern (this issue) nicely illustrates these complexities of neoliberal shifts in the global agro-food system as Mexican migrants come north to work as farmworkers. Despite supporting the consumptive needs of the U.S. population, farmworkers are essentially not part of the global North — their low wages and “undocumented” status leaves them apart from the dominant political economy with its rights and benefits and often in dire straits in terms of housing, food security, basic human rights, health, and safety.

As editors and contributors to this special edition, we recognize that urban agriculture, food justice activism, and foraging exist embedded in a capitalist political economy, the qualitative nature of which is defined by struggles over the distribution of surplus value, or the acquiescence to the elite creating systems that privilege their interests over all others. We also recognize critiques of AFNs as projects that subsidize capitalism and low wages by creating provisioning systems following the roll-back of governmental programs and social safety nets (Guthman 2008, Pudup 2008). It is no accident that several of the SIFS described in this special issue emerged after the US Great Recession of 2008, partly as a response to calls for improved household food security and self-sufficiency in low-income communities where social safety nets have been slashed. We certainly see an urgent need for political action that intervenes in the beefed up circuits of surplus extraction that the elite have constructed through a neoliberal discourse of markets-and-a-non-interventionist-state-as-freedom (Harvey 2005) and that actively contests the neoliberal construction of politics, which is based on an oxymoronic solving of political and distributional problems through individual consumption patterns.

Few of the SIFS we look at are doing this kind of political work explicitly, but the authors do not dismiss them because there is a different politics at work, one that does not align easily with the common division of liberal and conservative in the U.S. To see this, we turn to Colin Ward (1998: 12), the U.K.'s gentle anarchist, who, writing in 1985 at the height of Thatcherism in his introduction to Kropotkin's *Fields, Factories and Workshops Tomorrow*, notes: "I often wonder how we reached the situation when honourable words like 'enterprise,' 'initiative' and 'self-help' are automatically associate with the political right and the defense of capitalism, while it is assumed that the political left stands for a big brother state with a responsibility to provide a pauper's income for all and an inflation-proof income for its own functionaries." Increases in community and individual initiative, self-sufficiency, and self-help cannot be solely read as something that more easily allows for the abandonment of the liberal vision of the state, but rather as a positive development (see also White 2011). Additionally, SIFS matter because there is an urgency created by hunger, lack of access to appropriate foods, unemployment, and sub-poverty wages that the authors do not personally experience, which makes it difficult and callous to dismiss efforts to mitigate these problems. (Re)building a state safety net will take concerted political effort, and time, but basic needs must be met in the meantime. On behalf of ourselves and the authors, we note the importance of a both/and strategy: one that recognizes the importance and contributions of SIFS and often the community economies that they are building, and one that works on the larger political project of recreating a political discourse and political reality in which collective action and state provisioning of basic human needs become revalorized.

4. *A transformative food politics*

We are optimistic that SIFS can work towards a transformative food politics. This can happen in a range of ways at various scales, from the individual level with personal consumers transformed into food citizens (as academics, we often do this through teaching and learning from activists, see Galt et al 2013)² or at broader scales through community organizing and political action. Food can be used as an entry point for political organizing, or combined with broader political goals to build alliances with other actors interested in broader issues (that include food but are not reducible to it) such as health, social and environmental justice (Levkoe 2011). Though critics question whether alternative food networks can reshape the conditions that produce marginalization in the first place (Alkon and Mares 2012, Pudup 2008), several papers in this special issue give an inkling to how this

² While writing this, Galt received an email from a former student: "Four years later, I still have warm memories of the engaging, open-minded, and field-based learning environment you fostered in CRD 20 [Food Systems], and I wanted to let you know that you inspired many students to be activists in the food system."

might happen. For example, while critiques of changes in individual consumption frequently focus on wealthy consumers, Gray et al (this issue) examine how gardens transform food politics in low-income Latino communities, leading families to change their relationships with food systems on an individual scale by emphasizing Latino foodways and consuming culturally meaningful foods. At the neighborhood and community scale, backyard gardeners use different forms of social capital and community networks to work towards broader social and community change.

McClintock (this issue) argues that urban agricultural projects are both radical and neoliberal, but that this dichotomy should be rejected in order to move the field forward; indeed, as SIFS become accepted into the mainstream, they may ultimately lose their radical and subversive edge with regulatory, policy and political changes that lead to real gains for marginalized communities. Examples of these sorts of shifts are emerging within SIFS. As organizations connect and create alliances between like-minded groups for policy change, we've seen the emergence of coalitions through broader regional structures such as food policy councils or through organizations and individuals speaking before city councils or developing policy briefs to change food policies (often about zoning and food preparation). Other examples illustrate how food justice organizations often have broad scopes of political activism, including working on self-directed community organizing and anti-racist agendas (Bradley and Galt this issue, Morales 2011, White 2011).

5. The social relations behind SIFS

All of the papers in this special issue illustrate the importance of the social relationships behind SIFS. Importantly, we read SIFS as part of the community economy, broadly conceived. Most would fall under the heading of the informal economy, and, as scholars have shown, this is a range of activities that “add up to an enormous range of human activities without which life on this planet would be impossible” (Ward 1998: 10). Yet while SIFS should be read as engaging in economic transactions, they are not reducible to the categories of economy. Both Gray et al (this issue) and Minkoff-Zern (this issue) illuminate how gardens can bring forth cultural and embodied knowledge that provide immigrant communities connections to cultural dietary and agricultural practices. These cultural practices help immigrant communities reclaim traditional foodways while bringing about self-provisioning to augment household food security. Similarly, the social relations behind foraging facilitate knowledge production and relationship building among diverse communities ranging from like-cultural communities to disparate networks of scientists, practitioners, and hobbyists (McLain et al this issue). These “new” communities of practice may serve as mechanisms through which to address questions of justice in urban and peri-urban environments (see also Poe et al. 2013).

SIFS are about more than just production and/or exchange; the performance of cultural practices can enhance and reproduce ethnic, racial and gendered identities. SIFS can increase networks of exchange and reciprocity and they are also fertile areas of research into how cultural spaces reproduce nature-society relationships (Christie 2004, WinklerPrins and Souza 2005). The connectedness, trust and reciprocity that emerge from SIFS allow communities to co-create collective action and have the potential to re-embed the moral economy of exchange into social relations (Kloppenberget al 1996, Lyson 2004, Polanyi 1957). These are examples of what Gibson-Graham (2006b: 77) term “new economic becomings — sites where ethical decisions can be made, power can be negotiated, and transformations forged.”

It is important not to oversell the possibility of SIFS to make everyone foodies or locavores or romanticize the recreation of cultural communities that are fixed and unchanging. Foodways are complex; they can be modern and industrial and local and/or home-cooked at the same time (see Bradley and Galt this issue). Community food choices, or lack of, are determined somewhat by culture but often as much by broader political economic forces and societal influences. Paying

attention to the dilemmas, problems, and possibilities that exist within these articulations is challenging work, but it is an analytical point taken up by each article that follows.

To conclude this introduction, we note that the interplay of the interstitial and subversive in food spaces is an exciting area in which society is being transformed. We argue for a reading of SIFS in “both/and” ways that see SIFS as generative of new potential and new futures — “reading for difference rather than dominance” allows for “calling into question the marginalization and ‘non-credibility’ of the nondominant” (Gibson-Graham 2006b: xxxii). SIFS are an important part of stitching together counterhegemonic ways of thinking, relating/valuing, managing landscapes, and engaging in consumption/exchange (Figure 1) that will allow humanity to revalue its relationships — to ourselves, to others, and to the non-human world.

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Figure titles

Figure 1: A framework for thinking about subversive and interstitial food spaces (SIFS)

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