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# From “Rust Belt” to “Fresh Coast”: Remaking the City through Food Justice and Urban Agriculture

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Rising levels of urban food insecurity and diet-related disease have led to many inquiries into the urban food environment and its relation to health. Community-based food activism and urban agriculture (UA) provide alternatives to conventional food systems and promote food justice. Forms of food activism include community gardens, farmers' markets, antihunger initiatives, legislative advocacy, food literacy campaigns, and organic food consumption. Although many benefits are noted, scholars also contend that food activism often serves to bolster neoliberal structures by encouraging neoliberal citizen subjectivities or engaging in localized activities that do not directly challenge broader structural injustices. To the extent that neoliberalization is a racist (and racialized) process, the reproduction of neoliberal structures contributes to reproducing racial difference. This article examines the complexities of food activism within the context of neoliberal governance, with particular attention to the role of the local entrepreneurial state and its interactions with nonstate actors. City government and private development agencies promote UA as a means of neoliberal economic development that operates via public–private partnership to revitalize and generate value from central city neighborhoods. In so doing, these actors appropriate discourses from community-based UA organizations to legitimize their political–economic interests. Community-based organizations in turn recognize these interests and engage strategically with the city and private agencies to survive in the context of heightened resource competition and performance pressures within the nonprofit sector. Our research is based on seven years of fieldwork in Milwaukee, collecting data through intensive semistructured interviews, participant observations, and documents analysis. *Key Words:* *community gardens, food justice, neoliberal urbanism, urban agriculture.*

城市粮食不安全程度的加剧，以及与饮食相关的疾病，已引发诸多有关城市粮食环境及其与健康的关系之探问。以社区为基础的粮食行动主义与城市农业 (UA)，提供了传统粮食系统之外的另类选择，并提倡粮食正义。粮食行动主义的形式，包含社区花园、农夫市场、反饥饿运动、立法倡议、粮食知识运动，以及有机食品消费。尽管诸多益处已受注意，但学者仍主张粮食行动主义经常通过鼓励新自由主义的公民主体，抑或参与无法直接挑战更为广阔的结构不正义之在地化活动，因而经常强化了新自由主义结构。如同新自由主义化作为种族歧视(和种族化)的过程，新自由主义结构的再生产导致了种族差异的再生产。本文检视新自由主义治理脉络中的粮食行动主义，并特别聚焦企业型地方政府的角色，及其与非政府行动者的互动。市政府与私人发展机构，提倡 UA 作为透过公私伙伴关系操作的新自由主义经济发展的方式，以此复兴并创造市中心邻里的价值。这些行动者藉由这么做来挪用以社区为基础的 UA 组织之论述，以正当化其政治经济利益。以社区为基础的组织，从而认识到这些利益，并与市政单位和私人行动者进行策略性合作，以在非盈利部门紧缩的资源竞争与表现压力之脉络中生存。我们的研究是根据在密尔沃基为期七年的田野工作，并透过密集的结构式访谈、参与式观察和档案分析来搜集资料。关键词：社区花园，粮食正义，新自由主义城市主义，城市农业。

Los niveles crecientes de inseguridad alimentaria urbana y de enfermedades relacionadas con la dieta han conducido a muchas indagaciones dentro del entorno alimentario urbano y su relación con la salud. El activismo alimentario de base comunitaria y la agricultura urbana (AU) proporcionan alternativas a los sistemas alimentarios convencionales y promueven la justicia alimentaria. Las formas de activismo alimentario incluyen huertas comunales, mercados de granjeros, iniciativas contra el hambre, apoyo legislativo, campañas de concientización alimentaria y consumo de productos orgánicos. Si bien al respecto se notan muchos beneficios, los eruditos también sostienen que el activismo alimentario a menudo sirve para apuntalar estructuras neoliberales estimulando las subjetividades ciudadanas neoliberales o comprometiéndose en actividades localizadas que no retan directamente las injusticias estructurales de mayor envergadura. En la medida en que la neoliberalización es un proceso racista (y racializado), la reproducción de estructuras neoliberales contribuye a reproducir la diferencia racial. Este artículo examina las complejidades del activismo alimentario dentro del contexto de la gobernanza neoliberal, con particular atención sobre el papel del estado empresarial local y sus interacciones con actores no estatales. El gobierno de la ciudad y las agencias privadas de desarrollo promueven

la AU como medio de desarrollo económico neoliberal que opera a través de la asociación público–privada para revitalizar y generar valor desde los vecindarios de la ciudad central. Haciendo esto, estos actores se apropian de los discursos de las organizaciones de AU de base comunitaria para legitimar sus intereses político–económicos. Las organizaciones de base comunitaria a su vez reconocen estos intereses y se comprometen estratégicamente con la ciudad y las agencias privadas para sobrevivir dentro del contexto de competencia exacerbada por los recursos y por presiones de desempeño dentro del sector de ánimo no lucrativo. Nuestra investigación se basa en siete años de trabajo de campo en Milwaukee, durante el cual se recogieron datos por medio de entrevistas semiestructuradas intensivas, observaciones participativas y análisis de documentos. *Palabras clave: huertas comunales, justicia alimentaria, urbanismo neoliberal, agricultura urbana.*

In 2013, the City of Milwaukee launched HOME GR/OWN (HG), an initiative endeavoring to increase fresh produce consumption and reduce obesity rates citywide through the development of urban agriculture (UA) and other local food system infrastructure. In doing so, the city joined a growing number of government and community-based organizations seeking to promote food justice<sup>1</sup> by improving access to healthy foods (Alkon and Agyeman 2011; Guthman 2012). Simultaneously, food justice and UA are framed by Milwaukee city leaders as an economic development approach that will stimulate revitalization through sustainable green infrastructure development, productive reuse of vacant city land, and job creation. Accordingly, UA development efforts have tended to focus on the working-class, African American neighborhoods of Milwaukee’s Northside, which have disproportionately borne the consequences of white flight, disinvestment, and economic recession. The case of UA development in Milwaukee thus provides an opportunity to examine the intersections of food justice, green space production, and neoliberal urban economic development.

In this article, we examine the complexities of food activism within the context of neoliberal governance, with particular attention to the role of the local entrepreneurial state and its interactions with nonstate actors. We ask how UA-based revitalization efforts take shape and what it means for UA (and related local food system development) to be used by a municipal government as a neoliberal economic development strategy. We argue that local government agencies both constrain and exploit community-based food justice organizing to advance neoliberal interests. City government and private development agencies promote UA as a means of neoliberal economic development that operates via public–private partnership to revitalize and generate value from central city neighborhoods. In so doing, these actors appropriate discourses from community-based UA organizations to legitimize their political economic interests. Community-based organizations in turn

recognize these interests and engage strategically with the city and private agencies to survive in the context of heightened resource competition and performance pressures within the nonprofit sector.

Further, because the city now actively champions and collaborates with these organizations, neoliberal development activities paradoxically create openings for these organizations to advance their own interests. This has led to a flourishing of UA-centered food projects coalescing around a dominant narrative that frames food justice as economic development.

We situate this project relative to existing research on neoliberalization and economic development. To the extent that neoliberalization is a racist (and racialized) process, the reproduction of neoliberal structures contributes to reproducing racial difference. Thus, we attend to the fundamental structuring role of race and racism, noting that efforts to develop UA in Milwaukee often reproduce racializing discourses that constitute “inner-city” black communities and spaces as “unhealthy” and thus viable to be leveraged in the interest of (and even standing to benefit from) neoliberal economic development. Food and dietary health inequities that arise from systemic poverty and racism are addressed through place-based narratives of “health and wellness,” prompting localized land use interventions through UA and community wellness programs. *Unhealthy* might thus stand in for more politically loaded terms (e.g., *blight*) that have traditionally been used to justify urban renewal and gentrification.

Using a mix of methodologies, we have addressed these complex questions through seven years of case study research in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. We have examined food and dietary health inequities through spatial analysis. We have also drawn on seven years of in-depth qualitative fieldwork to examine food discourses and the UA movement. This includes approximately fifty-five open-ended interviews with city officials, community organizers, and activists, along with content analysis of policy documents, promotional materials, organizational correspondence, social

media text, and news articles. The following sections elaborate on our theoretical approaches and examine key research findings.

## Neoliberalism, Economic Development, and Food Activism

Shaped by the ideologies of market liberalization, entrepreneurial governance, and retrenchment of state welfare, neoliberalism has been a dominant policy influence at all levels of U.S. government. Public-private partnership approaches to economic and community development are increasingly common in the context of neoliberalization, as local governments have sought to shift social service management to voluntary and private-sector actors and as community organizations have been compelled to cope with precarious funding (Newman and Lake 2006; Perkins 2009; Ghose and Pettygrove 2014b). Increases in poverty and dependence on cheap (but nutritionally poor) food are some of the effects of neoliberalization. Neoliberal welfare reforms have also contributed significantly to rising food insecurity and declining health, by reducing welfare benefits and pushing more individuals into temporary and low-wage employment (Lightman, Mitchell, and Herd 2008; Cook 2012).

Although food justice organizing and other efforts to improve food access in disinvested urban areas are often conceived of as responses to processes of neoliberalization and uneven development (Staheli, Mitchell, and Gibson 2002; Baker 2004; Eizenberg 2012), research indicates that these efforts might serve to reproduce neoliberal governmentalities, by encouraging reforms centered on volunteerism and consumer choice (Guthman 2008; Pudup 2008; Ghose and Pettygrove 2014a). These forms of neoliberal governance could also be spatialized through urban land use processes, where environmental design is used to incentivize or compel idealized behaviors (Shannon 2014; Carter 2015). These are often centered on narratives about “place-based” health and wellness programs (Carter 2015, 375). Efforts to alleviate dietary health inequities through highly localized neighborhood-scale environmental modification (e.g., developing a grocery store in a low-income neighborhood), however, can produce a form of neoliberal paternalism that nudges individuals into healthy behaviors while disconnecting the problem from larger political economic systems (Shannon 2014).

Further, local governments could promote activities associated with improving food accessibility and UA development as a neoliberal economic development strategy or a type of sustainability fix that resolves crises of accumulation by building sustainable infrastructure (e.g., green space) and positioning the city as innovative to attract corporate investment (While, Jonas, and Gibbs 2004; Castree 2008; Quastel 2009; Draus, Roddy, and McDuffie 2014; Walker 2015). UA can thus contribute to processes of eco-gentrification, wherein green space and community gardens become amenities that elevate property values (Quastel 2009). Simultaneously, municipalities continue to engage in land use conflicts in which urban community gardens and farms are heavily regulated or evicted in favor of revenue-generating uses (Domene and Saurí 2007; Barraclough 2009; Irazabal and Punja 2009; Perkins 2009; Rosol 2012). Neoliberal urbanism has thus tended to favor forms of urban green space development and management that are economically productive.

It is also important to consider how neoliberal political economies are both racializing and fundamentally structured by race (Pulido 2000; Barraclough 2009; Wilson 2009; Lai 2012; Bonds 2013b). Contemporary efforts to revitalize or remake urban spaces are “imagined through and embedded within” histories of white supremacist land use practices, which include rules about property ownership and the right of states to dictate land use (Bonds 2013a, 1392). Neoliberal discourses about individual responsibility and the supposed color-blindness of market-based systems have served to simultaneously obscure and reproduce race and racism as organizing principles of society (Melamed 2006; Roberts and Mahtani 2010). Whiteness and white supremacy are reproduced through various practices and policies, including land use planning, economic development and revitalization, and mortgage lending practices (Pulido 2000; Delaney 2002; Lawson, Jarosz, and Bonds 2010; Bonds 2013a; Feagin 2013).

The racialization of space that occurs with the production of the inner city or areas targeted for redevelopment functions in different ways to reproduce racial hierarchies, in part by providing boundaries that “demarcate devaluation” (McClintock 2011, 95) or, conversely, enabling urban renewal and gentrification (Lai 2012). Racialization of space can, in a sense, be considered to reflect the differential valuation of space and its inhabitants (Pulido 2000). What is identified as valuable or productive land use is inextricably tied

to racial constructions. In the case of development initiatives tied discursively to public health, it might also be useful to consider how racialization has occurred often through discourses that delineate more or less “healthy” populations and spaces on the basis of bodily or environmental norms (Guthman and DuPuis 2006; Marvin and Medd 2006; Brown 2009; Keil 2009; Shannon 2014).

Indeed, in the case of food justice and UA organizing, many scholars have drawn attention to the role of race. Some have noted that the pervasive whiteness of many organizations contributes to reinforcing racialized exclusion through the creation and defense of white spaces (Slocum 2007; Alkon and McCullen 2009; Ramirez 2015). Particularly in the context of UA development, the presence of white organizers might racialize spaces in particular ways, reinforcing notions of struggling black neighborhoods needing

developers and the state to revitalize them and thus “normalize processes of black dispossession” (Ramirez 2015, 762; see also McKittrick 2011). Further, by using development of marginalized neighborhoods to generate value for municipal entities (e.g., by stimulating gentrification or attracting commercial activity and tourism), such activities exploit marginalized populations (Lai 2012; Bonds 2013a).

In the case of HG, however, the ways in which the City of Milwaukee is “intervening” simultaneously provide openings for black organizations to reshape space according to their own imaginaries and reproduce neoliberal racialized discourses. As Ramirez (2015) noted, “Race, power and privilege emerge through community food spaces; they either reify existing inequalities or challenge them, depending on how the food space is being produced” (752). We emphasize that both can occur within the same space,

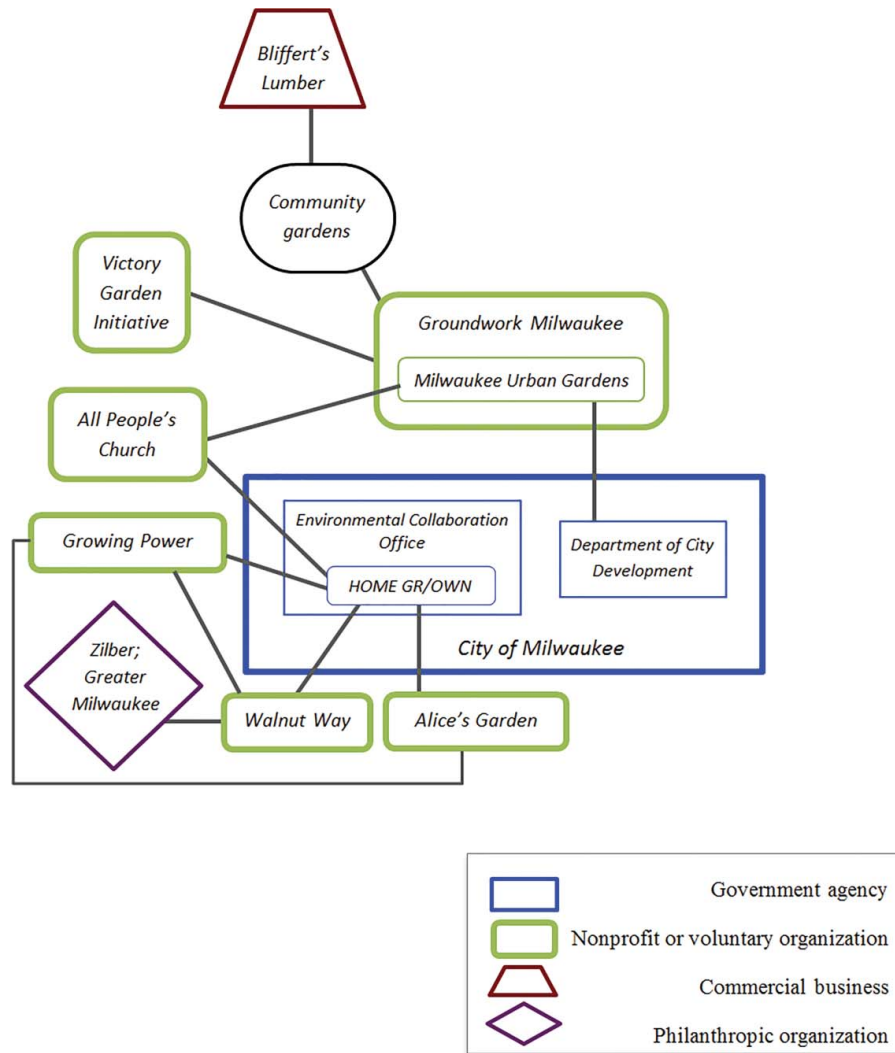


Figure 1. Actors and networks in Milwaukee's urban agriculture movement. (Color figure available online.)



as with neoliberalization more broadly (Roy 2011). Further, as Ramirez (2015) showed, black UA and food justice projects can “use land as a tool of liberation, drawing from practices of resistance that stem from plantation survival strategies” (751; referencing McKittrick 2013).

These theorizations of how racialization structures political–economic processes add an important dimension to ongoing discussions about neoliberal economic development and its relationship to sociospatial inequities. If racialization of space entails valuing spaces differently, then we should attend to the racial narratives entwined with (and potentially propelling) revitalization and gentrification projects, especially where they involve decision making about best or appropriate land uses. For example, the decision to allow or disallow UA in a neighborhood cannot be fully understood without reference to the historical

and contemporary division of space in a particular locale (Barraclough 2009). Accordingly, we consider how HG’s UA initiative racializes the spaces of its interventions and contributes to potential dispossession and displacement through environmental production.

## Food Organizing and Urban Agriculture in Milwaukee, Wisconsin

The sociospatial landscape of Milwaukee and its surrounding metropolitan area reflects many characteristic urbanization processes that have occurred since the mid-1960s in cities across the United States. As a city historically fueled by a robust industrial manufacturing economy, the period of deindustrialization and post-Fordist political–economic restructuring

### Filling in Milwaukee's Food Deserts: Turning the Vacant Lots in Food Deserts into Community Gardens

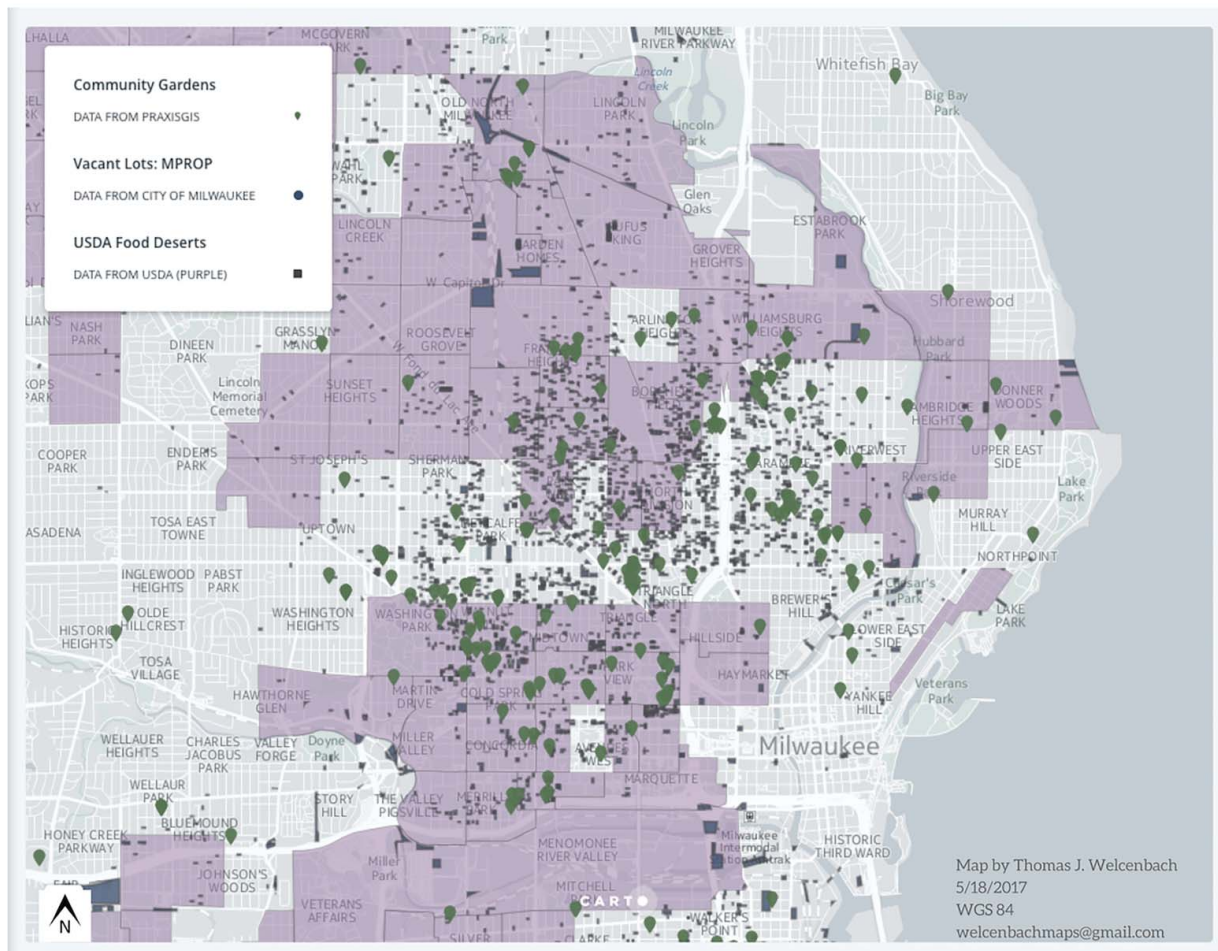


Figure 2. USDA-defined food deserts and urban agriculture in Milwaukee. (Color figure available online.)

led to particularly significant impacts via employment loss, urban disinvestment, suburbanization, and white flight. Milwaukee is also significantly racially unequal, in terms of housing patterns, employment, transportation access, and incarceration rates (Quinn and Pawasarat 2013; Rast 2015). In the wake of economic recession and a housing and mortgage crisis that began in 2006, home foreclosures and land vacancy have increased significantly (Derus 2007; Pawasarat and Quinn 2007).

Since the early 1980s, the City of Milwaukee has pursued various forms of neoliberal economic development, including downtown redevelopment initiatives and defunding municipal public services such as parks management (Ghose 2007; Zimmerman 2008; Perkins 2009). In response, voluntary organizations have proliferated to fill social service needs (Roy 2011).

UA development efforts in Milwaukee have emerged as largely community-led projects against a backdrop of historical and ongoing revitalization initiatives, many of which have aimed for neighborhood-level economic and community development on the Northside. UA activities have involved a variety of community partners, funding sources, and specific objectives (Figure 1) but have typically included efforts to improve homes and property values, in addition to reducing crime, addressing health concerns, and improving quality of life. UA projects have also been shaped by the disparities in food access that exist in Milwaukee (Gibbs-Plessl 2012; Pettygrove 2016), in terms of the availability of food and individuals' abilities to afford food (as reflected in the distribution of food assistance benefits).<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the earliest UA efforts undertaken in the 1990s by nonprofit organizations such as Alice's Garden, Growing Power, and Walnut Way Conservation Corps (WWCC) have promoted UA as part of broader food justice organizing goals, linking urban environmental quality to dietary health and community control over food systems.

Within the last five years, local government leaders have also begun to promote UA as a key economic development strategy, emphasizing its potential as an innovative and comprehensive form of revitalization that will also improve public health and environmental sustainability (Figure 2). Through the creation of public-private partnerships centered on UA, they have sought to bolster community-led UA development. As we will argue, though, these efforts have also served to reinforce neoliberal forms of development that operate through the racialization of urban space. As the city promotes the redevelopment of vacant city

lots into productive uses that generate value for the city, it does so in part by framing predominantly black neighborhoods as "unhealthy" and in need of environmental improvements (in the form of UA) to expose residents to healthier foods.

### Economic Development and Urban Agriculture

In 2013, the City of Milwaukee launched HG as part of its comprehensive sustainability plan.<sup>3</sup> This coincided with the launch of the Mayor's Strong Neighborhoods Plan, and both were heralded as efforts to revitalize inner-city neighborhoods through the redevelopment of vacant, "blighted" spaces (Anonymous, personal communication, 2014; City of Milwaukee 2013, 2015). Whereas the Strong Neighborhoods Plan has focused on preventing and mitigating impacts of home foreclosure, HG has targeted vacant lot improvement through reuse. HG, housed in the Environmental Collaboration Office (ECO), operates through a public-private partnership model, with the stated objective of redeveloping vacant public lots into UA spaces that will come under the long-term care of community organizations. HG has also worked to implement land use and building code changes to enable a broader range of UA activities, in the hope that this will encourage more community-led UA projects beyond the scope of HG. This represents a substantial policy shift from the previous tolerance of community gardens to the active promotion and financing of UA projects on city-owned land (Ghose and Pettygrove 2014a, 2014b).

HG's initial phase of development was funded with a \$75,000 grant from the Greater Milwaukee Foundation and other private philanthropic organizations (Northwestern Mutual Foundation, the Fund for Lake Michigan, and the Zilber Family Foundation). HG distributes part of these funds through small grants to community organizations and neighborhood groups. Funded projects are designed collaboratively between community groups and ECO. Construction and maintenance during the first year is provided through city-contracted labor from organizations including Growing Power and Walnut Way's Blue Sky Landscaping. Community groups are then encouraged to raise money or apply for funding (e.g., via the Neighborhood Improvement Development Corporation [NIDC]) to cover costs in the years following. To date, HG's projects primarily include parks and fruit orchards, along with some production farms and community gardens.

As a public–private partnership, HG works with a variety of local nonprofit and private organizations. HG’s first UA development project, Ezekiel Gillespie Park (opened in 2014), received financial and in-kind support from a variety of city agencies and private entities, including University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee’s Community Design Solutions (CDS), which provided design labor. The construction labor for the park was contracted to the lead community group Walnut Way’s Blue Sky Landscaping, an employment training program run by the organization. City of Milwaukee administrators have been particularly explicit about the strategic advantage to the city of collaborating with nongovernmental actors in their efforts to develop UA and improve healthy food access. The participation of community organizations in HG has been facilitated by a well-established and highly interconnected network of local UA and food justice organizations, in which the city has positioned itself as simply a participant (Figure 1).

Because they are central to the flow and exchange of organizational resources and a source of political legitimacy, partnerships are a normal part of how both community-based and government food projects in Milwaukee function. HG has positioned itself as a continuation of Milwaukee’s long history of community-based food organizing, drawing on popular perceptions of Milwaukee as a UA center. HG accordingly highlights how the local government simultaneously coopts community narratives to further its own interests and supports these narratives to the benefit of community activists.

In 2016, despite initial enthusiasm, HG began to shift its focus away from UA development toward more conventional forms of neighborhood revitalization. HG now focuses principally on redeveloping vacant lots (of which there are more than 5,000 in Milwaukee) into parks and greenscape projects. As HG came to understand the challenges and financial costs associated with urban food production—particularly the need for greenhouses to allow growing through Milwaukee’s long, cold winters—they became reluctant to invest. Community groups, however, continue to build and maintain community gardens on the Northside, their efforts made easier by HG’s land use policy changes.

Thus, although HG has lowered barriers to community gardening in Milwaukee, the work of developing community gardens remains with residents. Although framed as a panacea for marginalized neighborhoods, HG has prioritized the interests of the City of

Milwaukee, treating UA as a sustainability fix intended to generate increased property values in inner-city neighborhoods and increase the city’s attractiveness to investors. This is reflected in their open reliance on Growing Power<sup>4</sup> (an organization that is high-profile nationally and focused on the commercial production of organic produce) as the model for UA, without considering local factors critical to sustainable economic development through UA (e.g., the need for agricultural training and the relatively small acreage offered by vacant lots). With HG’s movement away from UA, Employ Milwaukee (through its EARN and LEARN program), along with the City of Milwaukee Common Council and several state legislators, has taken interest in continuing to promote UA as economic development, with a dedicated focus on creating employment.

UA development in Milwaukee is thus tied to broader discourses surrounding neoliberal economic development and place making. The City and other organizations actively position UA as a means of economic revitalization—particularly in the inner city, where land vacancy, in the wake of the home foreclosure crisis, has increased pressure to find productive reuses of vacant space. The City of Milwaukee has expressed increasing concern about an abundance of vacant land concentrated on the Northside of the city since 2012, when the foreclosure crisis first became apparent (although many date the origins of the crisis to 2006 and the subprime mortgage crisis; Derus 2007; Quinn and Pawarasat 2007; Wisla n.d). Although the city has permitted community gardens on vacant public residential lots since 2000, it was only in 2012, with the initial conception of HG, that the city began actively pursuing development of UA and community gardens.

### Urban Agriculture and Dietary Health

HG frames local food systems development, centered on UA, not only as a form of economic development but as a solution to inequities in healthy food access.<sup>5</sup> UA development is typically described as most needed in neighborhoods where large chain grocery stores and farmers’ markets are scarce and convenience stores abound and where residents are thus generally characterized as being in poor dietary health.<sup>6</sup> Such conditions are nearly always ascribed to low-income, predominantly black, inner-city neighborhoods (synonymous



colloquially with the Northside). Dietary health issues are commonly attributed to the abundance of convenience stores and fast food restaurants on the Northside, which are typically characterized as unhealthy, threatening, or aesthetically unpleasant; one community organizer describes corner stores as “creepy, dark, nasty” (Anonymous, personal communication, 2014). These narratives of unhealthy places then become discursively linked with long-standing tropes about blight and disinvested neighborhoods.

Despite emphasizing that dietary inequities are structural (a function of the environment), food organizers and city representatives suggest that individuals need to be persuaded to engage in healthier behaviors, in many cases by being acculturated into healthy foodways. It casts people of color as relatively unaware and seems to pathologize the Northside, implicitly constituting residents of these neighborhoods as unhealthy and framing dietary health as a matter of personal choice. According to some organizers, successfully changing residents’ dietary health will also require a shift in cultural values surrounding food. As a member of the Milwaukee Food Council (MFC) explained, in discussing strategies for improving healthy food access in low-income neighborhoods, “We can’t just put veggies there [in the store] and expect people to eat them” (Anonymous, personal communication, 2014). Broadly, organizers and city leaders tend to construct the built environment and cultural systems as interlinked contexts that shape individual behavior. As one organizer explained, individuals make “bad decisions” not out of apathy but because “they are in an environment—in a culture, in a system—that pushes them to make the wrong decisions” (Anonymous, personal communication, 2015). A Milwaukee Health Department staff member attributed unhealthy eating habits on the Northside, where he is involved in developing healthy corner stores, as a function of

lack of knowledge or just not being exposed to it . . . kids are not used to getting an apple handed to them to eat . . . people don’t know how to cook, so we tried to have some cooking demonstrations . . . it was marginally successful . . . it’s a systematic thing. (Anonymous, personal communication, 2015)

Thus, describing the problem as systemic in this case appears to refer primarily to cultural systems, rather than political-economic systems that structure resource access. Constructing unhealthy dietary

behaviors in this manner contributes to racializing the subjects of this intervention according to long-standing tropes that pathologize black cultural systems, often without explicitly mentioning race (Guthman 2008; Slocum 2011).<sup>7</sup> It also simultaneously provides justification for interventions that center on physically redeveloping urban space.

In this context, UA is positioned by many groups (including the city) as an essential strategy to address dietary inequities, in part because UA is understood as an effective environmental “nudge” that promotes consumption of foods (fresh produce, in particular) valued as healthy, in contrast to more “conventional,” clinical forms of nutrition education. UA encourages cultural shifts by inscribing particular food values into the urban landscape.

This linkage between public health and environmental conditions highlights city leaders’ fundamental interest in UA as a revitalization strategy that works through remaking urban space. In describing HG, staff indicate that creating healthy food access is not the initiative’s primary or most important goal. Although official descriptions of HG in the city’s sustainability plan and on its Web site present reducing dietary health inequities as a principal objective, discussions about it elsewhere indicate that public health and food access are tangential to the basic motivation for development of HG. In public presentations, local media reports, and personal interviews, HG is framed as being first and foremost about rejuvenating vacant lots into green spaces (whether that includes food or not). HG’s first pilot project, a “pocket park” in the Lindsay Heights neighborhood, completed in 2015, contains fruit trees and perennial fruits but also contains areas of lawn and other features intended to enable its use as a park. Other HG developments have included fruit orchards and community garden spaces, as well as more traditional parks. Thus, although framed in significant part through the discourse of UA as a means to improve healthy food access, HG appears to be driven by broader economic development interests. As the director of HG explained, the initiative is

really just trying to solve the multitude of problems that we have, in the central city, of urban blight, neighborhood destabilization, poor access to healthy food, and joblessness. . . . You know, if you impact one vacant lot . . . you may create income for someone working on the site . . . you help solve urban blight . . . lower city operating costs . . . crime tends to drop in greener neighborhoods. . . . We touch this piece of land, we’re going to get

7 to 9 benefits out of it ... that's a pretty darn good return on investment. (Anonymous, personal communication, 2014)

The city thus contends that it is not only reducing city operating costs (by shifting costs of lot maintenance to community or private groups) but also stabilizing property values and creating employment (through construction and maintenance). This discourse—that UA promotes economic development—is echoed by nongovernmental economic and community development organizations, including philanthropic foundations.

UA development is also part of the city's effort to stimulate economic development by remaking the inner city (and Milwaukee overall); that is, by reconstructing vacant and blighted places as sites of greening, the city positions itself as innovative, sustainable, and thus economically competitive. Mayor Barrett has described this as part of his campaign to shift the image of Milwaukee from “rust belt” to “fresh coast.”<sup>8</sup> This emphasis on UA as a means to improve the city's economic appeal and put vacant lots back into economically productive uses underscores the city's support for UA as it fits into neoliberal economic development agendas.

As we note in subsequent sections, the city's framing of UA as economic development relies in part on the resonance of this narrative with community groups, many of whom view UA as a strategy to generate resources and economic self-sufficiency on a local scale. In seeking to remake Milwaukee, city leaders emphasize the existing discourse of Milwaukee as a UA “hub” and pioneer, built on a history of local community organizing around this activity (iconized by Will Allen, who established Growing Power in 1993). A city staff member noted that the idea for HG began to circulate in 2012 when “Will Allen had just been named one of the 100 most influential people. Food was starting to get hot, and we decided ... let's ride this wave” (Anonymous, personal communication, 2012). Thus, the city appropriates what has been a largely community-driven UA movement (led by many black organizations) to advance its neoliberal economic development interests. The Bloomberg competition, where HG first emerged as an idea, is important because it drew attention to Milwaukee and served to demonstrate the appeal of the HG idea to funders (even though HG was ultimately not selected to receive an award) and to the general public.

That HG is understood as being able to address multiple issues simultaneously also appears to help explain

its strategic appeal to the city, in that this enables HG to be adaptable to constraints. As HG's director stated,

We're really working on multiple issues simultaneously, and that helps, because ... sometimes things are tough to do in city government and you hit a roadblock, and we've got the ability to veer off in a different direction. (Anonymous, personal communication, 2014)

The extent of popular support (whether perceived or real) for UA has been central to the city's view of UA as a viable economic development tool, as it has enabled the city to see UA as a low-cost effort, with the bulk of the work carried out by voluntary or private organizations. HG is consciously discussed as an initiative that is merely supporting existing community efforts toward UA, which already has legitimacy and is best left to the responsibility of civil society. So, for example, the director of HG consistently frames the initiative as responding to and emerging from the community, and thus as inherently collaborative.

Although the city has provided financial support for UA—in the form of a funded staff position responsible for coordinating HG projects, labor donated from agencies like the Department of Public Works, and financing construction costs through a Greater Milwaukee Fund grant—the focus of HG work since its inception has been coordinating projects carried out by nonprofit organizations or private entities (even while retaining ownership of the land). As the director of HG explained, in the case of a pocket park developed as part of the program, the space will continue to be city property maintained by the partnering community organization in the immediate future, but the city is “hoping that engaged residents will take over the management of the property, which actually helps us lower our city operating costs” (Anonymous, personal communication, 2014). The cost of UA implementation continues to reside within the civil society.

In these ways, UA development generates value for the city, putting places and people “to work.” By drawing on and reinforcing social constructions of Milwaukee's black inner-city neighborhoods as blighted, unproductive, and unhealthy (environmentally and culturally), the city positions UA development in these neighborhoods as a necessary and beneficial intervention. City-sponsored UA development is then simultaneously reproducing neoliberal structures, which are themselves fundamentally racialized and racist (Roberts and Mahtani 2010).

This discourse—that UA promotes economic development—is echoed by nongovernmental

economic and community development organizations, including philanthropic foundations. The Zilber Family Foundation, for example, frames its decision to give \$500,000 for Walnut Way's Innovation and Wellness Commons as an economic investment that will draw more investment. The prominence of the narrative equating locally grown food with health in Milwaukee might be at least partially due to the popularity of this narrative with funders who have a history of funding community development activities locally. Medical College of Wisconsin's Healthier Wisconsin Partnership Program (HWPP), for example, has funded collaborative UA projects among seven of the organizations considered here.

Many community organizations also support the discourse of UA as economic development, albeit with an emphasis on the economic opportunities that local food systems provide in addition to its potential to improve land value. In part, this appears to reflect the idea that linking UA and local food to economic processes will enable its long-term sustainability and viability. Beyond this, however, there are groups that construct UA as a means to economic survival and autonomy for groups that tend to be excluded from or marginalized within broader economic processes on the basis of race and class. The production of green space for UA, or other local food spaces (e.g., farmers' markets), often dovetails with practices centered on food and farming business and labor development, particularly efforts to train and support individuals (often youth) in farming or other food-related entrepreneurial skills, provide gainful employment, and develop markets for those entrepreneurs. For many organizations, these practices use farming or local food business management as a means to employment and skills development for youth or adults who face structural barriers to formal, living-wage employment.

Although the development of UA here certainly aligns with and possibly reinforces elements of the city's economic development agenda (and many of these projects have directly benefited from partnering with HG to obtain land or other resources), these projects emphasize economic development via UA as a direct benefit to marginalized groups. To the extent that the dearth of adequate economic opportunities in African American neighborhoods is a function of structural racism expressed through historical land use processes (including redlining, home mortgage lending policies, urban renewal projects, white flight, deindustrialization, and disinvestment from central cities), efforts to develop community-based economies via

food systems are antiracist because they enable communities on the receiving end of racial discrimination to promote their own sustenance and survival (see Ramirez 2015).

UA and local food system development are thus also positioned as part of efforts by marginalized groups to assert political control by making food systems directly meet local needs and controlling the production of space. In this context, community ownership of space is central to food system localization and UA development. A Northside farmers' market director noted that the market is important in part because it "fills niches . . . that big agriculture can't, like, sweet potato greens—those are popular especially among African immigrants" (Anonymous, personal communication, 2015). Revitalization, as a central narrative of the city's economic agenda, has been embraced by Northside UA groups, to the extent that they are able to leverage this narrative in support of projects to reclaim and transform vacant lots for a variety of purposes. For example, the director of a prominent black-led UA organization describes particular gardens in Northside neighborhoods as sites of healing in the wake of violent deaths of residents.

This challenges straightforward distinctions between "activists" and opponents, as negotiations over ownership and development of city space for UA are not a simple conflict between the city (and commercial interests) and community groups, but between different groups with distinct interests. The city, in other words, exists simultaneously as an ally and an antagonist in its governance of space. Although urban economic development is often synonymous with neoliberalization, there might in practice exist multiple economic development agendas. In the context of Milwaukee UA, where city agencies promote UA as part of a neoliberal economic agenda centered on reducing municipal operating costs and stimulating investment (directly and through boosting the city's image), multiple Northside community organizations frame UA as a means of economic development that will build wealth directly for local communities. Wealth for these groups includes financial resources, land ownership, and capacity to self-sustain outside of formal economic systems.

## Conclusion

In Milwaukee, different conceptions of food and health (with distinct rationales and goals) have

coalesced to support UA development and related practices. The tendency of groups to link UA and dietary health and the prominent role of UA across Milwaukee food projects appear to a significant degree to reflect the resonance of the discourse of UA as a comprehensive form of economic or community development that can address numerous concerns. UA is also a low-cost, politically feasible form of organizing and economic development. It is thus a form of neighborhood revitalization (framed as sustainable development and public health promotion) that appeals to the local government leaders and community groups. Perhaps most significant, UA has been framed and leveraged by the city as a means of creating value from vacant lots and thus remaking the inner city. The foreclosure and land vacancy crisis has created an economic incentive for the city to promote UA development on vacant lots, and the existence of strong, thriving UA and food movements within Milwaukee has facilitated this strategy of economic development. In this way, environmental sustainability, revitalization, and dietary health seem to function as mutually reinforcing discourses.

The City of Milwaukee's promotion of dietary health in this manner aligns with its broader neoliberal interest in ensuring productive uses of land and promoting public-private partnerships. The City uses UA to leverage value from disinvested neighborhoods and remake the image of Milwaukee according to sustainability narratives. Yet municipal policy changes to promote healthy food access have also facilitated the work of community organizations engaged in UA development. There is thus tension surrounding these activities, as they simultaneously contest and reinforce white supremacist capitalist economic development agendas.

Although the development of UA sites in this context does appear to facilitate black-led community organizations' access to resources (especially land) and to provide tangible benefits for residents of these neighborhoods (e.g., green space, fruit trees), the city's focus on this particular strategy of investment does not address the various structural processes that produce racial inequities in Milwaukee. Further, by reinforcing the narrative of the inner city as a space to be (re)developed and made productive by (and for) the state—supported by the narrative that black residents need to be exposed to and educated about healthy foodways—this initiative reproduces white supremacist (and colonial)

imaginaries. Again, although race is often unspoken (at least in text), the framing of UA as a means of encouraging cultural change in the communities where it is developed seems to racialize revitalization as whiteness, in that it is a process meant to improve neighborhoods understood to be black.

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## Notes

1. We use *food justice* in this article to refer to activities associated with pursuit of (more) equitable food systems, including, primarily, equitable access to nutritious foods and community control over food production.
2. In 2013, North-Central Milwaukee contained the highest density of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (administered in Wisconsin via the FoodShare program) benefit dollars distributed per person.
3. HG is the first municipal program devoted solely to food and UA in Milwaukee.
4. In 1993, Will Allen established Growing Power on a 2-acre farmland in Milwaukee, to practice urban agriculture. Today, Growing Power has multiple farm sites in Wisconsin, including a 40-acre rural farm, and sites in Chicago. Although it supports community gardening endeavors, Growing Power functions as a commercial agricultural enterprise where products are sold for a profit.
5. They also emphasize creating an explicit, unified set of priorities, goals, and values to guide food activism. This discursively configures the networked space of food activism around the ideal of consensus and cooperation. Although there has been apparent alignment around particular narratives and practices among Milwaukee food organizations involved in shared networks, this might in part reflect the practical necessity of participating in these networks, as a result of which actors might opt to alter their priorities to maintain support. In this way, the alignment of narratives could serve to construct a political space that delineates the appropriate scope of action, the actors that are included, and the appropriate arrangement of actor relationships.
6. Milwaukee actors often use chain grocery stores as a referent for ideal (quality) retail food sources, although development of such stores is rarely pursued as a solution to food access concerns. When one organization assessed local healthy food accessibility, they counted stores as healthy food sources, "if they had a good, decent selection, or a really nice, like, Pick 'n' Save kind of thing" (Anonymous, personal communication, 2014).

7. This is not unlike “culture of poverty” discourses that seem to shift blame from individuals but still amount to constructing particular racialized groups as abnormal or inherently destructive (Goode and Maskovsky 2001).
8. On 8 December, Mayor Tom Barrett was in Washington, DC, where Milwaukee

was one of 16 cities featured in case studies as part of a recent report by the Federal Reserve titled ‘The Enduring Challenge of Concentrated Poverty in America.’ Barrett cited initiatives such as the new Urban Entrepreneur Partnership of Milwaukee . . . set up to encourage economic development. Taking issue with the report’s use of the term ‘rust belt’ to describe Milwaukee, Barrett (said) that he prefers to think of the city being on the ‘fresh coast,’ a reference to Lake Michigan’s fresh water. (Marrerro 2008)

HG is part of such initiatives, and the city has emphasized innovations associated with UA, such as storm water management, cisterns, and porous paving stones.

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