

MUTUAL AID AND AUTONOMY: OPPORTUNITIES AND
CONSTRAINTS FOR FOOD SOVEREIGNTY IN THE
WILLAMETTE VALLEY

by

ABIGAIL GRAVATT

A THESIS

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Approved: David Meek, Ph.D.
Primary Thesis Advisor

McMichael argues that we currently exist in the third food regime. One marked by capitalism, corporate control and increasingly extreme externalities impacting humans and the environment (Robbins, 2015). Colonialism and capitalism have shifted once local and autonomous food systems to a globalized and industrialized one characterized by extreme distancing and lack of autonomy for individuals and communities (Robbins, 2015). According to Robbins (2015), this third food regime “has many long-term social implications, such as displacement and dispossession, dietary changes, and a widening gap between producers and consumers” as well as catastrophic environmental impacts such as “biodiversity loss, soil depletion, deforestation and greenhouse gas emissions” (p. 449). This is an example of Marx’s theory of metabolic rift, the “separation between humans and nature” under capitalism, creating ecological decline (Robbins, 2015, p. 452).

In the Willamette Valley and across the globe, one of the most obvious effects of the current food regime is high rates of food insecurity. Lane County in Oregon, where the City of Eugene resides, has comparatively high rates of food insecurity. In 2017, 12.9 percent of Oregon was food insecure, and 14.6 percent of Lane County was food insecure. In the same year, 18.9 percent of Oregon’s children were food insecure, and 20.2 percent of Lane County’s children were food insecure (“2019 Status of Hunger,” 2019). In Lane County, minority populations are

over two times more food insecure than white populations. The white population in 2017 reported 12.2 percent food insecurity, Asian and Pacific Islander populations reported 14.4 percent food insecurity, Black populations reported 28.1 percent food insecurity, Hispanic populations reported 28.8 percent food insecurity, and Native American populations reported 31 percent food insecurity (“2019 Status of Hunger,” 2019).

Food Sovereignty is one counter movement to the capitalist and corporate food regime. Food Sovereignty radically reimagines the food system and outlines a “desired system of agricultural production, distribution, consumption and social relations” that is local and equitable food systems (Robbins, 2015, p. 452). Localization is often a central element of food sovereignty because it acts in resistance to the distancing caused by industrialization and globalization (Robbins, 2015). However, it raises questions about who these counter food movements are serving, and whether intentions are being actualized. Robbins (2015) raises the question: “Can local food systems adequately feed those living in poverty and low-income situations, those who cannot afford to pay premium prices for local, ecologically produced food products?” (p. 450). I argue that this is where mutual aid and nonprofit organizing steps in to fill the visible gap between the illusion of food sovereignty for a community and the real rates of food insecurity experienced by unhoused, low income and minority populations. However, grassroots organizing has its limitations for creating true autonomy, sovereignty, and systemic change.

My thesis outlines food insecurity as a result of the current corporate food regime and determines how successful mutual aid and nonprofit organizing is at creating individual and community autonomy as a way of working towards food sovereignty for marginalized populations. This research aims to answer the questions: How does the process of mutual aid shape the experience of autonomy in the Eugene food system? What forms of mutual aid

currently exist in Eugene? To what extent is there autonomy in Eugene's food system? In what ways do policy and other factors structure mutual aid and autonomy in Eugene's food system?

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Additionally, I want to include a land acknowledgement for Eugene and the University of Oregon where I reside and carried out this project.

“The University of Oregon is located on Kalapuya Ilihi, the traditional indigenous homeland of the Kalapuya people. Following treaties between 1851 and 1855, Kalapuya people were dispossessed of their indigenous homeland by the United States government and forcibly removed to the Coast Reservation in Western Oregon. Today, descendants are citizens of the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde Community of Oregon and the Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians of Oregon, and continue to make important contributions in their communities, at UO, and across the land we now refer to as Oregon.

We express our respect for all federally recognized Tribal Nations of Oregon. This includes the Burns Paiute Tribe, the Confederated Tribes of Coos, Lower Umpqua and Siuslaw Indians, the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde Community of Oregon, the Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians of Oregon, the

Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs, the Coquille Indian Tribe, the Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe of Indians, and the Klamath Tribes. We also express our respect for all other displaced Indigenous peoples who call Oregon home” (Honoring Native Peoples).

However, we must do more than simply acknowledge the fact that we live, work, and play on stolen land. Acknowledgment without action shows complacency in systems of oppression such as settler colonialism, racism, and whiteness. We have the responsibility to abolish our colonial values and practices of exploitation and extraction, and shift toward ways of living and knowing that have been forcibly suppressed alongside Indigenous people. There are limitations to the practice of a land acknowledgment, yet it is still important to center Indigeneity in the present and not residing in the past.

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Chapter 1: Research Design and Methods

In response to food insecurity in the Willamette Valley, grassroots mutual aid and nonprofit organizations have developed to provide more equitable access to food as well as work towards providing autonomy beyond basic food security. Organizations doing this work in Eugene include but are not limited to Burrito Brigade (the parent organization to Waste to Taste and the Little Free Pantry), Food Not Bombs, Willamette Farm and Food Coalition, Whiteaker Community Market and 86 Hunger (a partner with Acorn Community Café). Two organizations I interviewed operating in Portland, Oregon are the Black Food Sovereignty Coalition (the parent organization to the Black Futures Farms) and Rogue Farm Corps. Countless other organizations are working towards food justice and sovereignty in the Willamette Valley, however, it is unclear to what extent these grassroots efforts can actually achieve autonomy and sovereignty for the communities they serve. I conducted interviews with representatives from these organizations to get a better picture of the food system in Eugene from the perspective of those who are living and working directly in the community. Through these interviews I gathered information about the constraints and opportunities for mutual aid work in Eugene, and to what extent the work currently being done increases individual and community autonomy and food sovereignty.

Research Questions

My research aims to answer the questions: How does the process of mutual aid shape the experience of autonomy in food system in the Willamette Valley? What forms of mutual aid currently exist in the Willamette Valley? To what extent is there autonomy in food systems in the Willamette Valley? In what ways do policy and other factors structure mutual aid and autonomy in food systems in the Willamette Valley?

Methodology

I collected qualitative data through interviews aiming to answer my research questions and record community knowledge of theory I have been working with in an academic context. I conducted preliminary research and constructed a literature review on current discourses around food systems, mutual aid, autonomy, and food sovereignty as well as the state of food insecurity in the Willamette Valley where my research is focused. The individuals I interviewed provided insight into nine different organizations in Portland and Eugene. From Portland, I interviewed the Black Food Sovereignty Coalition and the Rogue Farm Corps. From Eugene, I interviewed Food Not Bombs, Waste 2 Taste, Willamette Farm and Food Coalition, Whiteaker Community Market, and 86 Hunger.

The interview process began with getting research approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB). This is when I developed my research questions, interview guide, and methods. To get information useful to answering my research questions and prompt meaningful discussion, I developed these interview questions:

1. Can you introduce yourself and tell me what the organization you are associated with does?
2. Does your organization partner with or interface with other organizations working towards food systems change in Eugene/Portland or broader?
3. How would you describe the structure of Eugene's/Portland's food system?
 1. How do you see your organization fitting into this food system?
4. What are the ways in which you see the current food system in Eugene/Portland being successful or unsuccessful?
5. How would you describe 'mutual aid'?

1. What forms of mutual aid already exist in Eugene/Portland?
6. What are the successes of mutual aid work in this space?
 1. What are the challenges?
7. To what extent is there autonomy in Eugene's/Portland's food system?
8. What are barriers/policies/structures in opposition to autonomy and mutual aid work in Eugene/Portland?
9. How would you define food sovereignty?
 1. Where do you see examples of food sovereignty in Eugene/Portland?
10. What are decentralization initiatives like in Eugene/Portland?
11. How has COVID 19 impacted your organization's work (if applicable)?

These questions acted as a guide and jumping off point for discussion. Once IRB approval was obtained, I began the interview process. Participants signed an informed consent form before each interview to ensure that audio recordings could be taken for post interview transcription and to get consent for the use of their name in the final thesis. The interviews were conducted either in person or via Zoom. The audio recordings were taken on my phone using the Voice Memos application, then transcribed using the software Otter.ai. I then coded the interviews by categorizing the quotes. The quotes were color coded to be identified under one of the following categories: Food System, Food Security, Mutual Aid, Autonomy, Collaboration, Barriers, Opportunities, and the COVID-19 Pandemic. This was used to formulate my analysis.

Through the interviews, I sought to gain a better sense of the mutual aid scene in the Willamette Valley. It was important to see how people in these communities think about food sovereignty and how their work engages with it. The interviews bring us closer to understanding

what systemic factors create food insecurity and how mutual aid can help to create autonomy and food sovereignty for individuals and the community.

I want to be intentional in centering myself in this research while also acknowledging that I am not from the Willamette Valley, or even Oregon. As an out-of-state student, I have worked to ingrain myself in the Eugene community as much as possible, understanding that there are limitations I have when attempting to speaking on behalf on their behalf. For this reason, I rely on centering the voices and direct quotes of the individuals who I interviewed. This project is important in chipping away at the dominant belief about who possesses knowledge in a community and who does not, bringing forward the voices of community organizers who are typically left out of scholarship. As Pimbert argues, transforming ways of knowing for food sovereignty requires democratization of research in which the boundary is blurred between specialists (trained scholars) and non-specialists (community members) and western science and local knowledge. Ultimately this builds horizontal networks for autonomous learning (Pimbert, 2015, p. 41).

I want to acknowledge the possible shortcomings of my research from the beginning. I had intentions of interviewing far more groups better representing the diversity of communities and types of organizations in this area. However, within the constraints of the project, I was limited by personal capacity and the capacity of the groups I was wanting to engage with. Additionally, a lot of this work is about making connections, which takes time. There are certain groups that I had preexisting connections with, and this had an influence on which groups I was ultimately able to interview. I understand that this presents a gap in my research and is something I would change if I were to do this project again.

I also want to acknowledge the nature of subjectivity present in this work. The qualitative nature of the interview data means that there is little objectivity. I had previous connections with many of the people that I interviewed. I also have worked in nonprofit and mutual aid spaces. This previous knowledge and experience of what it means to face certain constraints and unique challenges in this space will ultimately impact how I analyze the interviews. However, this does not make the work any less valuable.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Food Regimes

In 1987, Harriet Friedmann formulated the concept of the ‘food regime’ with the purpose of structuring the history of capitalist food relations and analyzing those relationships (McMichael, 2009, p. 163). A food regime is defined as a period with a relatively stable set of relationships regarding the “rule-governed structure of production and consumption of food on the world scale” (McMichael, 2009, p. 142). Furthermore, the concept of food regimes works at “problematizing linear representations of agricultural modernisation, underlining the pivotal role of food in global political-economy, and conceptualising key historical contradictions in particular food regimes that produce crisis, transformation and transition” (McMichael, 2009, p.140). Friedmann characterizes two distinct food regimes with a possible third. The first food regime spans the time from the 1870s to the 1930s and is characterized by settler colonialism and colonial imports. The second food regime spans the 1950s to the 1970s and is characterized by “re-routed flows of (surplus) food from the United States to its informal empire of postcolonial states on strategic perimeters of the Cold War” (McMichael, 2009, p. 141). The third and current food regime spans the time from the 1980s to the present and is characterized by the supermarket revolution and the global food and fuel industrial complex. Another important component to this food regime is the emergence of counter movements such as Food Sovereignty, Localism, Slow Food and Community Supported Agriculture. Philip McMichael adds to our understanding of the current food regime, labeling it the “corporate food regime” and discussing the influence of neoliberalism (McMichael, 2009).

Friedmann and McMichael are in conversation with one another, having published works together on the topic of food regimes. However, they have grown slightly apart in their focus and

have distinct understandings of what a food regime means, though their understandings are not in opposition. For example, regarding the current food regime, McMichael understands it to be a recognized food regime, corporate and neoliberal in nature. Friedmann is cautious in determining a food regime for the present but believes there is an emerging “corporate-environmental” food regime (McMichael, 2009). Both reference the theory of “metabolic rift” as it pertains to all three food regimes. “Metabolic rift” entails the “subordination of agriculture to capitalist production relations,” causing a distancing between humans and the environment (McMichael, 2009, p. 161). The “metabolic rift” is deepened by the current food regime through processes such as petro-farming and industrial agriculture (McMichael, 2009). Food regimes are important as an analytical device used to pose questions about current structures. In the context of my research, the current corporate food regime, and the capitalism and colonialism embedded within it, is the root causes of the food systems issues in the Willamette Valley.

Food Sovereignty

Food sovereignty emerges in response to the food insecurity, environmental degradation, and other negative effects of the corporate food regime. Food sovereignty is a counter narrative which aims at moving control to the local level so that food systems are geographically and culturally specific (Robbins, 2015). Food sovereignty is an ongoing process (Wald, 2015). The process “aims to build ecologically-based production models, develop postcapitalist politics of exchange, democratize decision-making in the food system, and reconnect food producers with food consumers” to achieve not only food security but autonomy (Trauger, 2017, p. 2). Food sovereignty also incorporates a critique of corporate-led globalization and emphasizes the importance of local autonomy over food production (Wald, 2015). The use of the term food sovereignty is intentionally different than the term food security.

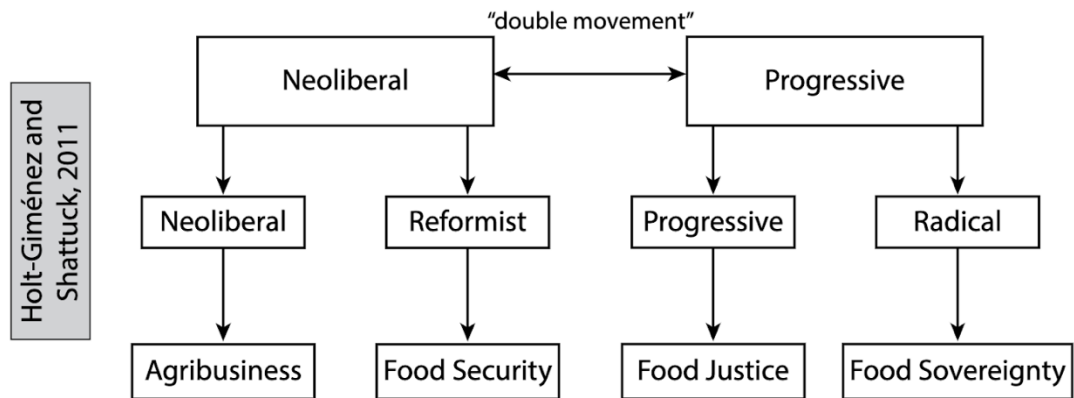


FIGURE 2. Food system regimes and trends. (Adapted from Holt-Giménez & Shattuck, 2011)

Figure 1: (Trauger, 2017, p. 35)

As seen in Figure 1 from Trauger’s *We Want Land to Live: Making Political Space for Food Sovereignty*, food security is placed within neoliberalism and is labeled as reformist (Trauger, 2017). Reformism will “merely tinker with existing harmful conditions, failing to reach the root causes,” providing no real change and acting as a demobilizing force (Spade, 2020, p. 132). Since the term food security is limited to working within the neoliberal and capitalist structure, to work toward structural change and autonomy, scholars like Trauger argue that the term food sovereignty must be employed. There are scholars and experts in industrial agriculture who argue for the benefits of neoliberal agribusiness as it is what supports our current food system. However, there is little scholarship presenting any nuanced benefits of global agribusiness that outweigh the negative impacts it has on the environment and people’s health. There is far more literature calling for radical food sovereignty to combat the ills brought about by globalized neoliberal agribusiness.

Radical food sovereignty which is on the opposite end of the spectrum to agribusiness and food security is defined as people’s right to:

define their own food and agriculture; to protect and regulate domestic agricultural production and trade in order to achieve sustainable development objectives; to determine the extent to which they want to be self-reliant; to restrict the dumping of products in their markets (Pimbert, 2015, p. 38).

Mutual aid and autonomy encourage food sovereignty. According to Colin Ward, “given a common need, a collection of people will, by trial and error, by improvisation and experiment, evolve order out of the situation” outside of what external authority could provide (Springer, 2014, p. 253). This external authority is often the government at the national, state, and local levels. It is important to note that there are multiple sovereignties and food sovereignty is an ever-evolving term with regionally and culturally specific definitions (Iles, 2015).

Issues with Food Sovereignty

There are some challenges that the term food sovereignty presents. One is the term’s ambiguity. It is important to hold space for the multiple sovereignties to exist. However, multiple scholars including Robbins argue that this ambiguity leads to alternative food systems not being well articulated or detailed (Robbins, 2015). Because food sovereignty is a place-based process, it makes sense that there would not be a universal set of guidelines for alternative and sovereign food systems. Iles (2015) also referenced the vagueness of the term to be its downfall. Scale is another issue that came up in several readings due to its ambiguity. Robbins works to define scale, with large scale being “capital intensive, space intensive, or national” and small scale being closer to the household level and with a shorter supply chain (Robbins, 2015, p. 456). Scale can also be generalized to have large scale equate with capitalist and industrial food systems and small scale to be with a food sovereignty framework (Robbins, 2015). Both ways of defining size are on a scale, with food systems falling somewhere in between being large and small.

Lastly, localization is often a central component to food sovereignty. Localization removes corporate control of trade and stops the flooding of domestic markets with cheap products produced globally (Robbins, 2015). It focuses on shorter supply chains and supporting local agriculture. However, small scale, organic agriculture tends to increase the price of goods to a level that is out of reach for many consumers. The question is raised about who is supported by localization and who is being left behind. I will touch on this more in depth in the analysis of the interviews and conclusion because it is extremely relevant to the structure of the food system in Eugene.

Mutual Aid

Mutual aid broadly looks like radical collective care, active political participation, and capacity building, to expose the failures of our current systems and imagining a different more survivable reality (Spade, 2020). I will be defining mutual aid as informal or formal organizations rooted in grassroots community organizing, existing on multiple scales, and responding to a community need (Lofton, 2022). Characteristics often embodied by mutual aid groups include a critique of capitalism, imperialism, colonialism, patriarchy, and “authority claimed by the state” (Springer, 2014, p. 254). Mutual aid’s intersection with food sovereignty can be defined as the radical reimagining of local food systems with a food sovereignty lens (Lofton, 2022). To promote reciprocity and critique our current food system, “mutual aid organizations provide resources as a catalyst for personal stability that can then be reinvested into mutual aid organizations and not as a handout,” promoting systems change, not temporary relief (Lofton, 2022, p. 120). Mutual aid does not come without its pitfalls and challenges. Mutual aid action around food security can often be put into the box of charity, but mutual aid is not charity. Charity engages in restrictive eligibility requirements and often perpetuates the

harmful narrative that “poverty is a result of immorality” and that only those who can prove their worth are deserving of assistance (Spade, 2020, p. 140). Mutual aid does not put in place arbitrary qualifications that exclude people from receiving their services (Parson, 2014).

Community fridge programs are just one example of mutual aid efforts that have sprung up during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Love Fridge mutual aid organization in Chicago has the mission of “reducing food waste, the belief that food is a right, not a privilege” and that providing food in this way is radically re-imagining food systems and safety in communities (Lofton, 2022, p. 120). The fridges are stocked and accessed by community members. These programs have been started all around the country including in Eugene and Portland and are successful in providing food to communities. The Love Fridge in Chicago had provided over 10,000 pounds of food as of November 2021 (Lofton, 2022).

Autonomy

Autonomy can work alongside mutual aid in response to the increasing globalization of the food system which “undermines people's capacity for autonomy and self-determination” and therefore capacity for food sovereignty (Pimbert, 2015, p. 37). A decentralized food system incorporates a “multi-scale approach to food systems” which opens decision-making space on multiple levels (Renato, 2021, p. 2). The globalization of the food system has also created distancing which decreases autonomy. In consumers’ relationship to the food system, “there are many dimensions to distancing, or the separation of raw-food production” and the final product (Barndt, 2008, p. 69). Because we are so distanced from food production, we enter only at the point of consumption and can only identify with eating and not producing, making it difficult to imagine autonomy and decision-making regarding food systems (Barndt, 2008).

Chapter 3: Mutual Aid and Nonprofit Organizations in Eugene and Portland

Burrito Brigade, Waste to Taste, and Little Free Pantry



Figure 2: (Little Free Pantries, 2022)

Burrito Brigade is a nonprofit organization operating since 2014 (Project Impact Reports, 2022). The mission of their three projects is “to increase food security while decreasing food waste in our communities” (Project Impact Reports, 2022, p. 55) The founding program of Burrito Brigade is still running, and hand delivers over 800 burritos to people in Eugene and Springfield each weekend. Delivery occurs on the weekends because fewer groups provide food services or are open, so Saturdays and Sundays are the most food insecure days for unhoused people (Project Impact Reports, 2022). Waste to Taste, the second of Burrito Brigade’s programs, is a low barrier free grocery store open to unhoused and low-income individuals and families. This is Burrito Brigades largest program, and it has been running since 2020 (Project Impact Reports, 2022). The Little Free Pantries are stand-alone pantries stocked by volunteers with non-perishable foods. There are two fridge locations in Eugene with perishable foods,

twenty-five pantry locations in Eugene, sixteen in Springfield, one in Junction City and one in Florence (Little Free Pantries, 2022).

They employ their mission through “rescuing consumable food from local grocery stores, restaurants, bakeries, farms, and other organizations that would otherwise end up in the landfill,” and they use this rescued food to make the burritos and stock the store and pantry shelves (Project Impact Reports, 2022, p. 55). The organizations rescue around 5,000 pounds of food every week, which means that as of September 2022, Burrito Brigade rescued over 600,000 pounds of food since their start in 2014 (Project Impact Reports, 2022). The Burrito Brigade, Waste to Taste and Little Free Pantry Programs have also been successful in reducing food security in Eugene and Springfield. Data from a quantitative survey done as part of the United Way of Lane County Project Impact Reports shows that ninety-four percent of respondents felt their or their family’s “overall well-being had improved” since shopping at Waste to Taste (Project Impact Reports, 2022, p. 61). Sixty-seven respondents experienced a “significant decrease in the number of days they did not have enough food to eat,” and many noted they have a more varied and healthier diet since shopping at Waste to Taste (Project Impact Reports, 2022, p. 61).

Food Not Bombs



Figure 3: (Gravatt, 2022)

Food Not Bombs is an anarchist mutual aid organization with chapters operating in over “1,000 cities in 65 countries in protest to war, poverty, and destruction of the environment” (“FAQ”). A single city will often have multiple groups operating at the same time. The groups act autonomously, using nonviolent direct action and non-hierarchical consensus decision making to provide food and supplies to those who need it. Food Not Bombs was originally created in May of 1980 in opposition to the Seabrook Nuclear power station in New Hampshire, providing full meals outside of the “stock holders meeting of the Bank of Boston to Boston to protest the exploitation of capitalism and investment in the nuclear industry” (“FAQ”). Some consistent elements between the Food Not Bombs groups in different cities are that they provide free vegan meals and are resistant to neoliberal charity (Parson, 2014). The FNB chapter I interviewed in Eugene, Oregon is completely structureless and autonomous and depends on volunteer engagement and donations to function (Interviewee 1, 2022).

86 Hunger and Acorn Community Café



Figure 4: (86 Hunger Foundation, 2023)

The mission of 86 Hunger is to work with local farmers, food producers, and restaurants to eliminate food waste and increase equal access to quality food (86 Hunger Foundation, 2023). The name comes from the food industry. To “86” something is to remove it from the menu due to diminishing product stock. This group is working to “86” hunger by reducing food waste, providing nourishing meals in the community, and supporting “equitable access to quality food” (86 Hunger Foundation, 2023). 86 Hunger received 501(c)(3) status in August of 2022, allowing them to receive more donations from the community and fulfill their mission (Jones, 2023). 86 Hunger partners with the Acorn Community Café, which operates as a traditional café for the most part, but with the partnership with 86 Hunger, they offer “free meals and market boxes to neighbors in need” (86 Hunger Foundation, 2023). The Blue-Plate Special is a free meal every week that is made using the donated produce and food. Those ordering the Blue-Plate Special do not have to show documents or sign anything. It is based on mutual respect and trust (Jones, 2023). There is also a free pantry located at the front of the café with donated items from the

community. Donated produce and perishable food items that cannot be used or given away at the Acorn Community Café are redistributed to the Eugene Community Fridges or Alluvium’s free market on Sundays (Jones, 2023).

Whiteaker Community Market



Figure 5: (Buckwalter, 2022)

The Whiteaker Community Market is a farmer and artist market in the Whiteaker neighborhood in Eugene. Established in 2016, the purpose of the market is to address the lack of “affordable local farm food in the neighborhood, a lack of inclusive and diverse gathering space for neighbors and community members to come together, and a lack of affordable space for neighborhood artists and musicians to support and share the unique and creative talents” of the neighborhood (*Whiteaker Community Market*). The market runs every Sunday and works to “prioritize Black, Indigenous, People of Color & LGBTQIA+ vendors” and shoppers who are often alienated from farmers markets and other public spaces (*Whiteaker Community Market*).

Willamette Farm and Food Coalition



Figure 6: (Spotz, 2022)

Willamette Farm and Food Coalition is a nonprofit organization established in 2000. Their mission is envisioning a food system that is “secure, sustainable, and inclusive” and that increases the health of the entire community (“About”, 2020). The two major programs that Willamette Farm and Food Coalition (WFFC) works on are Double Up Food Bucks and Fill Your Pantry. Double Up Food Bucks matches up to \$20 a day at farmers markets and select stores, increasing individual purchasing power and allowing fresh, locally grown produce to be more accessible (“About”, 2020). Double Up Food Bucks are also available for use at Fill Your Pantry, which is a bulk buying event where people can buy storage crops directly from farms at the beginning of winter (“About”, 2020).

Rogue Farm Corps



Figure 7: (Rogue Farm Corps, 2022)

The Rogue Farm Corps is a nonprofit founded in 2004. Their mission is to “train and equip the next generation of farmer and ranchers” through programs, apprenticeships and providing necessary resources (Gordon, 2023, 0:46). Rogue Farm Corps (RFC) values stewardship, mentorship, collaboration, and systemic change to engage in futures thinking through practices that cultivate meaningful and sustainable relationships with land and food production (*Rogue Farm Corps*). Some of the programs that RFC provides is the beginning farmer training program, apprenticeship programs, educational event series focused on regenerative production, and a new program called the Rogue Valley Regenerative Farming Fellowship (Gordon, 2023). The Regenerative Farming Fellowship is “aiming to serve people who are facing more significant barriers” such as People of Color, LGBTQIA+, veterans, and people leaving residential drug treatment programs (Gordon, 2023, 2:15).

Black Food Sovereignty Coalition



Figure 8: (Black Food Sovereignty Coalition)

The Black Food Sovereignty Coalition exists in Portland, Oregon and “serves as a collaboration hub for Black and Brown communities to confront the systemic barriers that make food, place and economic opportunities inaccessible” (*Black Food Sovereignty Coalition*). The Black Food Sovereignty Coalition (BFSC) does this through reclaiming food, health, wealth, and place on the land (Harris, 2023). The Black Futures Farm is a BFSC program which actively works to “restore the connection between Black people and the land” through growing produce and cultivating meaningful relationships and community (Harris, 2023, 0:33). The Black Futures Farm donates 90% of its produce, hosts educational skills building workshops and works closely with the younger generations (Harris, 2023).

Chapter 4: Interview Analysis and Discussion

This chapter analyzes the interviews conducted aimed at answering the research questions: How does the process of mutual aid shape the experience of autonomy in the Eugene food system? What forms of mutual aid currently exist in Eugene? To what extent is there autonomy in Eugene’s food system? In what ways do policy and other factors structure mutual aid and autonomy in Eugene’s food system? The individuals I interviewed from Eugene, Oregon were Jennifer Denson, the executive director at Burrito Brigade (encompassing Waste to Taste and the Little Free Pantries), Saoirse Scott, the outreach and events coordinator at Willamette Farm and Food Coalition and market director at Whiteaker Community Market, two volunteers with Food Not Bombs, and Taylor Jones, the volunteer Coordinator at 86 Hunger. I interviewed two people from the Portland, Oregon, Nia Harris who is the community program specialist at the Black Food Sovereignty Coalition’s Black Futures Farm and Mathew Gordon, the education director at Rogue Farm Corp.

The Food System

“I can mention the system’s broken” (Denson (pt. 1), 2023, 16:42)

Multiple times throughout her interview, Jennifer Denson mentioned that the food system in Eugene is broken. She reflected on there being “so much food being thrown away” and nonprofits and mutual aid groups not having the space or power to do much about it (Denson (pt. 1), 2023, 3:50). Identifying that our local food system is not functioning equitably or efficiently directly references the effects of the capitalist food regime and raises the question: Is the system broken, or was it simply not built to serve certain populations? In my opinion, the system is not broken. It is successfully achieving its purpose, profitability for few through the exploitation of many. Food sovereignty emerges to challenge this “corporate food regime” which “embodies the

tensions between a trajectory of “world agriculture” and “cultural survival” (McMichael, 2009, p. 151). The work that Burrito Brigade is doing actively works against the inequalities in our current food system by focusing on localizing, food waste reduction, and creating avenues for individual autonomy. Jennifer has even been given the nickname the “food liaison of Lane County” for her work connecting excess food destined for the landfills to people in the community (Denson (pt. 1), 2023, 1:25).

Saoirse also identified in her interview how the food system in Eugene is working in service of certain groups while leaving others behind. The middle and upper-class families and individuals participate in a more “self-sustaining food system” involving local farmers, farmers markets, and independently owned grocery stores (Scott, 2023, 8:31). This is a promising sign that a food system can exist in Eugene that is an alternative to the current industrial and global food regime, one that is self-sufficient and provides autonomy and food sovereignty for the community. However, the way it operates now perpetuates certain values of capitalism that leaves out large populations which include but are not limited to elderly, low-income, and unhoused people. In her article titled “Exploring the ‘Localisation’ Dimension of Food Sovereignty,” Robbins discusses how farmers markets recreate and perpetuate commodity relations (Robbins, 2015). In a way they are mimicking the same systems that in theory they are trying to work against. This is a shortcoming of centering localization as the pinnacle solution to food insecurity because a local food system still does not always support everyone. Again, the food system in Eugene was built to serve wealthier families and individuals without accommodating for anyone outside of this demographic. This furthers the stance that the system is not broken but rather non-inclusive and built to be structurally bar certain people from participation.

Due to this inequity, Eugene's food system requires nonprofit and mutual aid intervention to fill the gaps. This extensive network of organizations is greatly decentralized and largely independent from any city or state support. While decentralization and separation from government leads to a certain level of autonomy, too much decentralization void of communication or collaboration amongst groups leads to disconnection, redundancy, and a scarcity of resources. Taylor mentioned in his interview how too much decentralization, or too many groups providing similar resources, leads to confusion and difficulty accessing services (Jones, 2023). There is an oversaturation of groups in the space and therefore sometimes difficult to keep track of which groups are providing which resources on which day. Saoirse identifies that while decentralization is what Eugene excels at, there must be collaboration. There must also be an abundance of resources and support, otherwise decentralization leads to small groups lacking funding and with organizers and volunteers who are stretched thin.

Constraints on the Food System

"The bottom dollar is more important than humans eating" (Denson (pt. 1), 2023, 10:12)

There were several constraints identified that hinder access to food and autonomy. Transportation, advertising, and price were the three most common barriers to food access listed in the interviews. Funding was identified as a limiting factor impacting the ability for grassroots mutual aid and nonprofit organizations to be able to effectively address the barriers listed above. There are also systems at play such as colonialism and capitalism, which are the root causes of all the issues we are seeing today with our food systems. However, mutual aid does attempt to identify and remove the barriers they can while acknowledging that there must be larger systems change such as decolonization and a departure from capitalism.

Transportation was brought up in the interviews as a common barrier to accessing food. Food deserts is the term often used to describe “areas where healthy, affordable foods are difficult to obtain,” and is usually characterized by a lack of options as well as transportation (Sadler, 2016, p. 444). Chackal writes about how “availability is connected to access” and that the ability to make choices about one’s food is “ultimately unreachable for those without sufficient transportation” (Chackal, 2016, p. 127). In addition to transportation, individuals must also have access to information about which group is providing services and when. With so much organizing and outreach being done on social media, a lack of digital literacy or access to the internet can be significant barriers for people. Again, those being left out are largely “low-income folks, folks who don’t speak English, and elderly populations” (Scott, 2023, 10:12).

The complexity of locally grown produce and the presence of farmers markets in Eugene were discussed by many of the interviewees. The presence of farmers markets and small privately owned grocery stores in Eugene is complex when we consider the role they play in the picture of food sovereignty in the Willamette Valley. Matt, the Education Director at Rogue Farm Corps, talked about the high input cost of growing organic produce and how that drives high prices of good as farmers markets and independent grocery stores (Gordon, 2023). Farmers in the Willamette Valley and elsewhere are forced to price items higher, meaning that locally sourced food is more expensive than the globalized and industrialized foods sold in supermarkets. This is another reason why localizations are not the answer to solving the food insecurity crisis. It does not cater towards those who are suffering from food insecurity. However, Matt did identified programs such as SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) and Double Up Food Bucks as ways for farmers markets and Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) to make food more accessible, but there are still people who do not qualify

for these programs or are unaware of their existence (Gordon, 2023). To see a greater reduction in price overall and make the local food more accessible for producers and consumers, Saoirse recommended instituting a program that would subsidize farmers directly (Scott, 2023).

Matt focused on the structural barrier of “private land ownership” (Gordon, 2023, 18:30). Land greatly influences the decision-making power an individual or community has. Kepkiewicz discusses how “food justice scholars have done well to emphasize the importance of addressing capitalist systems of land ownership as a key part of transitioning to a more just and sustainable food system” and the ways in which “land policies in North America bar racialized groups from accessing agricultural land” (2016, p. 101). Nia spoke to this “lack of Black land ownership [and] of Black food stewardship” creating a severed relationship to land and food for Black, Indigenous and communities of color (Harris, 2023, 4:01). Leasing land is another barrier, mostly to small scale, community supported agriculture (CSA) and community gardens. The short-term leasing cycles “impede access to many start up grants for medium-large scale growing, and discourage the planting of perennial plants (e.g., fruit trees) because the sites are subject to a quick “ground clearing” (in the event of the site being redeveloped) which necessitates growing in movable containers, which can be expensive to build or to buy” (Tornaghi, 2017, p. 7). Policy issues were also brought up in multiple interviews. Most striking was an anecdote that Jennifer presented regarding how school board administrators do not step foot in a classroom though their job is to influence the experience of students. This is the same experience with our food system. Often, our policy makers are not experiencing insecurity or are exposed to people who are in their community. The problem is that policy is not accurately representing the effected communities.

Everyone I interviewed expressed how money, or lack thereof, is one of if not the biggest barriers to accessing food. It is also one of the major factors limiting the work that organizations in this space can do. Nia talked about how to dream big and do the “most meaningful work possible” you must have money (Harris, 2023, 8:23). Taylor describes how the nonprofit structure of relying on outside funding to carry out their mission causes problems, but you also must work within the capitalist system to get things done on a larger scale (Jones, 2023). Many, if not all, of the problems listed stem from systemic issue that are creating poor food systems and general food insecurity. Capitalism is a major systemic barrier to equitable food distribution. Inflation was identified as a direct result of capitalism that is impacting the food system. Prices of goods are going up, but grocery stores are not ordering less to compensate for customers being able to afford less (Denson (pt. 1), 2023). Incredible amounts of food are wasted in this process (Denson (pt. 1), 2023). Jennifer distilled this down to the place where we can acknowledge that we live in a society where “the bottom dollar is more important than humans eating” (Denson (pt. 1), 2023, 10:12). Taylor also spoke to this issue, framing capitalism and individualism as the root issues with the food system which “makes everybody so sick” (Jones, 2023, 29:40). In her article titled “Beyond Inclusion: Toward an Anti-Colonial Food Justice Praxis,” Kepkiewicz writes that “connecting inequalities within the food system (e.g., food insecurity) to larger structures of oppression—capitalism, patriarchy, colonialism, and white supremacy—and understanding how these structures operate (as well as overlap and intersect) to shape food injustice needs to be focused on our work” (2016, p. 101). Everyone I interviewed had a broader understanding of how these systems of oppression affect our food system and food insecurity. However, it is difficult for mutual aid to make systemic change.

Mutual aid

“Reclaiming our power and stepping into a placemaking, developing moment” (Harris, 2023, 27:19)

When asked, everyone gave a slightly different definition of mutual aid but with some consistent elements and similarities. Firstly, mutual aid was not described as being seen as separate from nonprofit organizing. Many of the people I interviewed work for nonprofit organizations and describe their work as mutual aid. One of the interviewees from Food Not Bombs described mutual aid as the obligation to take part in supporting other people and your community so that “when things go badly for you, people are there to help out” (Interviewee 1, 2022, 13:12). Taylor described mutual aid as “giving and receiving time and energy” and replacing transactional elements such as money with participation and reciprocal engagement (Jones, 2023, 17:51). Saoirse adds to these definitions by building in a relational element that focuses on the “way in which we are connected” and our responsibility to recognize the needs of our neighbors and do what is in our power to alleviate those needs (Scott, 2023, 17:06). Matt had a similar definition, focusing on mutual aid as the responsibility to uplift those you live in community with, building relationships in the process (Gordon, 2023). Nia described mutual aid as acting outside of governmental or greater organizational support and instead pooling resources and redistributing our excess to those who are in need (Harris, 2023). She also described mutual aid as a process of encouraging leaders and communities in “reclaiming [their] power and stepping into a placemaking, developing moment” to liberate everyone and work as a collective (Harris, 2023, 27:19).

These definitions align with the theory discussed in the literature review. Spade (2020) defined mutual aid to broadly look like collective care and the critique of current systems that are

working against the imagined alternate reality in which there is food justice and sovereignty for individuals and communities. Lofton (2022) defined mutual aid as informal or formal organizations rooted in grassroots community organizing, existing on multiple scales, and responding to a community need. This definition most closely aligns and incorporates many of the elements brought up by the community members. It includes Saoirse’s focus on relationality and attentiveness to community needs and Matt’s focus on the responsibility to act on that identified community need. Lastly, a common theme between the interviews was situating mutual aid as a critique to larger systems of oppression and working to lessen the effects they have on marginalized communities. Springer lists a critique of capitalism, imperialism, colonialism, patriarchy, and “authority claimed by the state” to be crucial to mutual aid (2014, p. 254). It is important to note the ways in which there are direct connections between those looking at mutual aid work through an academic lens and through a community lens. There is less disconnect than one might expect, but in the Willamette Valley there has been no collaboration identified between the community and academic spaces.

Autonomy

“I think that that's where autonomy comes in is being able to have a decision on what resources projects, programs and opportunities we offer to our community” (Harris, 2023, 16:37)

One of the most important opportunities for Eugene’s food system is autonomy. In its most basic form, most interviewees emphasized decision making power as being central to autonomy. Unlike many of the other questions and topics covered, there was not consensus on the degree to which autonomy exists in the present food system, aside from the sentiment that we could use more. In Portland, Nia discussed a gap in ownership over and leadership of local food systems, and a need to reclaim autonomy through “owning land, sharing land and curating some

type of economic development to keep not only food flowing, but money flowing” (Harris, 2023, 4:01). Even autonomy does not currently exist, the Black Food Sovereignty Coalition knows what needs to be done to regain power and autonomy, and that is increasing access to land. According to Nia, looks like a position in which “you don't necessarily have to succumb to what's just available but having the choice of doing something that's appropriate” and in alignment with you needs (Harris, 2023, 17:43).

In Eugene, Saoirse believes that there is autonomy to a limited extent, but not at the level we need it to be (Scott, 2023). However, there are programs that exist in Eugene that are making meaningful strides towards autonomy and building community power. Waste to Taste is a great example of programing that goes past providing food security and works towards creating autonomy. Shoppers can get food for free and have access to choosing foods that would otherwise be too expensive or outside their comfort zone. Because Waste to Taste is getting surplus and donated foods from multiple locations, they provide a great variety of options and shoppers have autonomy and agency over what they bring home with them. Another program that increases autonomy for the individual consumers is Double Up Food Bucks. The Fill Your Pantry event put on by Willamette Farm and Food Coalition increases autonomy for its shoppers by accepting Double Up Food Bucks. This makes local produce a lot more accessible while still allowing farmers to charge the higher prices they need to (Scott, 2023).

The Whiteaker Community Market is increasing autonomy by locating the market in an area comparable to a food desert. The Whiteaker neighborhood is a low-income area that is cut off from easily accessing food. The neighborhood is disconnected by freeway, train tracks and 7th Avenue, and there are less options for accessing food within the neighborhood (Scott, 2023). Locating the market in this Whiteaker brings resources to the community and allows them to

make decisions about the foods they purchase. Acorn Community Café is another great example of a space that provides autonomy. Unhoused community members who are often deterred from entering businesses can dine at the café along with the other patrons. Acorn Community Café does not require documents that might be required of them at other handout locations. They just ask that everyone treats others with integrity and trust (Jones, 2023). Similarly, Food Not Bombs creates autonomy in their spaces through choice and a lack of barriers. When they give out food, there are multiple options and people are allowed to choose what they want rather than having it decided for them. This both decreases food waste and increases autonomy. Those volunteering their time with Food Not Bombs do not require individuals to be drug free, another barrier they might run into at other hand out locations (Interviewee 1, 2022). Those volunteering with Food Not Bombs who have noticed that the way they set up and distribute their food offers a certain kind of community and trust building between those giving and those receive the services that does not occur in spaces that engage in greater power dynamics associated with charity (Interviewee 2, 2022).

Chackal argues “that autonomy is often constrained, obstructed, and inauthentic” (2016, p. 124). Many factors influence autonomy such as one’s “internal capacity to independently think and external social resources that generate thinking and opportunities for action,” and this can make it difficult for true autonomy to exist (Chackal, 2016, p. 126). This is most likely the reason no one I interviewed stated that they believe they are providing autonomy or that individuals are already autonomous. Mutual aid is increasing the individuals and communities’ capacity for autonomy, but creating the space does not outrightly produce an autonomous experience.

In addition to individual autonomy, autonomy is important for organizations at the community level. Nia discusses the importance of autonomy for organizations such as the Black Food Sovereignty Coalition (BFSC). In this context, preserving energy and being intentional with that energy is a form of autonomy. Being careful and specific with what the BFSC focuses on is a way for them to maintain autonomy (Harris, 2023). Ensuring they have full control over their spending is another way of maintaining autonomy. She mentions how ego and being driven by money infringes on autonomy (Harris, 2023). That could be a reason for why “there isn’t as much autonomy in Eugene’s food system as we need” (Scott, 2023, 29:30).

Constraints on Mutual Aid

“The burnout is just incredibly high” (Scott, 2023, 19:17)

There are challenges to the mutual aid and grassroots organizing that occur in Eugene. The lack of adequate funding leads to burnout for organizers, staff and volunteers’ which limits the extent to which organizations operate. A lack of funding causes the organizations to be extremely volunteer heavy, or completely in the case of Food Not Bombs. Burnout was mentioned by Taylor, Jennifer and Saoirse as being a large challenge to working within Eugene’s food system. Taylor mentioned how volunteer interest fluctuates, meaning that it might come down to two or three people carrying out the work of the entire organization for weeks or months. This is not sustainable and leads to overburdening and burnout (Jones, 2023). There is also burnout among individuals due to organizational overlap. People can be involved in volunteering for more than one organization on top of working for a nonprofit, being a farmer or running a business (Scott, 2023). When those people are stretched thin amongst many different facets of food systems work, they are unable to sustain themselves. This, leads to a drop in energy and creative ability, affecting the capacity of the entire organization (Scott, 2023). Scott

also identified that many people doing mutual aid work are already at low capacity in terms of mental and physical energy, often being food insecure themselves (Scott, 2023).

Another challenge comes with the sheer number of organizations involved. There are so many mutual aid groups and nonprofits working to fight food insecurity and yet it is still such a big problem in Eugene. Saoirse identified that there are so many groups and yet there is seemingly less getting done because those organizations are working in silos. They are not sharing resources, information, and experiential knowledge, creating a false ceiling for the progress they can make (Scott, 2023). Saoirse even goes as far as identifying that the way in which organizations are working separate from one another could be creating more barriers and structures that hinder food sovereignty (Scott, 2023).

It is important to acknowledge the unique problems that are associated with nonprofit organizing. Nonprofits tend to require more from those looking to receive resources, perpetuating transactional relationships. For example, nonprofits working to assist unhoused people in finding a home often require lengthy amounts of paperwork, permits, drug tests, enforced curfew, etc. (Interviewee 2, 2022). One of the individuals interviewed from Food Not Bombs said that “Eugene is some place that claims to have a lot of resources, but sometimes it feels like nothing’s actually getting done here besides a whole lot of paperwork” (Interviewee 1, 2022, 21:30). The idea of charity is often brought up when discussing nonprofit organizing and was brought up in my interview with Food Not Bombs. They discussed how the idea of charity is degrading and leads to a separation and power dynamic between those providing resources and those receiving them. This is counterproductive when trying to create real systems change, because “when food justice involves ‘improving’ and ‘providing charity’ it ‘rarely address[es] the source of inequality...bringing individual improvement rather than allowing for (or

supporting) collective action” (Kepkiewicz, 2016, p. 100). A more general limitation to mutual aid is that it is often very small scale and nothing more than a band-aid solution which will not produce systemic change. Lastly, something that I have identified in Eugene and that Nia identified in Portland is how there is lots of stigma around taking free food and resources, particularly for BIPOC people. Nia wants more BIPOC people to be engaging with the programming and understand why it is there for them (Harris, 2023).

Opportunities

“I think the mutual aid really stepped up” (Denson (pt. 1), 2023, 8:31)

Despite the challenges to mutual aid, there exist ways in which mutual aid and nonprofit organizing are successful in providing food security and autonomy for people in Eugene. Although Saoirse identified the number of groups organizing in Eugene and working in silos to be a challenge to organizing and food security, the groups I interviewed are not working in silos and are engaging in collaboration. The Black Food Sovereignty Coalition in Portland is working as a collaborative hub bridging different programming efforts (Harris, 2023). They work with local libraries, the Multnomah County Health Department, Portland Public Schools, local universities, and colleges (Harris, 2023), Zenger Farms, Growing Gardens, Seven Waters Canoe Family, NAYA (Native American Youth and Family Center), Headwaters Farm, Imagine Black, Afro Village, Blacks in Technology, Blueprint Foundation and Black & Beyond the Binary Collective (Harris, 2023). One of the Rogue Farm Corps biggest strengths is their ability to partner and work in collaboration with other groups (Gordon, 2023). The Rogue Farm Corps partners with nonprofit farms such as Family Nurturing Center Farm in Rogue Valley as hosts for their fellowships (Gordon, 2023). In the advocacy space, they partner with Pineros y Campesinos Unidos del Noroeste (PCUN) on farm worker over time and Friends of Family

Farmers on improving accessibility for beginning and regenerative farmers (Gordon, 2023).

Lastly, Rogue Farm Corps is part of the Oregon Community Food System Network and Oregon Agricultural Trust (Gordon, 2023).

In Eugene, every organization aside from Food Not Bombs works in collaboration with other organizations and businesses. Burrito Brigade and Waste to Taste partner with grocery stores such as Market of Choice, charity groups such as The Mission and farms such as Camas Swale and Sweet Leaf Organic Farm to acquire the food they use in the burritos and the free store (Denson (pt. 1, pt. 2), 2023). They donate food and support to groups such as HIV Alliance, White Bird, Homes for Goods, the MLK Commons, and The Now. 86 Hunger and the Acorn Community Café loosely partner with farmers at the Lane County Farmers Market to take the leftover produce they don't sell (Jones, 2023). The Whiteaker Community Market partners with many local farms and artisans as well as the Lane County Farmers Market in putting on their Holiday Market. Lastly, the Willamette Farm and Food Coalition partners with groups such as Farmers Market Fund to provide Double Up Food Bucks (Scott, 2023).

The simplest opportunity that mutual aid provides is creating access to free food. Black Futures Farm donates much of their food to BIPOC people in Portland, Acorn Community Café provides free Blue-Plate meals and Waste to Taste allows people to shop for free at their market. A common theme for successful food distribution is consistency. Policy is another area in which there are opportunities for Eugene's food system to improve. One policy that Matt from the Rogue Farm Corps advocated for is Oregon Agricultural Heritage Program which "can provide money for conservation easements, which basically can help to reduce the selling price" of agricultural land and secure the agricultural and conservation values into the future (Gordon, 2023, 19:26). Matt also highlighted a program through the Oregon Food Bank which gives grants

to farmers providing food to low-income communities so that they can do so without going under financially (Gordon, 2023).

Food Sovereignty

Through interviews and research, it has become evident the ways in which autonomy plays an important role in developing food sovereignty. Several of the interviewees were able to define food sovereignty, however, as Saoirse pointed out, many groups in Eugene use the term food security significantly more. For those who were able to define food sovereignty in the context of their work, some common themes included access, agency and situating it as a fundamental human right. These elements, particularly the agency and autonomy over decision making, is what elevates food sovereignty above food security. However, you cannot have food sovereignty without food security because access is half the battle (Scott, 2023). Nia and Saoirse both discussed the importance of ownership and agency over decision making around food. Nia frames this agency as “having a stake or some sort of ownership in the way that your food is grown, processed and distributed” (Harris, 2023, 21:17). Saoirse describes food sovereignty as “agency in making your own decisions about where you’re getting your food, when you’re getting your food, what you’re making with your food, who you’re sharing it with” (Scott, 2023, 35:14). Autonomy must exist at every step of the process. For people to have autonomy and decision-making power, they must have the resources needed to do so. This includes access to land, capital, and education (Gordon, 2023).

Another way in which food sovereignty was defined was as a human right. Someone I interviewed from Food Not Bombs said that “food is a human right” and “people should be able to eat” (Interviewee 2, 2022). Taylors defines food sovereignty in a similar way, stating that “everyone should be able to get the nourishment that every human being needs to survive”

(Jones, 2023, 25:40). Access to culturally appropriate foods is also very important. Nia phrases this as “having access to foods that are in alignment with your existence” and access to “culturally relevant foods” (Harris, 2023, 22:05). Like the definitions of mutual aid, there is significant overlap between what scholarship defines as food sovereignty work, and what organizations are doing in the Willamette Valley. Wald’s (2015) definition of food sovereignty incorporated the critique of corporate-led globalization and emphasized the important of local autonomy over food production. Both the Rogue Farm Corps, Willamette Farm and Food Coalition and the Black Futures Farm work to increase autonomy around local food production and the other groups work to increase autonomy around local food consumption. It was interesting to see how the term food sovereignty and food security were viewed by these community organizers. Saoirse had not heard people using the term food sovereignty often hear the term food security (Scott, 2023).

Food sovereignty does exist in Eugene, but not for the groups that mutual aid is seeking to support. Higher income people in Eugene have the purchasing power to make decisions around their food and have access to making choices between chain supermarkets, farmers market, and independent grocers. They have food sovereignty at the individual or family level. As for lower income individuals, they are still behind in terms of basic food access, and therefore the groups enhancing food access in Eugene are predominately focused on food security rather than food sovereignty (Scott, 2023). Saoirse illuminated some of the nuances of the term food sovereignty as it is used in Eugene. She sees food sovereignty as used in the context of the predominantly white upper middle class, higher income communities in Eugene as being performative and manipulative. It is performative because the only people able to claim real food sovereignty are those with higher incomes, and so claiming food sovereignty is not

representative of the entire Eugene or Portland community (Scott, 2023). The term food sovereignty is also manipulated and used to pressure and outcast those who are not able to make decisions around their food choices (Scott, 2023).

Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic

“I’ve loved watching the mutual aid grow in this town over the pandemic” (Denson (pt. 1), 2023, 8:03)

The last question that I had the interviewees reflect on was the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on food security and sovereignty in the Willamette Valley and the work that they do. The only group that did not exist prior to the pandemic is 86 Hunger and the affiliated Acorn Community Café (Jones, 2023). For them, the pandemic was a catalyzing event where the founders finally had the time and resources needed to begin this project. When given the open-ended question of how “How has COVID-19 impacted your organization's work,” the only group that recounted significant negative impacts was Food Not Bombs. They solely rely on volunteers and donations, so the pandemic heavily impacted the way their groups operate. Before the pandemic, volunteers would cook together at someone’s house, and they would make large dishes they would serve out of. Since the pandemic, volunteers have been cooking separately and have been making individually packaged meals (Interviewee 2, 2022). Those in the organization have become less connected and the size of the group has decreased significantly (Interviewee 2, 2022).

Although everyone struggled during the pandemic, all the other groups focused on the ways in which the pandemic positively impacted their work. Unemployment benefits gave people a greater purchasing power, but now without it, they have gone back to making a lot less money, negatively impacting their ability to access food (Scott, 2023). A positive impact for the Rogue

Farm Corps is that they have found that the pandemic made people “reconsider what they want to do for work in the world” and increased interest in their programs because people were prioritizing growing their own food and creating their own ways of making money. Matt also noticed that in Portland, there has been increased interest in food systems and food distribution work coming out of the pandemic (Gordon, 2023). The Black Futures Farm started right before the pandemic, and their first growing season was during the pandemic. This means that much of their work has been keenly focused on community needs exacerbated by the pandemic (Harris, 2023). She also added that the pandemic “actually encouraged us, propelled us more into it, motivated us into it, and allowed us to actually meet the needs that our community needed” (Harris, 2023, 24:47). Lastly, Jennifer mentioned how the pandemic helped to reduce extreme overlap for groups. It encouraged groups to share and collaborate more, changing the ways in which groups organized to ensure there were not “multiple people doing the same thing” (Denson (pt. 1), 2023 7:26). This has resulted in there being some more efficiency in the way groups function with one another.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Final Analysis

The initial question driving this research was: How does the process of mutual aid shape the experience of autonomy in the Eugene food system? The question was later broadened to look at the food system in the Willamette Valley. The pinnacle way in which I see mutual aid shaping experiences of autonomy for individuals is through their ability to increase food security while building space for choice. Being food insecure greatly decreases one's autonomy. We see individuals being forced to take what they can get from shelters, food banks and other hand out locations. While these programs are great at working towards food security, the base for food sovereignty, they rarely focus on autonomy. Acorn Community Café, Waste to Taste, and Food Not Bombs focus the most on immediate need and food security while also prioritize facilitating autonomy. Acorn Community Café provides the ability for low income and unhoused customers to choose off a menu what they would like to be served and enjoy a sit-down experience that would not be offered to them anywhere else. Waste to Taste allows shoppers to brows the free store and choose any items they want, often being able to take advantage of more expensive brands donated by higher price point supermarkets such as Market of Choice. Lastly, Food Not Bombs offers multiple meals per shift with diet sensitive options such as gluten free and vegan. Providing consistent food access through these programs has the ability of moving an individual or family out of a state of food insecurity. What moves them into the area of food sovereignty is the ability for them to make choices about what they are eating that reflect aspects of their lives, and feel they have agency and autonomy over what food they are acquiring and how they acquire it. Mutual aid is so crucial in shaping autonomy because autonomy is what has been stripped

from people by systems of oppression as well as the way in which governments on the national, state, and local levels work to address issues of food insecurity.

Actionable Implications

It was my intention throughout this entire process, to ensure that the information that I collect, and present is useful and applicable to various stakeholders. These groups include the organizations and individuals I interviewed (as well as the countless other organizations working in the food systems space in the Willamette valley), policy makers (who ultimately can influence our food systems on a more systemic level), and scholars (since this piece is conceived of and executed within academia).

There are a few ways in which I would hope my research and interpretations could be used by mutual aid organizations and those working to advance food sovereignty and food justice in the Willamette valley. The first is to show the organizations doing this work the ways in which they are and are not adding to autonomy for the populations they serve. Having worked in this space, I can see the value in learning from other groups to understand what is successful. From my conversations with these individuals, and my time involved with mutual aid and grassroots organizing, I believe that most people in this space are advocating for food sovereignty even if they don't have the term to describe it. Many groups have moved past a mission focused on security and are advocating for something more alongside a critique of capitalism and colonialism. I would hope this paper act to reaffirm organizations and individuals that what they are imagining in the community space is simultaneously being imagined in the academic space, and that they have significant value to add in the movement towards food sovereignty and alternative food systems. They have vital lived experience and I worked to showcase that here.

For policy makers, they are the people who should be focusing on instigating systemic change and eliminating bureaucratic and systemic barriers where they have the power to do so. Although mutual aid and grassroots organizations want systemic change, very few groups are at a level of capacity in which they would be able to enact any type of systemic change. Policy makers on the other hand could remove certain barriers so that communities are able to regain autonomy. One way in which policy change could better reflect community needs is with land ownership and renting. In reviewing scholarship and the interviews, it's apparent that access to land is closely tied to autonomy and decision-making power for communities. Nia discussed how it is important to food sovereignty to reconnect Black people to the land. She also stresses how land ownership contributes to food sovereignty on more ways than one. Not only are people able to learn how to grow their own food and supplement their diet with the produce they grow, but they are able to foster economic development within the community through land ownership. Increasing the wealth and purchasing power of an individual increases their opportunity for food security and sovereignty. A call to action for local governments would be to simply support the groups already in place that are successful. A direct ask from many of the organizations was for more funding for their programs. City and state governments should make accessing money more accessible for the groups who are doing the work that the city should really be responsible for. As Saoirse said, if the city will allow only decentralized organizations do the work that they should be doing, then "they should at least support it" through funding (Scott, 2023, 41:09).

Lastly, Matt called for the support of specific programs in his interview. One is the Oregon Agricultural Heritage program which "can provide money for conservation easements, which basically can help to reduce the selling price" of agricultural land and secure the agricultural and conservation values into the future (Gordon, 2023, 19:26). He also advocated for

supporting programs through the Oregon Food Bank which give grants to farmers providing food to low-income communities so that they can do so without jeopardizing their business (Gordon, 2023). The biggest contribution I want to be making in an academic space is to conversations around food systems and food sovereignty is showing the value in centering community voices and validating the work that mutual aid and grassroots organizations are doing to contribute to autonomy and visioning for alternative food systems for their communities. Too often is there a separation between scholarly and community knowledge. This distinction often undervalues community knowledge or holds scholarship above it. This paper aims to bridge the two spheres and make space for community leaders to be included in the discourse. I also want to add to the discussion with those who are framing food insecurity as a problem based in larger systems of capitalism and colonialism rather than as a problem with an individual or group. Kepkiewicz (2015) writes, “in order to walk the talk, food activists need to engage more meaningfully with the work of other justice activists, supporting them in their efforts without attempting to control the dialogue or to enroll other justice activists in their own food-related initiatives” (p. 102). The same could be said for the need to be more intersectional in our approaches to alternative food movements such as food sovereignty and food systems change. It is important for scholarship around food sovereignty and food systems to be critical of compounding systems of oppression and be actively intersectional and decolonial in their approaches to alternative food systems. We should spend less time “intervening in the lives of marginalized communities” and “shift to challenging the activities and structures of oppression” (Kepkiewicz, 2016, p. 103). We must all work together to in envisioning a just future and food system that supports us all, and to do so we have a lot to learn from mutual aid organizations who are collectively working towards that future.

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