Food for All:
A Study of the Inclusivity of the Athens, Ohio Local Food Movement

A Thesis Presented to
The Honors Tutorial College
Ohio University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for Graduation
with the degree of
Bachelor of Arts in Anthropology

by
Sasha Francisca Estrella-Jones

April 2016
Acknowledgements

I would first like to thank God for providing me with strength throughout this journey. The Lord blessed me with countless individuals who have made this thesis possible. I am forever grateful for all that Dr. Smoki Musaraj, my Director of Studies and Thesis Advisor has done for me. Her patience is truly remarkable and she has been in my corner every step of the way. From the bottom of my heart, thank you Smoki. I could not have done it without you. Dr. Theresa Moran introduced me to the local food scene in Athens and has been incredibly influential in my education. I want to especially thank Dr. Moran for her kindness, encouraging words, and office this past semester. Dr. Rebecca Conrad Davenport has been an irreplaceable source of emotional support and encouragement. Cary Frith has acted as a second mother to me and I thank her for her relentless support and guidance, on both academic and personal matters, throughout my time at Ohio University. I would like to thank the Honors Tutorial College for their financial and academic support for this project and more. I want to thank the professors at Ohio University for giving me an education in the truest sense of the word. A special thanks to my friends who have provided emotional support and always uplift me, especially Olayemi Olurin, Kaitlin Wilson, Bobby Walker, and Angel Thornton. And of course, Dad and Mom. You have been my biggest cheerleaders and always reminded me that I can do anything I put my mind to. I love you more than you could ever know.
Abstract

Recent scholarly literature that discusses local food movements and alternative food networks (AFNs) has criticized the organic, fair trade, and Slow Food movements for being activities centered within upper class and wealthy communities. This study engages with this literature by conducting ethnographic research on the vibrant alternative food movement of Athens, Ohio. Using ethnographic techniques, such as participant observation, surveys, and semi-structured interviews with local food activists, local farmers, and local business owners, this study maps out networks and relations of individuals involved in alternate food networks within Athens County. By exploring local definitions of and barriers to accessing good food, this thesis gauges how the Athens’ food network compares to national and local movements in terms of inclusivity of socioeconomic groups. My goal is to observe how AFNs in Athens address questions of poverty and food justice, and how they engage with disadvantaged local communities in one of the country’s poorest regions. An ethnographic approach will provide unique insight into how these networks are inclusive or exclusive of individuals from different socioeconomic backgrounds.
**Table of Contents**

**Acknowledgements**

**Abstract**

**Table of Contents**

**Chapter One: Introduction**

- Aim and Scope
- Project Background
- Project Methodology
- Chapter Overviews

**Chapter Two: Literature Review**

- Anthropology of Food
- Food Studies

**Chapter Three: What is “good food”?**

- Accessing Good Food
- Not Only About Health
- Food on a Continuum
- Conclusion

**Chapter Four: Poverty and Food Insecurity**

- Food Insecurity in Southeast Ohio
- A Food Bank at the Edges of Organic Athens
- Structures of Inequality: Poverty and Infrastructure
- Conclusion

**Chapter Five: Charting The Future of Alternative Food Networks**

- Policy versus Programming
- Conclusion

**References**
Chapter 1

Introduction

It is one of those summer days that you know it is going to be extra sticky and unpleasant. As you come back from your morning run you cannot decipher if it was your sweat that made the concrete glisten or if somehow the cement actually had pores of its own and was secreting a sweat-like substance. Either way, it was hot. As you start to think of today’s to-do list, you begin to perspire again, a mix between your anxiety as you see the growing length of the list and in part because your AC’s economy mode is not quite cutting it. After a shower and a browse through the *New York Times*, you head out the house to grab breakfast at a neighborhood café, where you pick up a cup of organic coffee, made from fair-trade coffee beans, and a whole wheat vegetarian quiche totaling just shy of ten dollars. Glancing at your watch and seeing it is close to ten o’clock, you make your way over to the farmers market in an attempt to beat both the heat and the crowd.

You fail at both, but do manage to do your shopping at a new personal best: forty-two minutes flat. Into your Toyota Prius, you load three reusable grocery bags filled with a variety of goods: fresh organic green apples, a few garlic gloves, four juicy sweet onions, homemade blueberry jam that you ran out of yesterday morning, an herbal formula for headaches, a bag of non-GMO black bean tortilla chips, three pounds of grass-fed lamb chops, two tomatoes and a cucumber for an evening kale salad, and a bag of heirloom potatoes. Oh yes, and beautiful yellow mum to plant in your garden to add a pop of color as your sugar snaps begin to bloom.
By the time you get home, grab the bags from the car, load up the refrigerator, and run a few more errands, you realize it is almost two o’clock and remember you are supposed to be meeting a friend uptown for lunch. When you two meet up, you have trouble deciding where to go. The choice is between a worker-owned restaurant, which serves Mexican-American cuisine that has been around since the 70’s or a Mediterranean restaurant, which is next to a coffee shop with the best iced mochas in town. Your friend reminds you that there is also the brewery with an assortment of local beers that attracts men with great beards, graduate students, hippies and professors, along with conversations about the country’s political climate or the Caribbean restaurant with bottomless mimosas and delicious plantains that sits in a beautiful all-brick building, quietly tucked off in an alley. Though not an easy decision, you two opt out and enjoy gyros from a family-owned Indian food cart.

Over lunch as you discuss the heat, you cannot help but think one of the indoor options would have been a more logical choice. The annual fundraising dinner is fast approaching and you two have both managed to purchase tickets to the quickly sold out community event. As first time attendees, you two are excited to eat family style, outdoors on a table that runs a block long. The menu created by local chefs features seasonal, sustainable dishes made with produce from farmers in the county. This year, the funds raised will be going to the regional food bank. Additionally, there will be an auction at the dinner to raise even more money to help food insecure families. As you head home, the conversation you had over lunch replays in your head. You are wondering where all these food insecure individuals are; how can a group exist, but be invisible?
Now, let’s picture the poorest county in Ohio; to be exact, one of the poorest in the nation, yet surprisingly a county that is home to a local food movement over 40 years old. What would you expect that county to look like? To smell like? To feel like? To taste like? The county described is Athens, Ohio and the hypothetical account above is non-fictional. Though a county with a poverty rate over 30 percent, it is also a county that serves an example of the resilience of Southeastern Appalachian people and their culture. The realms of the alternative food movement, which include organic and local food, and issues of food insecurity do not exist separately from one another in Athens County. They both directly and indirectly impact and depend on each other.

In the United States, the local food movement has increasingly become both an alternative to agribusinesses, which mass produces food using industrial methods, and a subject of scholarly research over the past 20 years. Farmers markets and community gardens can be found in both urban and rural settings and even some public schools serve produce grown by local farmers. While anthropologists have been studying food and culture since the late 1800’s (see Mallery 1888), food studies emerged as a new interdisciplinary field in the late 1990’s (see Mintz and Du Bois 2002). Recent literature on local food movements and alternative food networks (AFNs) has criticized organic, fair trade and slow food movements for being activities centered within upper class, wealthy, educated and predominantly white communities (Levkoe 2006; McCutcheon 2011; Nonini 2013; Broad 2016). This study engages with this literature by doing an ethnography of an active alternative food movement located in Athens, Ohio, in order to provide unique insight into how these networks are inclusive or exclusive of individuals from different socioeconomic backgrounds.
Aim and Scope

In this thesis, I aim to observe how AFNs in Athens address questions of poverty and food justice, and how they engage with disadvantaged local communities in one of the country’s poorest regions. An ethnographic approach provides unique insight into how these networks are inclusive and exclusive of individuals from different socioeconomic backgrounds. The data collected to create this social map seeks to address the following questions:

- How do local non-profits and businesses in Athens collaborate to create an alternative food system?
- What socioeconomic groups are active and mobilized in the Athens local food movement?
- How do individuals in the community approach food and food politics in connection to sociocultural identity?
- In what ways does this local food movement intersect with and diverge from similar national food justice movements in terms of inclusivity amongst different socioeconomic groups?

This thesis is based on ethnographic techniques, such as participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and field notes with local food activists, local farmers, and local business owners, in order to create a social map of networks and relations of individuals involved in AFNs within Athens County. By mapping out the network of businesses, NGOs and other community members engaged in the local food movement, I gauge how the Athens’ food network compares to national and transnational movements in terms of inclusivity across social, educational, and economical statuses. Based on four
months of ethnographic research, my study proposes that the local food movement in Athens cuts across socioeconomic demographics by (a) mobilizing social networks amongst low-income communities, (b) approaching food and health as key factors in individual and social well-being, and (c) placing economic inequality at its center. Athens however, is not immune to issues that correlate to class and economic divisions, which are also larger obstacles present in the transnational movement. Actors within the Athens AFN have recognized these divisions and are actively striving to amalgamate individuals within Athens City and those in the greater Athens County.

Understanding how the local food movement in Athens places people, rather than food, at its center, we can better understand how alternative food systems can be more inclusive and promote health equality. Thus, this research can present solutions for ways that other local food movements can be a revamped to be socially inclusive and economically feasible for all income levels.

**Project Background**

With the global onset of the alternative food movement in the 1980s, the fields of anthropology and food studies both began to collaboratively study this movement. What is known today as the Slow Food Movement, originally started off as a demonstration protesting the opening of a McDonald’s near the monumental stairway known as *Scalinata di Trinità dei Monti* (Spanish Steps) in Rome. In 1986, Carlo Petrini, alongside other activists, united to form the grassroots organization, Arcigola, following the demonstration. Individuals associated with Arcigola continued to protest the opening of this McDonalds, fighting to preserve Italian gastronomic culture and history.
Three years after the initial protest, the Slow Food Movement was officially founded in Paris, marked by the signing of the Slow Food Manifesto. The Slow Food Manifesto, written by Petrini and Folco Portinari, a close friend of Petrini’s and an Italian journalist, was written in December of 1989. Delegates from 15 countries attended the meeting, all of whom signed and endorsed the Slow Food Manifesto. The manifesto accused industrialization of giving birth to the ‘fast life’, which they predicted to lead to the global extinction of local and regional food cultures and traditions, while simultaneously destroying the environment. Formally declared in the manifesto, a snail is the official symbol of the Slow Food Movement, purposely chosen for its slow but sure nature.

While the heart of the movement was centered in Europe, the movement aimed to be an international organization. The first chapter of the Slow Food Movement appeared in the United States in 2000, creating the organization Slow Food USA that serves as the liaison between branches of the Slow Food Movement in the United States and the greater, global movement. In 2008, Slow Food USA—by then, connected to some of the biggest names in food studies like Michael Pollan and Eric Schlooser, as well as celebrity chefs like Alice Waters—hosted the inaugural Slow Food Nation event in San Francisco. With California being one of the hotspots for slow food, organic food and alternative food movements, the choice of location was quite fitting. The event featured a speech by Slow Food Movement founder, Petrini, and had over 50,000 attendees. Today, Slow Food USA has over 200 chapter across the United States, each chapter focusing on the specific needs of their communities, trying to make sustainable and substantial impact (Slow Food USA 2017). We mostly know about the slow food movements in big urban
hubs like New York City, Sacramento, Washington, D.C., Boston and Minneapolis—areas with a large concentration of wealth. Being that the socioeconomic demographics of Southeast Ohio differ vastly from these urban hotspots, it seems unlikely to have a bustlingly slow food movement in this region.

Athens, though thousands of miles away from the official birthplace of the Slow Food Movement, has been doing what this movement set out to do, consciously and unconsciously, for well over forty years. One could even debate that a kind of slow food movement in Athens started almost two decades before the one in Italy. In this thesis, I refer to this movement as the alternative food movement to distinguish it from the global Slow Food movement. While there is not a date that can mark that exact commencement of the alternative food movement in Athens County, for the purpose of this research, I will use the opening of the Athens Farmers Market in the summer of 1972 as an approximation for when the slow food movement started here. At its opening, there were only 3 vendors in the Farmers Market; by the end of summer there were 12; today, over forty years later, the market has over 60 vendors and has been recognized nationally.

It is not just the Farmers Market that has put Athens on the map. The local food scene has been able to attract tourists from cities within Ohio, as well as from out-of-state who have heard and read about the unique movement here. The 30 Mile Meal project has collaborated with over 140 local food partners, as well as the Athens County Visitors Bureau and the Appalachian Center for Economic Networks (ACEnet), to promote eating locally from vendors who use local products (30 Mile Meal 2017). From a worker-owned cooperative that, since the 1980s, makes Mexican-American cuisine (Casa Nueva), to a locally sourced bakery and café (The Village Bakery) that sprung up a little over ten
years ago, to schools within the city of Athens that serve non-GMO, organic, tortilla chips from an Ohio grown seed and mill company (Shagbark Seed & Mill), local food has been able to permeate across Athens geographically and culturally. These businesses are not only a source of organic, locally grown food; they are also a source of employment in an impoverished region of the country. They serve as a source of social and cultural events that draw people from a wide area that encompasses and goes well beyond the city limits of the college town of Athens, Ohio. In a similar vein to rituals of gift exchange among communities that span the globe (Mauss 2016[1925]), this thesis approaches this alternative food network as a “total social fact”; that is as a social network and series of events that perform economic, social, cultural, spiritual and political functions.

Project Methodology

This study is based on four months of ethnographic research and involved three research activities in different sites around Athens, OH. I conducted participant observations while interning with the Athens Regional Food Policy Council (ARFPC); semi-structured interviews with various actors within the Athens alternative food movement including local food activists, business owners, staff from non-profit organizations and local government agencies, as well as regional farmers; and participant observation at numerous local social events to determine the role of food and community in Athens.

The first part of my research took place from May to August of 2016, during which time I served as a summer research intern for the ARFPC. During my tenure at the
council, I conducted interviews with council and community members, participant observation of the daily activities and meetings of the organization, and produced a report for ARFPC to qualitatively and quantitatively assess its effectiveness.

The mission of the council is to create and improve upon policies that support the development of a food system in Athens that produces healthy, affordable, and equitable food, using environmentally sustainable methods. Established in March 2009 by the Appalachian Staple Food Collaborative (ASFC), the council was created to study and come up with plausible solutions to issues of food insecurity, food production, economic development, and land use policies in Athens County. The first members of the council included residents of Athens, owners of local businesses, organizational leaders, government affiliated officials, and Ohio University professors and researchers. The council is composed of three committees: Healthy Food Access, Food and Energy, and Food and the Economy, each with unique goals in line with the organization’s mission.

ARFPC works closely with local non-profits dedicated to food security, as well as local business owners, which enabled me to meet and work with key individuals who are part of the local food movement here. During my internship, I participated in council meetings, committee meetings, as well as attended events organized, sponsored and/or supported by the council, in order to identify and solicit important community members in the Athens local food movement.

During my research internship with ARFPC, I interviewed 17 informants, with interviews lasting from 50 to 75 minutes. At the conclusion of my internship I developed a best practice guide for the ARFPC. The guide aimed to support the council in improving their techniques in providing the local community with opportunities to
produce and consume food that is healthy, environmentally sustainable, and equitable. I presented my observations and suggestion at the August 2016 ARFPC general body meeting. I also facilitated a group discussion following the presentation. My work at ARFPC thus took on the role of engaged and collaborative anthropology (Low et al. 2010), whereby my ethnographic research fed back into the community I had observed and studied.

The second part of my research consisted of semi-structured interviews with Athens community members, including food activists, local business owners, regional farmers, individuals working for government agencies, and staff members and volunteers of local non-profits dedicated to food security and supporting the local economy.

All individuals who participated in the interviews are different actors in the same movement that is concerned with procuring fresh and local food and produce, supporting local economies, and creating alternative food sources in the Athens area. During these semi-structured interviews, I was attuned to the following questions:

- How do these individuals define ‘community’, who is included in this definition and who is not?
- What constitutes good food for the people involved in the local food movement?
- How do these actors describe the community and relationships that have emerged within the wider community of activists, business persons, and consumers of the local food promoted by this movement?
- How does poverty feature in discussions around food? How do these actors engage with socioeconomic inclusion and exclusion? How do they address economic inequality in this region?
The third and final part of my research was participating in events within the Athens’ community where a) the procurement and consumption of local food is the reason for the gathering or b) is the topic being discussed at the event. Through my internship with the ARFPC, I was offered and accepted a job at the Athens Farmers Market where I worked for six months for a local, organic seed and mill company. This position allowed me to see the backend of a true staple within the Athens local food movement and to observe relationships between local farmers, business owners, and consumers. Prior to working at the market, I went to the farmers market every two weeks during a four-month period. Other events that I attended included the 5th Annual Real Food, Real Local Conference, taking place in July 2016 at the Eclipse Company Store. One of the themes of the conference was determining the economic impact of the local food movement. This provided me with insight into how actors within the movement address questions of economic inequality and food justice. Events I attended were a mixture of structured, formal events and more casual events such as the 18th Annual Pawpaw Festival at Lake Snowden. Together, these events strengthen my ties to the Athens community by immersing myself within the local food movement, while still remaining at a critical distance to collect data through participant observation.

Following the conclusion on my data collection, I transcribed and coded my interviews and field notes, with all data being stored in my password-protected personal laptop with electronic backup files. This data was analyzed by a) identifying trends in the economic, social, and educational demographics for participants, b) generating a social map that links certain key individuals and entities with one another while exploring those links, and c) identifying the language participants use to describe and discuss community,
nutrition, health, poverty, economic justice, social mobility, and organic, local and fair trade food. Through this analytical framework, I evaluate how, if at all, the local food movement in Athens cuts across various socioeconomic groups.

Chapter Overviews

This thesis consists of five chapters. The introductory chapter is followed by Chapter 2, which presents literature from the fields of anthropology of food and food studies that engage with food and identity, food systems, and food inequality. Chapter 3 addresses how different members of the Athens local food movement define good food. The chapter argues that this is neither a simple nor a universal definition; rather, different actors define good food based on the criteria of nutrition and health but also on that of access and affordability. Many talked about food and status. I reflect on the importance of socioeconomic and cultural status attached to “good food” and highlight some critical perspectives on the inclusions and exclusions generated by the Athens local food movement.

Chapter 4 examines the interconnection between poverty and food injustice in this region, focusing on obstacles and the impact of community organizations to make substantial, sustainable changes to food insecurity. In particular, the chapter discusses local residents concerns with job security and infrastructure as barriers and bridges to accessing good food. Chapter 5 discusses how the Athens local food movement addresses some of the challenges addressed in Chapter 4. This final chapter focuses on the
community and relations that have emerged around food in Athens County. The chapter highlights Athens’ unique socioeconomic demographics as a good site for thinking more critically about questions of access, equality/inequality, culture and status relating to locally grown, sustainable, organic food. More broadly, the chapter highlights some of the ways in which local food movements can directly engage with poverty and inequality in local communities.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

This project engages with scholarly works in anthropology of food and food studies, to explore how these fields engage with food and culture, food systems, and food justice. These literatures have addressed questions of food and social class, food and identity, and food access. My research builds on these questions by focusing on the alternative food movement in Athens. It further contributes to this literature by bringing attention to tensions between a local food movement and structured inequalities, in a region persistently suffering from poverty and lack of adequate public infrastructure.

Anthropology of Food

Anthropologists have been interested in food and culture as they relate to the individual since the late eighteen-hundreds. In the first ever volume of the *American Anthropologist* from 1888, a paper by Garrick Mallery entitled “Manners and Meals” was released that focused on cross-cultural perspectives of eating to seek the origins of particular food habits. While today criticized for its imperialistic, paternalistic, and racist undertones, Mallery’s work was the first published piece of anthropological writing studying food as it relates to culture.\(^1\)

\(^1\) One should also contextualize the writings of anthropologists from the late 1800s, such as Mallery, as they were writing throughout a period of British imperialism in Africa and Asia and a time when relations were getting increasingly tense between Americans and Native Americans in the United States. They were anthropologists writing during a time of American hostility to immigrants and the “other”, which impacted their scholarly works.
As approaches within anthropology developed and transitioned towards more quantitatively driven methodology, the way data was collected within cultural anthropology was modified. Audrey Richards’ *Land, Labour and Diet in Northern Rhodesia* (1939) was one of the first works in anthropology of food that approached the study of food from anthropological, medical, and nutritional approaches. Richards’ study was one of the pioneering works that approached anthropology of food from an interdisciplinary approach, while also studying food consumption as an important set of cultural practices.

Richards focused on understanding nutrition from the emic perspective, while collecting data that was more than a collection of individual experiences but a quantifiable overview of the nutritional and kindship practices of the Bemba. Richards explored native ideas about food, the division of labor, and organization of kindship as it related to food. The research data for this study included collected work diaries, kinship charts, and extensive ethnographic fieldwork. Altogether, this research material allowed Richards to assess Bemba nutritional needs and social relationships. While her work represented a quantitative shift in data collection, Richards’ approach to food practices still reinforced ideas about the “primitive” other as savage, in ways similar to but not as explicit as Mallery’s “Manners and Meals.”

In the sixties and seventies, cultural anthropology focused on the symbolic meaning of cultural practices and cultural relativism. A landmark contribution to symbolic analysis is Mary Douglas’s *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (1966). Douglas took a structuralist approach to notions of pollution and taboos while providing a scholarly critique on the way anthropologists had
previously viewed the “other” throughout the first hundred years of the discipline. In “Magic and Miracle”, the fourth chapter in *Purity and Danger*, Douglas asked “How naïve can we get about the beliefs of others? Old anthropological sources are full of the notion that primitive people expect rites to produce an immediate intervention in their affairs, and they poke kindly fun at those who supplement their rituals of healing with European medicine, as if this testified to lack of faith” (Douglas 1966, 59). For Douglas, local food practices provided a key site for understanding culturally specific systems of meaning and belief. For instance, Douglas used the example of what a Dinka herdsman does when he is late for dinner and wishes that cooking is postponed, to prove that, indeed, “primitive” people are aware of their actions and are not blindly wishing upon the supernatural. The herdsman “knots a bundle of grass at the wayside, a symbol of delay. Thus he expresses outwardly his wish that cooking may be delayed for his return. The rite holds no magic promise that he will now be on time for supper. He does not dawdle home thinking that the action will itself be effective. He redoubles his haste. His action has not wasted time, for it has sharpened the focus of his attention to wish to be in time” (Douglas 1966, 64). Douglas’ work serves as a milestone in the anthropology of food, as she was one of the first anthropologists within this subfield to practice cultural relativism when attempting to understand and draw conclusions on other cultures food practices, refusing to view them through a “primitive” or “savage” lens.

A foundational and groundbreaking text in the anthropology of food was Sidney Mintz’s *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (1986). Mintz, arguably one of the most prominent and important anthropologists of food, traced the transnational geography of the commodity chain of one of our staples: sugar. Mintz
traced how sugar went from a luxury spice to a cheap and massively consumed commodity in eighteenth century England. He did so by studying the cultural history of sugar, following its commodity chain from the plantations of the British colonies in the West Indies to the diets of the emerging working class in the industrial metropole. What made Mintz work unique was that by studying a sole commodity, sugar, he was able “to illuminate broad societal processes such as political-economic value-creation” (Mintz and DuBois 2002, 100). Detailed outlining of the history of sugar, allowed Mintz to analyze the interconnectedness of Western culture and the legacy of British imperialism and colonialism, which both extracted and exploited resources and human beings in the West Indies. It was not a study of the “other” compared to the dominant, Western “self”, rather instead the recognition that there is a “we” amongst the two seemingly divided sides. Mintz understood that the exchange of culture went two ways throughout British colonialism and imperialism, using sugar as a means of studying that relationship socially and politically.

Throughout the nineties, anthropologists of food began focusing on food insecurity, especially food insecurity occurring in African and South American countries. Some anthropologists, notably Johan Pottier (1999), wrote about food insecurity focusing on famine. Pottier analyzed famine from socioeconomic, class, and gender-based lens, differing from other disciplines that studied famine from an environmental perspective. Other anthropologists, for example Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1992), while not known as an anthropologist of food, used food (or, rather, lack thereof) to explain cultural practices, beliefs, and customs among the urban poor in Brazil. As a medical anthropologist, Scheper-Hughes focused on how the absence of food and what she coined as the
“madness of hunger” impacts mother-love and the responses to child death under conditions of perpetual violence and poverty. Scheper-Hughes’ work and similar works around the same time period are representative of anthropology of food starting to make its way into other subfields within the discipline, as it started to gain respect as a legitimate form of anthropology.

By the start of the new millennium, this interdisciplinary approach became the standard for anthropologists of food and anthropologists writing about food, with a large number of scholarly works observing, analyzing, and discussing how eating and food relate to social, ethnic and racial identities, socioeconomic status, and political conflict. Heather Paxson and Anne Meneley are two anthropologists whose works have become increasingly prominent in contemporary writing about food. Paxson (2008) provides a framework for understanding the growing market for artisan raw-milk cheeses in the United States and simultaneously contextualizes debates about food safety, particularly for dairy products, and localism. While Meneley has written numerous ethnographic articles about extra virgin olive oil, her Blood, Sweat and Tears in a Bottle of Palestinian Extra-Virgin Olive Oil (2011) examines the life of fair trade extra-virgin olive oil from Palestinian producers to consumers worldwide who buy this oil as a political statement.

These works underscore how food production and representation are deeply embedded in cultural, social, and political meanings and networks, and how decisions around food and food policy involve many layers of society and government. In my study of the alternative food network of Athens, OH, I take a similar look into the cultural, socioeconomic, and political aspects of food. Further, I approach the economics and sociality of local food in conjunction with fast food and food banks as a way to further
investigate how AFNs operate vis-à-vis cheaper and less healthy food options in the region.

**Food Studies: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Studying Food**

While anthropologists of food laid the foundation for scholarly work that spoke to the relationship between food and culture, food studies developed into its own unique interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary field throughout the nineties. Notably, the publication of Warren Belasco’s *Appetite for Change: How the Counterculture Took on the Food Industry* (1989) highlighted the complexity and importance of this emerging field. Though scholars from disciplines outside of anthropology had written about food before this work, *Appetite for Change* provided a unique interdisciplinary approach to understanding the “countercuisine” culture of the 1960s. Earning Belasco the reputation as one of the founding scholars of this new field of food studies, *Appetite for Change* analyzed how counterculture responded to the industrialized capitalism of food production and, in turn, how industrialized capitalism responded to the counterculture food movement. Ironically, the scrutiny that the mainstream food industry was receiving from the countercuisine movement during the 1960s led to the mainstream marketing and increased availability of organic foods in the food industry as it became a profitable market.

Nearly ten years after the release of *Appetite for Change*, the first ever food studies reader was published: Counihan and Esterik’s *Food and Culture: A Reader* (1997). The authors provided readers with limited time, but a vast curiosity about food
studies, brief excerpts from and summaries of the most important works within anthropology of food and food studies.

A piece that examined the evolution of the counterculture food movement since the publication of Belasco’s *Appetite for Change* was Guthman’s *Fast Food/Organic Food: Reflexive Tastes and the Making of ‘Yuppie Chow’* (2003). Through the example of the organic salad mix—called ‘yuppie chow’ by Belasco—Guthman examined the impact of Belasco’s discussion of the “countercuisine” on activists in the counterculture food movement of the 1960s. According to Guthman, organic salad mix influenced the industrial organic food movement, as it became one of the first organic products to be mass-produced. Using this example, she argued that one cannot discuss the alternative food movement, organic, local, fair-trade, and slow food without simultaneously discussing industrialized food. Though the entities are discussed as polar opposites, Guthman critiques that ideology by analyzing the overlapping histories of AFNs and industrialized food as they relate to organic salad mix.

Early works in food studies were primarily concerned with studying how alternative food networks developed as a response to the capitalist, industrialized approach to growing and producing food. As the field developed, scholars began to study the inclusivity of alternative food networks across racial, educational, class, and economic groups. Researchers began to critique farmers markets, community gardens, food co-ops, and national and transnational local food movements for being exclusive and centered within white, upper-middle class, wealthy, and educated communities.

Guthman is also a leading scholar in dialogues concerning the critiques of AFNs. Through a case study analyzing students in the Community Studies at the University of
California Santa Cruz who were participating in a six-month field study with a community organization, Guthman concluded that activism surrounding alternative food networks are reflective of “whitened cultural histories and reflect white desires more than those of the communities they putatively share” (Guthman 2008, 431). Guthman argues that many community food initiatives are driven by whites. Meanwhile, efforts to make neighborhoods of color, black and Hispanic neighborhoods, more food secure have proven to be unsuccessful over time. These movements are unsuccessful, according to Guthman, because they do not address issues of white privilege, treating whiteness as an invisibility instead of a reality; individuals active in AFNs need to be consciously aware it is a movement of predominantly white spaces and can appear, though not intentionally, unaccepting of people of color. Guthman argues that in order to have more effective and inclusive alternative food networks, as well as enable more whites to be anti-racist allies, attention needs to be centered on the cultural politics of this movement.

Discussions of identity and socioeconomic and racial inclusion and exclusion are a central theme in this study. The context of Southeast Ohio also presents a different scenario than the one discussed in Guthman’s and others’ works. For one thing, the region I am studying is predominantly white. Further, here socioeconomic class does not necessarily overlap with racial groups as most of the poor who have difficulty accessing “good food” are white. As such, this site presents a different set of questions to AFNs: What are the identity and social markers of inclusion and exclusion in the Athens’ food landscape? How do class and race/ethnicity intersect with respect to access to food?

Another criticism of alternative food networks, is that they are driven by the market demands of upper-middle class consumers and are not social movements at all.
Alternative Food Networks (Goodman and Goodman 2009) frames this critique in terms of Karl Marx’s theory of commodity fetishism. When applying commodity fetishism to AFNs, Goodman and Goodman conclude that the organic movement is primarily concerned with the transparency of food safety and health, but not in the equality of access to nutritious food or safety conditions for workers who provide these organic goods. According to Goodman and Goodman, the focus of this movement is not social justice as some scholars and activists portray it to be, but rather a response to market demand from consumers of the corporatized organic food industry.

The local food movement has grown into a unique niche market, one that anthropologist Donald Nonini deems possible because of upper-middle class consumers with “high levels of disposable income and, unlike a vast majority of the rest of the population, able to afford the latest certified organic produce, and sustainably harvested seafood, many of them representing cosmopolitan globalizing elites committed to hybridity and consumer orientated multiculturalism” (Nonini 2013, 270). Nonini also uses the “rise of national corporations such as Whole Foods to service upper-middle class consumers, while Wal-Mart has become the largest supplier of USDA certified “organic” produce for lower-income” to illustrate the socioeconomic and class divisions of alternative food networks (Nonini 2013, 269). Even when lower-income individuals purchase organic goods, they are not buying from the same businesses that upper-middle class consumers buy their food from. Thus, creating two spheres in the alternative food network movement based on class and socioeconomic statuses, where there are individuals in the same movement but with different demographics that do not interact with each other. Similar dynamics permeate the Athens alternative food movement; I
discuss these dynamics more closely in Chapter 4. At the same time, comparatively speaking, the Athens food movement reaches across different socioeconomic groups to a much greater degree than in other urban wealthy areas of the U.S. While there are clear class distinctions between those who can or cannot afford to buy their produce at the farmers market, the consumers of local organic food are by no means exclusively the upper-middle class- else the movement could not survive given the small size of wealthy elites in the region. In the following, I therefore explore how the Athens AFNs have made an effort to address questions of food insecurity and access through various initiatives.

Though the alternative food movement has been criticized for its exclusivity, scholars have also viewed the alternative food movement as a way to tighten community relations, foster local economic growth, and provide opportunities for increased political participation. Priscilla McCutcheon (2011) analyzes two case studies where food is used as a tool to uplift the black community and encourage African Americans to become a more self-reliant people. The Nation of Islam and Pan Orthodox Christian Church, while different in their missions and religious beliefs, both treat food as an object that is more than a source of nutrition. The two entities view food as an intersection between race, religion, and social justice. McCutcheon analyzes how black identity has been shaped by food and how, understanding that connection, enables The Nation of Islam and the Pan African Orthodox Church to design food programs that address race and utilize food justice as a tool to fight racism.

Charles Levkoe’s *Learning Democracy Through Food Justice Movements* (2005) serves as a scholarly example where an alternative food movement is studied through the
lens of participation democracy. Levkoe uses a case study of The Stop Community Centre in Toronto, Canada to describe how involvement in grassroots, food-based organizations can increase levels of community political engagement. The Stop Community Centre is an organization that engages with low-income individuals who depend on food distribution and welfare assistance to combat unemployment problems in Toronto’s Davenport West region (Counihan and Esterik 2012). According to Levkoe, individuals who had a long-term relationship with this organization, through volunteer participation, became part of the food justice movement and also develop a stronger bond with other individuals in the local community. The knowledge and skills gained by these individuals through their experiences with the organization, are necessary to actively practice democracy and influence policy makers. Thus, Levkoe argues that alternative food movements, when engaged with community-based organized, can better prepare individuals to be participatory in democracy and food justice movements, due to a greater sense of belonging to one’s community.

The impact of AFNs on community mobilization is yet another central concern of this study. As I describe, especially in the final chapter, for most of the actors involved in the alternative food network in Athens, OH, “good food” is also about community. By conducting an ethnography of the broader network of food businesses and activists in the area, I show how most of my interlocutors are connected to each other through work, consumption, conferences, social, and cultural events. These food aficionados are indeed some of the most active catalysts of discussions around poverty, access, jobs, and infrastructure taking place at various levels of community and governance in the region. They show how food is not just an aftereffect of bad policies and failing infrastructure
but, also a means through which to address issues of poverty, inequality, and access to resources.
Chapter 3

What is “good food”? 

She was younger than I had imagined. When an official job title includes “coordinator”, I envision someone with a fair amount of experience in the field which I do not equate to someone who is fresh out of college. When I had met Isabella though, she appeared only a few years old than me, maybe twenty-five at most. I could not help but to think either she aged quite well or perhaps she indeed was a young person who represented another group within the Athens Food Movement. A sub-community of young, college educated, twenty-something year olds, working for non-profits or local government agencies, who had already started to dedicate their careers to coming up with solutions on how to alleviate food insecurity and poverty in Southeast Appalachia. The same individuals who simultaneously do not get paid enough for the work they do, with a portion of them receiving the same government assistance as the families they are helping. An ironic position to be in, however this is the reality for many of these millennials who walk a fine line between helping food insecure individuals and being food insecure individuals.

Isabella and I met up where she worked; she extended an invitation to a meeting open to the community ran through the Athens Health Department. The meeting was for a coalition designed for individuals who desire to create a culture within the Athens community that make healthy choices easy and attainable. As I entered the room, I sat in the first open seat I saw and began to make small talk with one person across from me and another next to me. I was surprised to learn I was the only community member at the
meeting who was not affiliated with or a representative from a non-profit or government organization. The coalition expressed that they were attempting to do more community outreach to inform community members about the coalition, however, they had not been successful in seeing new faces at the meetings thus far. Before the meeting began, one of the coalition members announced that she had prepared a variety of homemade snacks for the meeting and we were encouraged to eat and pass the food around the table. With the exception of the tortilla chips, which were made by a local business in town, this one individual had cooked everything herself only using seasonal fruits and vegetables. Though I did not come to the meeting with the intentions of being fed, I never turn down homemade food, especially when it’s free. Everyone tried a little bit of this and that, from the banana blueberry pudding to the blueberry strawberry salsa. My favorite was the focaccia with peppers and humus.

After the meeting, which I left feeling fuller then when I first arrived, Isabella and I sat down in what appeared to be spare office space. The room was filled with boxes and extra chairs. It was somewhat secluded from the rest of her coworkers, but with walls thin enough that I found myself consciously lowering the tone of my voice. We sat across from each other and began to talk. As our conversation progressed, Isabella’s eyes transitioned becoming soundless expressions to the ear but vociferous reflections of the emotions she carried inside her. Sometimes the blue hue of her eyes intensified, consumed by happiness as she recalled programs and initiatives that had gone successfully. At other moments, they deepened with uneasiness and frustration as she revealed the doubts and questions she has about the extent of the impact she can actually makes in her current role. There were moments when her eyes wondered off to a place
beyond the confines of the room that I was not privy to, as she pondered on what our community needs most and how, if at all, we can combat poverty. From time to time, as she was constructing her response, she would touch her hair—a loose thick brown braid that laid on her right shoulder atop her hunter green jacket, which she wore over a black and white striped shirt. Other times she would go off on tangents and then apologize when she caught herself in one, a slight blush attempting to overshadow the freckles that covered her face.

As the hour went by, there was something in particular that I kept coming back to that Isabella had said; when I asked her what constitutes “good food,” she responded that “food can fall on a continuum, where, at one end of the spectrum, is the most processed unhealthy thing you can possibly eat and, at the other end of the spectrum, there are whole foods, without any processing and everything kind of falls between that.”¹² Her answer spoke to the obscure nature of categories used to define or label particular types of food as good or bad, healthy or unhealthy. The same categories and labels that are often used by those within and outside of alternative food movements, as well the language used on packaging labels, to differentiate between foods that are prized and encouraged to be eaten versus foods that are not.

For both foods considered good and foods considered bad, there are paradoxes that exist. Good food, synonymous with healthy food, is both inaccessible and too expensive for local consumers in a number of communities (Pottier 1999; Winne 2008). In reality, how many individuals can be participatory in the eating of good food? Bad food is often more accessible yet society shames individuals for eating the less expensive and convenient options (Julier 2008; Albritton 2010). Take for example, fast food: it is

¹² Interview with author on July 14th, 2016.
common knowledge that this type of food is heavily processed, high in sodium, saturated fats, and GMOs. Fast food restaurants are more often found in less affluent neighbors and frequently advertise their dollar menus and meals under $5. Consumers on a tight budget and unable to cook at home—because they work multiple jobs to support their family or lack knowledge about cooking or do not have access to supermarket in their neighborhood but have easy access to cheap fast food restaurants—are more likely to choose the least expensive and most convenient option, the fast food restaurant.

Understanding the contradictions that exist within and between different definitions of good food and bad food, how do different groups of people value food? What criteria of good food do these individuals refer to in their assessments? What other concerns are expressed in these assessments of food? In this chapter, I will explore how different people involved in the food movement in Athens, OH talk about "good" food. I will suggest that different people define good food in different ways. Food is inherently unstable, and talk about food is also talk about health, identity, poverty, and social injustice.

**Assessing Good Food**

Everyone eats. A rather simple sentence, however what we eat, do not eat, and are encouraged or forbidden to eat can serve as cultural markers that have been studied for over one hundred years by cultural anthropologists. By studying patterns of consumption and procurement, anthropologists of food have discovered that deciding what to eat, how much to eat, and how to eat are both conscious and unconscious decisions impacted by cultural and societal norms, as well as people’s sense of identity and agency (Mallery
1888; Richards 1939; Mintz 1986; Tsing 2015). The act of eating is complex and intricate. By studying food and its consumption, we continue to gain a better understanding of how choices regarding food are also choices regarding individual and group identity, health, and socioeconomic status. Eating is as much about the nutritional content as it is about symbolic meaning.

In conjunction with anthropologists, scholars within the multidisciplinary field of food studies have critically analyzed industrial, alternative, slow, fair trade, and organic food movements as social movements that question both the healthy values of food as well as the social and political relations around food production and consumption (Nestle 2003; Winne 2008; McMillan 2012; Smith 2017). These studies have brought attention to questions of identity and class (Williams-Forson 2008), food insecurity (Poppendieck 2010), and social relationships to food (Hewitt 2009). In particular, many have discussed the implications of industrialized food and fast food on health and the environment (Simon 2006; Pollan 2007; Paarlberg 2010; Lappe 2010). The Slow Food Movement has emerged from these concerns and has generated an international conversation about what constitutes good food.

Viewed as an alternative to mass-produced, industrialized fast food, one of the critical components of slow food is its nutritional density. Followers of the Slow Food Movement hold the belief that eating can be enjoyable, while simultaneously nourishing to the body and low-impact on our environment. Food should also be sustainable, representing the variety and diversity that exist in our environments and on our palettes, while supporting local enterprises. Everything that one consumes, according to the Slow Food Movement, should follow the motto: good, clean, and fair. Since its birth, this
movement has spread to countries across the globe. Various groups associated with the Slow Food Movement work towards the same goal of promoting and procuring healthy, sustainable, local food that is good for those who consume it, those who produce it, and for the land on which it is grown. But how do people on the ground understand “good, clean, and fair” as it relates to their own life circumstances?

**Not Only About Health**

Through the course of my field work, I observed a trend in the way that many members of the Athens’ alternative food movement thought of good food. To be considered good food, food had to be “whole”, “unprocessed”, “local”, “organic”, “non-GMO”, “low in fat”, “sustainably raised”, “plant based” and “minimal in salt and oil.” Aligned with the transnational slow movement’s focus on health, many individuals within the Athens’ movement also share a definition of good food that is health focused.

Health, however, was not always the number one factor when defining good food. Some individuals purposefully avoided using the word “healthy” when attempting to encourage others to eat good food, because of the perceived elitism of the word. While these individuals did not value health less than others, there was a heighten awareness about the societal stereotypes of healthy individuals and good food. Society

---

3 The Slow Food movement is unique and has earned social prestige for many reasons, with membership to this organization required to be purchased, tracked and annually renewed. There is a level of exclusivity and elitism to this movement, which it has received criticism for. In recent years the movement has tried to address this criticism by also focusing on social justice issues, for example the treatment and living conditions of agricultural workers. The slow food movement has taken a stance against those injustices calling for better and just treatment of those workers, especially those with immigrant or undocumented statuses. Read Counihan’s and Esterik’s *Food and Culture: A Reader* (2013) for more information.
has depicted healthy people as people that are skinny, people that exercise a lot, people who do not eat fast food and good food as an expensive, luxury item. For many poor, rural, Southeast Appalachian people, the stereotypes of healthy individuals are images of people that are not people like them. For food insecure individuals living in a food desert, having access to any food, let alone good food, is one of the greatest obstacles. Understanding what good food is, if there is a true definition, is different than having access to that food, knowledge on how to prepare that food, and the desire to want to eat that food.

The socioeconomic inequalities and cultural difference that exist between those living in Athens City and those living in the greater Athens County creates unique challenges in promoting and ensuring that all individuals have access to good food. For the individuals whose definition of good food was not as concerned with health as it was with agency and personal growth, the continuum comes back into play. Isabella’s definition of food as a continuum redirects the analogy between food and health towards a wide range of other socioeconomic dynamics and concerns. Her statement opened up a different set of questions that expanded my understanding of good food: How is health defined and by whom? Does all good food have to be healthy? How is health being measured? What other factors come into play when discussing and creating definitions of good food and bad food? Are there challenges that prevent certain groups of individuals from having access to good food? How can this impact the definition and the spectrum that spans good to bad?

Once again, I sought to address these questions by being more attuned to the emic perspective on different assessments of food by actors in the Athens alternative food
movement. Which brings me back to Isabella’s definition of food on a continuum. What did Isabella mean by good food being a continuum rather than a solid category? This definition was clear to me at first but, as I continued to talk to other people involved in the alternative food movement, I began to understand it better as many articulated a similar understanding of good food.

**Food on a Continuum**

For instance, I encountered a similar definition of food as a continuum when talking to another young activist in the food movement, Sorrel. I met Sorrel during my internship with the Athens Regional Food Policy Council. She worked for a local government agency and had recently started to attend council meetings. I met her at the first ARFPC meeting that I attended. Sorrel was neither overly quiet or boisterous, inquiring from time to time about the council’s history with community outreach and putting forth suggestions when she had them. At her 9-5 job, she was tasked with creating healthy communities that related to food and water access, physical activity promotion, as well as policy work that makes the creation of healthy community environments possible. At the end of the meeting Sorrel came up to me and recommended some people I should talk to, after hearing during the meeting what my research was about, and while I jotted down the names of the individuals who she recommended, I really wanted to sit down with her.

I followed up via email and to my good fortune, after I explained to Sorrel that I was interested in the work she did and her perspective on the movement, she agreed to meet up with me. A few weeks after the council meeting I met her in her office and our
conversation began by discussing a grant awarded to Athens County that she oversaw. The grant was designed to prevent chronic lifestyle related diseases. It was only awarded to six Ohio counties, Athens County serving as the sole rural county in the state of Ohio to receive the grant. Southeastern Ohio as a whole, has an obesity rate of 35.6%, a statistics released by the Ohio Department of Health (Ohio Department of Health 2015). Athens County also has the state’s highest poverty rate out of all counties within the state of Ohio at 33%, subsequently presenting a distinct set of challenges that contribute to the difficulty in creating healthy community environments (Ohio Development Services Agency 2016).

As our conversation continued, I asked her “What is the difference between healthy and unhealthy food?” At that time, I was new to the research project and took for granted that “healthy” and “good” might be used interchangeably to describe the same kind of food. Her response was not as clear-cut as I expected and opened up a more complex scheme of assessing food:

That’s a very blurry line. I think just like health, our choices are on a continuum. It’s not healthy or unhealthy- think of it as a parallel line and it has arrows on both ends that signify it going in a direction all the way to one side and continuing on. It’s on a continuum. Say you’re eating chips, maybe baked chips is an improvement for you, because it’s a little healthier, but for someone like me who doesn’t eat chips, it would still be considered unhealthy. But, it’s all relative.⁴

If good food is not necessarily healthy food and healthy food falls on a continuum without definitive boundaries, what do the labels healthy and unhealthy, good food and bad food mean? Are they arbitrary or are they consistent and substantive? The beginning of that answer lies in the last word of Sorrel’s reply: relative. As I talked to Sorrel more over the course of my research, I began to understand that the continuum did not simply

⁴ Interview with author July 20th, 2016.
referred to health but also to a wide range of socioeconomic and cultural indicators. Healthy food, good food, unhealthy food, bad food is all relative to who you ask and their socioeconomic status, racial/ethnic background, and cultural practices and beliefs.

Sorrel works with individuals in communities that are primarily low-income, rural and white, that not only suffer from food insecurity, but also a lack of employment and access to transportation. Communities with a rich history of Appalachian resistance and a sub-culture with stories that are sometimes not a part of the dominant narrative of Athens.

For these individuals, food is very much a part of their identity. The same foods that some within this alternative food movement may consider unhealthy or bad represent years of tradition for these disenfranchised people. Thus, labeling and categorizing food using unstable definitions creates division based on inclusivity and exclusivity within the community. This division only produces additional challenges when working towards the goal of creating healthy community environments.

It was summed up best as Sorrel discussed the unique obstacles that face rural populations, especially impoverished communities in Southeast Ohio: “If you don’t have a lot of money and everything is dictated to you or certain dignities are taken away from you, food is going to be the last thing that you’re going to want to change because that is one of the last things you’re in control of.” In other words, here food is not only a source of health but also, primarily, a source of identity, a source of stability in times of change and adversity. Further, food choices, according to Sorrel, are so much more than decisions about nutrition or taste. They are also about identity and community. But most importantly, these are choices dictated by financial insecurity and inequality that

5 Interview with author July 20th, 2016.
permeate local communities. Members of the alternative food movement in Athens are acutely aware of these challenges and work day in and day out to address socioeconomic issues in their efforts at promoting good food.

**Conclusion**

The financial circumstances of many individuals in Southeast Ohio govern so many of their actions and strip them of the liberties of making certain choices, that the limited decisions they do have control of—for example, what will be eaten for dinner—are things that will not easily be let go of. Many of the activists in the alternative food movement note that, for rural residents of the region, decisions about what food to buy or eat are limited by their socio-economic status and their geographic location within the county. Hence, perception of good food may differ across different groups of individuals with some focusing primarily on health and nutritional value and others emphasizing socioeconomic status and access to good food.

The financial inequality that exists in this region prevents a one-size-fits-all solution for reaching the goal of making healthy choices desirable, affordable, and accessible. The challenges that face the local actors in the Athens’ alternative food movement speak to broader concerns within the global Slow Food Movement: How can we create healthy communities while also staying attuned to and respecting the ties that particular communities have between food and identity? What would a healthy community environment look like in less affluent places such as Athens, OH? What resources need to be present to construct these communities so that they are inclusive to individuals that represent wide range of socio-economic, racial and ethnic
backgrounds? The next chapter turns to these questions by exploring in more detail local concerns with poverty and food justice.
Chapter 4

Poverty and Food Insecurity

It was a quarter to eleven o’clock and the market had not been particular busy that day. I had been working for a local seed and mill company at the farmers market for just over a month now. The company sells a variety of local, Ohio grown, organic, non-GMO corn, flour, grits, cereals, beans, tortillas, and tortilla chips. Getting its start a little under a decade ago, the company has managed to maintain its appeal to local consumers while simultaneously branching outside of the Southeastern Ohio region, selling its products throughout the state in restaurants and supermarkets. When my internship ended with the Athens Regional Food Policy Council, I was asked to join the team as a farmers market marketeer by one of the company’s owners. Natasha, a well-known woman in the Athens local food scene, is memorable in every sense of the word. She is a combination of a free-spirited, modern-day hippie and a savvy, innovative business owner. Her lively personality makes her hard to go unnoticed and her passion for human rights and environmental issues has gained her the reputation of an outspoken community activist. It was hard to turn her offer down, however I was apprehensive.

What did I, a native New Yorker with zero experience on anything farm related, know about the dynamics of a farmers market? Not much, I can assure you that, but Natasha somehow convinced me the job would be a good fit. Hesitantly, I agreed to work the booth at the farmers market for an hour and a half on a Saturday morning in August. Within the first hour working there, I discovered she was right. The farmers market was filled with countless familiar faces, from professors I formerly had to students I knew and
people who I’ve seen around town. I enjoyed talking to people about the local business I worked for and their vision, because I honestly believed we were selling quality products. I was able to witness first-hand how invested the entire team was in producing and selling minimally processed, nutritious and delicious goods that are grown sustainably. These products also provide livable wages to employees while dignifying the labor of farmers and give back directly to the community.

From there on out, I worked two to three Saturdays a month at the farmers market and by this point, I had my routine nailed down; wake up at 6:50am to shower, eat and get dressed, always consciously trying to find the balance between fitting in at the farmers market, while still doing my makeup, hair and shaving my underarms. Then, I had to make it to the mill by 7:45am, load up my car and head to market so I could set up the tent and products by 8:30am. Though vendors cannot officially sell to consumers until 9 o’clock, which is marked by the striking of a bell by one of the market’s executive staff members, vendors are allowed to buy and sell to other vendors before the official start of the market. During the twenty-five-minute window between setting up and the commencement of selling, I would typically do my weekly shopping, picking up vegetables, herbs, meat, and occasionally a homemade sweet treat.

I was running behind time on this particular day, not waking up until 7:30am and having to rush to the mill. It was a hot day for September and I could feel the rays of the sun beaming on my back as I set up the tent. By now, I was starting to learn to predict which customers would make their weekly appearance and with which vendors I could exchange the leftover sample tortilla chips for a product they sold when market closed at noon. I assumed the weather might have kept some of the regulars away, because market
was slow for a Saturday. With time on my hands and a lack of customers, I attempted to make a seat out of cardboard boxes and people-watch.

No more than five feet from my tent, a group of five kids had stopped and gathered, talking to one another while their eyes scanned the booths. The youngest appeared to be seven or eight with the oldest being thirteen at most. All were dressed simply: shorts, t-shirt and well-worn sneakers, and three children out of the group were portly. I presumed they had come with an adult of some sort, however it did not appear that was who they were looking for. Just as I started to wonder if and how these children managed to get to the farmers market on their own, two women started walking their way talking loudly. As they reached the children, I could hear their conversation clearly.

One woman, who from the looks of it was the mother of two or three of the kids, informed the group that it was time to go. The oldest child spoke first and said that he and the other children wanted to buy something from the market. The women responded by telling him that “We can’t afford no food from here. It’s too expensive, lets go.” The four younger children looked towards the older child to speak up. It was then that the boy informed the two women that all five of the kids have been saving their money and pooling it, now totaling twenty dollars, and wanted to use their shared monies to buy food. The two women exchanged looks, but not words. Instead, without asking questions to the children, the women motioned for them to go off and the children, with smiles on their faces, all headed out in the same direction to conquer the farmers market.

While I did not see those children for the rest of the day or at another subsequent Saturday market, the encounter stood with me. I had questions for those children and the two women who accompanied them: What inspired the kids to pool their money
together? What were the socioeconomic demographics of these seven individuals and did that interfere with preventing them from buying food at the market? How did the food at the farmers market compare to food that these kids ate on a regular basis?

Though my questions went unanswered, I had never before witness children pulling their money together for food, particularly food from a farmers market. There were some families with children who I saw regularly at the farmers market, some parents even allowing their young children to pick out exactly what it was they wanted to purchase. These children lived a different reality and being able to buy food from the farmers market appeared to be a treat for them. The kids’ longing for farmer’s market food was a longing for distinction, for status (Bourdieu 1984). Yet, the hesitation of their mothers also spoke to a pattern of exclusion that the older generation had embodied. How are these distinctions between those can and those who cannot partake in the local food moment structured? What are the socioeconomic and cultural forces that generate and perpetuate such distinction and exclusions? This chapter will discuss food insecurity in Athens County as it relates to poverty, attuned to how rural poverty in this region is confronted with unique obstacles—from transportation and unemployment to socioeconomic status—that impede many socioeconomic groups from being active in the local food movement.

**Food Insecurity in Southeast Ohio**

Though issues of food insecurity are commonly thought of disproportionality impacting developing countries, the United States of America has a fair share of food insecure households. Being food insecure means that a family or individual does not have
access to a consistent amount of affordable, nourishing food on a daily basis. Athens has a food insecurity rate of 19.8% which is equaled to approximately 12,810 individuals (Feeding America 2014). Those numbers mean that almost one out every five people are food insecure within the county. This rate is 3% higher than the food insecurity rate for the state of Ohio and nearly 5% higher than the food insecurity rate for the entire country (Feeding America 2014).

The juxtaposition between a booming local food movement and widespread food insecurity occurring simultaneously can appear nonexistent from within Athens City limits. As one travels outside of city limits however, the food insecurity epidemic becomes more apparent. Some townships lack grocery stores and are classified as food deserts. To ignore these facts during this research would have been to produce inaccurate results, as well as turn a blind eye to more than ten-thousand struggling families whose stories deserve to be heard and written about. In order to better contextualize the food insecurity rates in the county, I spoke to several individuals who work for Hocking Athens Perry Community Action, better known as HAPCAP. HAPCAP serves as a resource providing food to food pantries in Athens County and low-cost transportation options to those who qualify for their services.

While attending my first Athens Regional Food Policy Council meeting I met two individuals who were serving as unofficial representatives of HAPCAP on the council. Both were a part of the Healthy Food Access Committee, which was appropriate given their desire to provide individuals facing food insecurity increased access to fresh, local produce. The morning I was scheduled to tour their facilities and had an interview with one of their senior staff members, was the same morning I first put their address into my
GPS and realized the main office was located in Logan County—thirty minutes away. I sped there, repeatedly thinking please don’t get a ticket, please don’t get a ticket. I soon started to notice a change in scenery; leaving the limits of Athens City and driving further into Appalachian poverty, I got off the wrong exit and found myself in a town where the only food source around was a local Marathon gas station and one diner that I could not tell if was closed for the day or permanently out of business.

After getting back on the expressway, I sped some more, luckily avoiding a ticket, and arriving to HAPCAP just in time to tour the 10,000 ft² facility. Our first stop was the kitchen. At the time, it was being used by teenagers who were a part of a summer youth program that provided jobs for low-income teens. After briefly stepping into multiple freezers, that stored frozen meats and freeze-dried fruits and vegetables, Bianca led us through a series of doors that ended with their massive shelf-stored product section. It looked no different from a warehouse one might expect to see at Wal-Mart: ceilings 30 feet tall, with widely spaced, never ending rows and forklifts scattered throughout that were used get items at the top of the columns. I was amazed. I never imaged a food bank could be so grand. Later, I learned that more space was needed to store increasing amounts of donated food and the staff at the facility was in the process of building an extension thanks to generous donation from corporate companies and local organizations.

A Food Bank at the Edges of Organic Athens

Bianca and I went back to her office after the tour, where she explained to me that she is the development and community relations coordinator responsible for outreach to their 60 member agencies, which included 56 food pantries, 2 soup kitchen and 2
residential facilities. There are 13 of their 60 member agencies in Athens alone. Most are food pantries although there is a congregate dining site for seniors and a resident facility for previously incarcerated men who are trying to adjust to life after prison. Observing how much shelf food was in the warehouse compared to the limited quantities of frozen food and fresh produce, I was curious to know how much of that food goes to families in Athens County and how much of that is fresh food? Bianca had my answer. In the month of June alone, the facility fed 495 seniors through the commodity program and 346 people at a meal site or shelter, while food pantries fed an additional 2,189 households and 7,416 individuals. The food distributed totaled 97,101 pounds, of which fresh produce made 16,336 pounds. While almost a fifth of that food is fresh food, that means approximately eighty percent of the food HAPCAP supplies is shelf-stable, canned and boxed products or frozen.

Comparing her figures to those presented earlier from reports on food insecurity in Athens County, it meant that more than half of the food insecure individuals in Athens could potentially be receiving a portion of their food from HAPCAP. Fifty percent, one out of every two food insecure individuals depend on agencies that directly depend on HAPCAP to provide them with food. I asked Bianca if her role ever put her in contact with food insecure families, particularly children. She told me a story about a summer feeding site, where HAPCAP provides free food for children under the age of eighteen regardless of a family’s income, when she brought along fresh peaches. At first, the children had no interest in eating these peaches, because according to them they did not look like real peaches. Bianca explained to the children, who had only eaten canned peaches, that these peaches were fresh and looked the same once you cut into them. After

---

6 These figures are from an interview with the author on July 28th, 2016.
some convincing, the children ate and enjoyed the peaches, while learning peaches do not fall off trees prepackaged in a can.

The majority of shelf-stable food is more processed and less nutritious than their fresh counterparts, a fact that is common knowledge for most individuals working in the food bank industry. Bianca was aware of that truth and the story she shared with me, spoke to the reality that for many children who grow up in food insecure households they may never access to fresh, healthy, nourishing, and nutritious fruits and vegetables. I followed up by asking her where is the future of food banking going in regards to shelf-stable food. To which her response was:

Even though there is a push for fresh and frozen foods, shelf-stable food is never going to go away because the families we serve may not have the capacity to have fresh or frozen food. They might not have a freezer to put their food in or access to a stove to cook. With that being said, the past few years looking at food insecurity and how powerful food is in terms of your health, is where a lot of the push came from. It is not just people facing food insecurity, but across the country we have a health crisis going on and a lot of that has to do with your food choices.²

Her reply represents a great obstacle in the food banking industry. The main goal of that industry is to feed individuals and families who are food insecure. That in mind, how important or unimportant is the nutritional value of that food? Is feeding someone more important than what they are being fed?

The divide in Athens County between those who have only ever eaten canned peaches and those who eat local, organic peaches is a divide created by the socioeconomic inequalities between the poor of Southeast, Ohio and the individuals who can afford the luxuries of getting most, if not all, of their produce from the farmers market. It is not a divide that is restricted solely to this county, rather Athens serves as

² Interview with author July 28th, 2016.
one example of socioeconomic divisions of food we can observe around the nation. In a rural setting, the reasons for food insecurity, as they relate to socioeconomic disparities, have different explanations. I was determined to find those answers, seeking to understand how divisions that create exclusions are generated and how they persist?

**Structures of Inequality: Poverty and Infrastructure**

On my second visit to HAPCAP, almost two weeks later, I started to get answers to my questions. I was driving up to meet with their agency relations specialist, JT, who I met at a ARFPC Healthy Food Access Committee meeting, this time getting off the correct exit. We spoke for nearly an hour talking about everything from his youth growing up in Glouster, a village in Trimble- a township of Athens, to his ideas on how the local food movement could work collaboratively with the movement to end hunger in our region.

Just as Bianca has expressed, he too explained that shelf-stable foods will always have a place, but that they were trying to get more fresh and frozen produce, which was a challenge due to the nature of food banking.⁸ He went on to explain that food banks are funded by tax dollars and made an analogy that compared food banks to schools; schools in wealthy areas, on average, have better supplies, facilities, amenities and teachers than schools located in low-income communities. As explained by JT, food banks were no different and Southeast, Ohio with its high poverty rates did not have many communities of extreme wealth to generate the tax dollars needed to successfully fund the food banks and their member agencies. My informants had been able to paint a precise picture on how food insecurity looked on the ground for many Appalachian families, but how did

---

⁸ Interview with author August 9th, 2016.
those families get there? I presumed they did not wake up one morning with all of their food suddenly missing, although there is some validity in that statement in regards to the unstable nature of food security, but something had to directly cause food insecurity. Food insecurity started somewhere and it was not at the table. How are so many families food insecure to begin with?

The area is unfortunately economically depressed. There are not a lot of really good jobs with livable wages in the region. When you are a single parent, which there are many of, money is even tighter. It is almost like a trap. You have single parent homes where a parent is left trying to provide for a child or children on their own, so they have to work. They get stuck with a low paying, dead end jobs making minimum wage or at most ten dollars an hour. With no time or ability to go to school and peruse college, they will not make livable wages to support their family. Then, they are stuck needing the continuous support of available social services. That is what I see happening in my area, in my community. It is tough for people who get stuck in that rut to get out and change their lives.9

JT’s reply was honest and insightful. Food insecurity is not the true culprit; low wages and unemployment are. He acknowledged that even those who have jobs still struggle to with food security. JT was not the only person I spoke to, who said that unemployment and low wages bring about food insecurity. Isabella, the young woman who serves as the Healthy Communities Coordinator for the County Health Department, expressed the same concern about the relationship between food insecurity, poverty and a lack of jobs.

We have one of the highest rates of food insecurity in the state of Ohio. People do not have access to healthy foods. They have access to shelf-life products at a corner store rather than fruits, vegetables and whole grains…I do not know how to combat poverty. I feel like we talk about all these things and I do work in terms of increasing access to the areas of the county that are struggling, but what am I really doing to change someone’s situation if I cannot make a dent in poverty and create jobs? We are not really going to make a huge dent on people’s health and health outcomes, if we are not addressing poverty and that includes access to healthy food.10

9 Interview with author August 9th, 2016.
10 Interview with author July 14th, 2018.
It is evident to those in the local food movement and those in the food bank industry that Athens County has a problem. A problem with poverty that stems from the inability to secure jobs with livable wages and manifest itself into food insecurity issues, which impact almost twenty-percent of the community.

Poverty was not the only issue. The second most commonly mentioned obstacle in Athens County, as determine by the individuals I spoke with, was transportation. The infrastructure in Athens County, while sufficient for Athens City, is either obsolete or only accessible to a small subpopulation in the greater Athens County. Bianca and JT saw first-hand how issues of transportation within the county prevented food insecure individuals from getting good, even when it was available. HAPCAP, serving primarily as a food bank, also has a transportation division responsible for Athens Public Transit and Athens on Demand. Athens Public Transit run strictly within the City limits, although there has been talk around town that the route may be expanding. Athens on Demand serves similar to a taxi service, where individuals can call and have a van pick them up and drop them off to places within the county for a low cost. Grocery stores and food pantries are common destinations for these vans and because they are in such great demand, HAPCAP has limited this service to the elderly. Those with transportation of their own still need to have gas in their vehicles, which means they need gas money and as expressed by Bianca, impoverished families and individuals in the region do not have expendable income.

**Conclusion**

Rural poverty in Southeast Appalachia is complicated by a lack of employment and transportation barriers in the region. With so many obstacles could the local food
movement in Athens realistically impact such large-scale community poverty and food insecurity? If they could or better yet, if already they were, how were they doing it? And could the food movement located in Athens serve as an example for other local food movements? Chapter 5, the final chapter, will explore these questions and aspects of community and culture created by this movement.
Chapter 5
Chartering the Future of Alternative Food Networks

I was nervous. I rarely get anxious talking in front of groups but I was. It was the end of my internship with the Athens Regional Food Policy Council and I was giving a presentation on my findings and recommendations to community members. Reading about how to do engaged anthropology (Low et al. 2010) is different from doing engaged anthropology. I wanted to be attentive to the emic perspective and aware of my positions as an insider outsider (Abu-Lughod 1993). Reflexive, but not offensive. During my one-on-one interviews with council members there were issues brought up that they had not discussed with each other. I wanted to be respectful and ensure the privacy of all of my informants, while still authentic about my findings and present the potential solutions I had to obstacles that were mentioned. Thankfully, I knew that the council gave me the internship knowing I would be providing them with a best practices guide and encouraging me to give constructive criticism. I met with the policy council coordinator earlier in the week to run-through my presentation and she gave me the thumbs up, which made me feel relieved because if all went wrong, I knew at least one person would like the presentation.

As we went through the agenda items before the meeting started, I was hoping someone would bring something up to give me some time to stale. It was apparent though, that the council was anticipating my presentation. Thus, without further ado, I stood in front of the people that for the past four months allowed me to get a glimpse into their world, and begin to talk.
Policy versus Programming

There was so much to share with council, however we were on a time schedule. I raised points about many things, although the bulk of what I said came from something that the majority of the council had brought up to me; were they a programming council or a policy council? The answers varied and some wanted to continue with the programming approach, although others kept pointing back to policy as the main goal of the organization. There were valid points made by people on both sides, especially because the council had one goal. Even if it was by different means, all council members wanted to achieve the same thing: a food system in Athens that promoted the production and procurement of locally sourced, sustainably grown, nutritious food and that ensured no individual was left hungry.

Members of the ARFPC who were concerned with programming understood that changes within community could not be made if community members were not aware of what the various actors in the movement were doing. They wanted to ensure the council was working collaboratively with other organizations. Their focus was somewhat more so on bringing new members to the council and expanding it, so that there were a greater number of perspectives being shared. In particular, they wanted to recruit more farmers and individuals facing food insecurity.

The individuals who wanted to see the council go in a more policy driven direction brought up the point that while yes, it is important for everyone to stay in the loop of what is going on, the council was not designed for that purpose. Instead, there was an understanding that issues the community were facing in regards to food insecurity and sustainability and energy issues, in part, needed policy changes to improve. Obstacles
like a lack of transportation and laws that harmed the environment required changes within the government, on local, state, and national levels. They saw the council as being actively a part of that movement. They felt the council should survey the community to find out what issues were most pressing and then support existing legislation and create policies that would alleviate problems within Athens County.

These two perspectives, a programming vs policy focus, represent two aspects of the alternative food movement in Athens that are in constant tension. On the one hand, people involved in the movement are invested in community building. This reflects an aspect of the movement that I discussed in Chapter 3, namely, that good food is about identity and social inclusion. By focusing on programing, ARFPC members seemed to be more invested in questions of identity and inclusion. On the other hand, people involved in the movement repeatedly point to policy barriers—such as persistent poverty and failing infrastructure, discussed also in Chapter 4—as crucial aspects of access to good food in the region. ARFPC members that focused on policy thus understood these issues to be of prime importance.

Conclusion

This tension between community and policy in the Athens’ food movement speaks to broader concerns shared by alternative food networks around the globe. The people that I have met through this research, some of whom became friends that I will continue to keep in touch with, were very much building relations and community through food. Indeed, food centered events—such as the weekly Farmers Market, the Paw Paw Festival, The Chesterhill Produce Auction—have become landmark community
and cultural events in Athens County. Further, many of the students who stay in the area after graduating from Ohio University are plugged in to the alternative businesses around food—among others, these include the Brewery-restaurant-farm, Jackie O’s, the Village Bakery, the workers’ owned restaurant, Casa Nueva, and networks ACEnet and Rural Action. Many of the businesses and organizations, while centered on food and interconnected through the 30 Mile Meal, are also about building a different culture and economic system around the production and consumption of food in the region. In other words, these various businesses and networks show how food and community are inseparable.

At the same time, one of the unique features of Athens’ food movement is its awareness of broader socioeconomic and infrastructural barriers. Hence here more than, for instance, food movement situated in wealthier regions, poverty and infrastructure are constantly targeted through the very programs and initiatives of the alternative food movement. As such, the dynamics of the Athens food movement provide a good model for charting the future of AFNs around the world—focused simultaneously on building inclusive communities while addressing policy at the local and national level.
References

http://athensohio.com/category/30-mile-meal/


Athens Regional Food Policy Council (ARFPC). 2017.: Athens Food Policy Council: Home.” http://athensfoodpolicycouncil.weebly.com


Feeding America. 2014. *Hunger in America 2014*.


Ohio Department of Health. 2015. *Impact of Chronic Disease in Ohio*.  

[https://www.development.ohio.gov/files/research/p7005.pdf](https://www.development.ohio.gov/files/research/p7005.pdf)

[https://www.ohio.edu/students/history.cfm](https://www.ohio.edu/students/history.cfm)


https://www.slowfoodusa.org

Smith, Christi. 2003. "Food and Culture in Appalachian Kentucky: An Ethnography."

*Journal for the Study of Food and Society* 6(2): 64-71.


