

Starving For Justice:
Reading the Relationship Between Food and Criminal Justice Through Creative Works of
the Black Community

by

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ABSTRACT

Much attention has been given to food justice in both academic and activist communities as of late. This project adds to the growing discourse around food justice by using creative works produced by members of the black community as case studies to analyze the relationship between food justice and the criminal justice system in their neighborhoods. In particular, this project examines two unique sources of creative expression from the black community. The first is the novel *Been 'Bout Dat*, the story of a young boy Fattz, who is born into the projects of New Orleans and takes to street life in order to provide for his siblings and struggling single mother. Written in prison by Johnny Davis it offers a valuable perspective that is combined with historical context and statistical support to construct an understanding of how concepts of food and criminal justice influence each other. The second source is the lyrical content of several hip-hop songs from rappers such as Tupac Shakur, Mos Def, Nas, and Young Jeezy. Comparing the content of these works and the lived realities expressed in both brings new and useful insights about food justice and criminal justice as experienced in poor minority communities. Recognizing this relationship may illuminate solutions to food justice issues through criminal justice reform as well as inform fresh efforts at community renewal.

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Introduction:

When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a communist. - Archbishop Dom Helder Camara

Food is an inescapable part of human culture; and American society is no exception. As living organisms we require food to sustain ourselves, but the impact of food goes far beyond that. Besides simply providing the requisite nutrients and caloric intake for survival, food is also responsible for nourishing our bodies in a way that contributes to their development and productivity. It is a fact that diet is one of the greatest influences on overall human health, with various ailments and diseases being linked to diet-related issues such as overeating, hunger and malnutrition. This includes, but is certainly not limited to several leading causes of death such as heart disease, cancer, respiratory diseases, and diabetes. Therefore it is unsurprising that numerous studies have indicated that food insecurity correlates with numerous problems regarding health and development (Seligman et al). The human need for a healthful diet and regular food intake illustrates the essential role food plays in any culture. In order to promote a better, healthier, more productive society, access to fresh and nutritious food sources is vitally important for all.

Beyond its role as subsistence and physical nourishment food has become a hobby, and for some an obsession. There are countless television shows about food, and even entire networks dedicated to it. Cake Boss, Top Chef, Chopped, Diners, Drive-Ins, and

Dives, Hell's Kitchen, Man Vs. Food; the list goes on and on. In 2015 one episode of Top Chef pulled in 1.9 million viewers, according to Nielsen Media Research (Baron). Even Youtube has channels devoted to food. In fact the internet serves as a prime example of our interest in food with 86 million Americans visiting food and cooking websites in November 2013 (Recipe for Success). We take pictures of our food; posting them on social media such as Instagram, or Facebook. We check in to let people know what restaurants we are eating at, or which Farmer's Markets we are shopping at. From New England Clam Chowder to Kansas City Barbecue, to San Francisco Sourdough different cities and regions pride themselves on iconic foodstuffs. A short internet search will turn up no small number of foods and restaurants across the nation that one must try before they die.

Which serves to remind us that food is also a business, and big business at that. "Fifty percent of the world's assets and consumer expenditure belong to the food system" (Lambert, 44). Agriculture and food-related industries accounted for \$985 billion worth of production in the year 2014 (Coleman-Jensen et al). For example, PepsiCo, Inc alone had food sales of 62.7 billion dollars in 2016 (PepsiCo on Forbes). Meanwhile Tyson Foods, Inc generated sales of 39.7 billion, establishing them as the nation's largest provider of chicken, beef, and pork (Tyson on Forbes). Just these two corporations alone provide jobs for tens of thousands of Americans; whether directly or indirectly. Food is also dominant in the advertising business. For instance, Susan Connor performed a study on food-related advertising on children's television channels in 2005. She found that between PBS, Disney, and Nickelodeon there were an average 1.354 food-related

commercials per half hour viewing block. Moreover she noted that between the three networks food-related commercials accounted for 35% of the total commercials aired (Connor). Likewise, analysis by the nutrition app company Fooducate, noted that in 2016 40% of Super Bowl ads were food-related (Fooducate).

If that wasn't enough food serves as a focal point of social life. Whether we are speaking of preparation or consumption, food is a catalyst for human interaction. We meet friends for lunch to catch up, sit down to family dinners, take our dates to favorite restaurants, prepare dishes for parties, and gather for bake sales after church or school. Major holidays such as Thanksgiving, Christmas, Easter, and the Fourth of July all revolve around their own particular style of food, and often-times these meals can be a defining aspect of the festivities. For many Saint Patrick's Day isn't quite right without cabbage and corned beef. Similarly Valentine's Day wouldn't be the same without chocolates. Even entertainment has become deeply intertwined with food. When you think of going to the movie theater you might think of the buttery smell of warm popcorn. Popular conceptions of a baseball game may include dining on hot dogs and drinking cold beverages. A day at the amusement park wouldn't be complete without some piping hot french fries, or maybe a caramel apple. Even shopping at the mall could mean hot pretzels or ice cream. From picnics to potlucks and everything in between; the presence of food has worked into just about everything we do.

Yet, despite all of this fixation with food as a nation; food insecurity is a very real problem afflicting individuals and families across America. An astounding 15.8 million households within our nation were food insecure in 2015 according to the USDA. Among

these households data indicates that 6.4 million children lived in households with food insecurity that same year. Although these numbers are lower than previous data recorded in 2011, they indicate continued trouble with food insecurity in our nation. International rankings produced in 2011 by the IMF placed the United States last among advanced nations in food insecurity (American Shame). Considering the impact of proper diet and nutrition on physical, mental, and social development (Coleman-Jensen et al) the importance of this issue cannot be understated. “Without enough food, the everyday processes necessary for social production and reproduction become daunting and/or impossible” (Heynen 129). Therefore, the overall health, strength, and productivity of our society is profoundly inhibited by the ongoing issue of food insecurity. This ultimately begs the question; in a culture so enamored with food, how is it possible that millions go hungry? Just as importantly, why do we continue to let it happen?

In answering these questions we must further grapple with the reality that elevated rates of food insecurity are delineated along lines of race, ethnicity, gender, and socio-economic status. It is terrible enough that food insecurity affects as many Americans as it does, but it is even more tragic that the brunt of the problem is borne by the oppressed and disadvantaged. Understanding how the experience of food justice among the disadvantaged relates to their experience with the criminal justice system is just one of the many steps necessary to fix our broken food system. Using my chosen case studies, works of creative art from people who lived in poor, minority, urban neighborhoods, I will seek to reveal their experience through the analysis.

Those most intimately affected by food insecurity are also disproportionately victimized by the criminal justice system and its regime of mass incarceration. Minorities, the poor, and single women continue to bear the effects of capitalist, patriarchal, white supremacy. Millions live in day to day uncertainty over whether they will have enough food, and yet “31 percent—or 133 billion pounds—of the 430 billion pounds of the available food supply at the retail and consumer levels in 2010 went uneaten” (Buzby et al 1). The difference between the haves and have-nots in our society is drastic, and food security is but one of the manifestations of this inequity. The USDA’s Economic Research Service published data denoting that in the year 2015 that 21.5% of households headed by black Americans were food insecure. When compared to the food insecurity prevalence of their white counterparts at 10%, we see that black Americans were more than twice as likely to deal with food insecurity. Similarly, the 19.1% of households headed by Hispanic Americans come up just short of being twice as likely to be food secure.

When it comes to gender both single women living alone, and single mothers living with children were more likely to be food insecure than their male counterparts. While the national prevalence of food insecurity among all American households was 12.7%, households headed by single mothers had an alarming prevalence of 30.3%, well above twice the statistical norm. For single fathers the prevalence is still above average at 22.4%, but the difference is not as dramatic. It should be noted however that there are considerably more households headed by single mothers than single fathers. In fact, the number of single mothers outstripped those of single fathers four times over. For

individuals living on their own the gender gap is not nearly as pronounced. Women living alone had a prevalence of 14.7%, while men were slightly lower at 14.0%. While both women and men living alone were marginally above the national average for all households, they were both significantly lower than their counterparts with children.

Poverty is also a major predictor of food insecurity; with the prevalence of food insecurity being 38.3% for households below the poverty line. This is almost exactly three times the national average, serving to illustrate the great influence of poverty on access to fresh and nutritious foods. It also shows the complex and interconnected nature of injustice in American society. The effects of poverty are multi-fold. It does not only affect the ability of households to afford healthful food options, but also delimits their choices through the uneven geographic dispersal of supermarkets and other fresh food sources. Moreover, the poor often suffer from a lack of mobility due to prohibitive transportation costs. This can be especially true of the urban poor who face the additional challenge of increased food costs when compared nationally against their suburban counterparts (Morland et al 24). Lastly, we must consider the severely limited land resources available to those stricken with poverty. Whether urban or not, poor people have less opportunity for land ownership and are less likely to have land available to them for the cultivation and harvesting of food sources.

It is no surprise then that the growing field of scholarship and activism on food justice is gaining in awareness and recognition. The Obama Administration's Healthy Food Financing Initiative and Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act are but a few pieces of evidence indicating a growing interest from both the public and policy-makers in fighting

for food justice; but they leave much more to be done. Communities across the nation have been dealing with these issues for years, and there are stories from New York to Los Angeles detailing how the poor and oppressed have come together in the struggle for food justice. Some are stories of success, while others detail an uphill struggle against the grain of societal structure. While many of these stories have been detailed by scholars and journalists across the country, many more remain unshared. Examining these lived realities as expressed through creative arts of music, literature, and film will provide vital insight into the way food insecurity is experienced among the urban poor.

Sadly, the industrial food system in the United States is built to serve corporations, not communities. It is a reflection of our society in the way that it puts profit before people. Like many aspects of our society the food system benefits the privileged and powerful, while preying on the marginalized and powerless. The industrial food system that we rely on for our day to day survival is fatally flawed at its very foundation. It depends on the exploitation and repression of poor farm laborers and denies access to fresh, nutritious food based on social status. It generates massive profits for multinational corporations while trapping farmers in debt, and leaving many farmworkers below the poverty line. It reinforces the status of the wealthy by maintaining their health, while it burdens the poor with disease and illness. It has been marked by disinvestment in local communities and the concentration of control in the hands of corporate entities. This system is not just, and it mirrors the reality of a society rooted in capitalist exploitation, white supremacy, and patriarchy.

Much like the food system, our criminal justice system is deeply flawed. It too reinforces social hierarchy and delineates societal resources accordingly. When speaking about the criminal justice system, I am referring to the portion of the legal system concerned with upholding social control through defining and sanctioning criminal activity. It is comprised of three basic components, law enforcement, the courts, and corrections. Intuitive or not, the food system and criminal justice system share a relationship, the importance of which should not be ignored or understated. While some within the food justice field have touched upon this, it bears significance enough to warrant more in-depth examination. The aim of this thesis project is to highlight the relevance of this relationship and flesh it out through both the application of historical evidence and the analysis of cultural artifacts. While the historical background provides a strong foundation, the analysis of creative works will develop and elaborate upon the link between these two vital institutions. Though a lack of food justice exists, and remains a serious problem in other areas of the nation, I will be narrowing my focus to concentrate on the interplay of criminal justice and food justice among the urban poor in the black community. In order to do so I will be evaluating two different cultural pieces of art. First I will examine the lyrics of hip-hop music; a distinct product of black culture in the United States. Second, I will analyze the book *Been Bout Dat*, which was written by Johnny Davis, a black man whose life sentence for drug charges was recently commuted by former President Barack Obama. I will assess these creative works as “case studies” to enhance our understanding of the relationship between criminal justice and food justice.

This will provide insight into how criminal justice reform can positively affect aspects of food justice in poor, urban communities.

Chapter One: Literature Review

How we eat is connected to how we care for the planet, which is connected to how we use our resources, which is connected to how many people in the world go to bed hungry every night, which is connected to how food is distributed, which is connected to the massive inequalities in our world between those who have and those who don't, which is connected to how our justice system treats people who use their power and position to make hundreds of millions of dollars while others struggle just to buy groceries. – Rob

Bell

The scholarly literature on food justice is both diverse and quickly growing. Before progressing further it is important to understand exactly what Food Justice is; and perhaps what it isn't. Food justice is an outgrowth of the environmental justice movement; which concerns itself with the unequal distribution of environmental benefits and burdens throughout society. While environmental justice covers a wide swathe of different environmental benefits and hazards, food justice takes a more focused approach that centers on food. Due to this focus there are connections between food justice, and existing alternative food movements. Journalists such as Michael Pollan and Eric Schlosser who have become figureheads of the alternative food movement share many of the same concerns as proponents of food justice; including food that is healthy, environmentally friendly, and more intimately connected with the community. However, the strategies of the alternative food crowd such as farmer's markets, CSA's, and farm to school initiatives often ignore, or even exacerbate inequalities present in the food system

itself. Julie Guthman, Alison Alkon, Julian Agyeman and Garrett Broad all level criticism upon the alternative food movement. In their influential *Cultivating Food Justice: Race, Class, and Sustainability* Alkon and Agyeman observe that “Pollan fails to consider the effects of race on food access and the alternative meanings his words may hold for people of color in the United States. In this same way, whites in the food movement often simply do not see the subtle exclusivities that are woven into its narrative” (Alkon & Agyeman 3).

Julie Guthman concurs later in her chapter “‘If They Only Knew’; The Unbearable Whiteness of Alternative Food”, with the title alluding to the fact many in marginalized communities cannot afford the increase in food prices or difficulty in accessing foods that comes with many alternative food tactics. These methods of alternative food activism are anchored in the experiences of middle-class whites and are simply often unfeasible for those who live in poor, urban, minority communities. Garrett Broad adds to this commentary noting “these initiatives have emerged, not only in response to the failures of the contemporary food system but also in response to an inadequate alternative food movement” (Broad 17). It is from the acknowledgement of inadequacy, in both the food system and alternative food movements, that the modern movement for food justice was born.

This focus on oppressed communities is perhaps the most defining aspect of the food justice movement; both in academics and activism. Engagement with poor and minority communities is a feature of food justice that can be traced back long before food justice became a recognized field of academic inquiry. Joni Adamson, who I have had the

pleasure of learning under, identifies these origins in *Medicine Food: Critical Environmental Justice Studies, Native North American Literature, and the Movement for Food Sovereignty*. As she rightly points out “the food sovereignty movement has deep roots in indigenous campaigns to force states to abide by treaty obligations including the right to ‘first foods’ like salmon, elk, deer, camas, geoduck, and huckleberry” (Adamson *Medicine Food* 215). Victimized by a tide of genocidal colonialism, indigenous Americans form an important subsection of the many communities who have suffered from our inadequate and unequal food system. Any introduction to food justice and food studies more broadly would be incomplete without acknowledging the importance of these movements. They laid the historical groundwork for food justice as we know it, bringing questions of food access and food sovereignty to the forefront through legal activism and grass roots organizing in these indigenous communities. Documents such as the United Nations’ *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* and *Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* were a product of these campaigns as Adamson notes, reflecting a move to formalize food sovereignty rights, and revealing the global influence of indigenous protests. Subsequently, the successes of indigenous groups have paved the way for contemporary groups of oppressed peoples to challenge food-based inequalities in their communities.

Robert Gottlieb and Anupama Joshi engage in a detailed examination of these contemporary food justice movements in their seminal work *Food Justice*, noting concern with both “bringing about community change *and* a different kind of food system” as integral elements of food justice (Gottlieb & Joshi 5). They focus on community-level

efforts in traditionally oppressed areas, but also go beyond that advocating for "a transformation of the current food system, including but not limited to eliminating disparities and inequities" (Gottlieb & Joshi ix). Alison Alkon and Julian Agyeman follow this viewpoint focusing their definition of food justice around community action. In *Cultivating Food Justice* they adopt their definition from the established food justice organization Just Food. This definition notes that food justice is "communities exercising their right to grow, sell, and eat [food that is] fresh, nutritious, affordable, culturally appropriate, and grown locally with care for the well-being of the land, workers, and animals" (Alkon & Agyeman 5). Alkon and Agyeman are less forward about it, but their use of Omi and Winant's concept of racial projects show that they too acknowledge the importance of fundamental change in the food system. This is evidenced by their comment that "if activists in the food movement are to go beyond providing alternatives and truly challenge agribusiness's destructive power, they will need a broad coalition of supporters." This sentiment follows Gottlieb and Joshi's transformational approach, which underlies much of what food justice is ultimately about.

One of the vital distinctions in the food justice literature is between food insecurity and hunger. It is not that these are wholly different concepts, but the term hunger is often too vague and nebulous to be useful in an academic sense. Hunger has all kinds of accumulated cultural and emotional meanings. It is imprecise, possibly meaning not having eaten for a few hours, or a few days. The use of food insecurity brings a more measureable element to bear. According to the United Nations food insecurity is "[the lack of] access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food

preferences for an active and healthy life” (U.N. 1996). This definition gives a more specific guideline to determine how lack of food access is affecting communities, and is more useful in that it specifically relates to the quality of life for affected persons. That being said, I will use hunger at certain points in this paper to bring out the various impacts created by hunger in a physiological sense. For my purposes this hunger denotes the painful sensation in the stomach created by a severe lack of food. In most cases I will speak about food insecurity, particularly when addressing statistics and large-scale trends. However, I will use hunger to describe and analyze the case studies in an effort to evoke the lived experience of the writer. This will give a more well-rounded perspective of food justice as lived through the life of those closely affected.

To understand this concept of food insecurity in a spatial/geographical context food justice scholars often employ the term “food desert”. The geographical plotting of food desert areas helps visualize the spatial distribution of food access on both local and national scales. Mapping such areas in reference to demographic patterns produces a valuable understanding of how such phenomena are organized spatially and illustrates how historically oppressed groups continue to bear disproportionate harm in the manner food access and security are dispersed throughout society. The term food desert generally applies to areas with both low income and low access to fresh food sources. There is no standard that defines exactly what qualifies as a food desert, but one USDA initiative distinguishes food deserts by the metric that “at least 500 people and/or at least 33 percent of the census tract's population must reside more than one mile from a supermarket or large grocery store” (American Nutrition Association).

Joni Adamson examines precisely this type of area in her article “‘Spiky Green Life’: Environmental, Food and Sexual Justice Themes in Sapphire’s PUSH”. In the article Adamson utilizes Sapphire’s novel PUSH as a case study to analyze social justice issues and urban greening initiatives from the standpoint of poor minority neighborhoods. The story takes place in Harlem during the 1980s, with the main character Precious’ food options defined by fast food joints and corner bodegas. (Adamson *Spiky* 78) Sadly this is a harsh reality lived by millions of poor minorities throughout the United States. This lack of access to healthful food options in poor urban areas, particularly black communities, will be a focal point of my own analysis. Adamson’s work illustrates that individual health is strongly bound to community health, further necessitating local community-based efforts that “transform vacant lots into playgrounds and community gardens” (Adamson *Spiky* 70), as well as larger-scale food system change.

As Garrett M. Broad notes in *More than Just Food: Food Justice and Community Change* “shifting the dominant cultural narratives and institutional networks of the food system toward greater justice is no easy task”. Here we see him clearly set out what he envisions as the goals of the food justice movement, in effect giving us insight into his own conception of what food justice is. This conception seemingly aligns with the *transformation* Gottlieb and Joshi suggest, calling for the subversion of dominant structures and the altering of relationships with power. This squares nicely with the narrative already established by Gottlieb, Joshi, Alkon, and Agyeman. Much of what Broad does in his research utilizes an approach similar to Alkon and Agyeman, “analyze[ing] the actions of community-based food justice organizations - grass roots,

people of color led groups that are working to promote health, equity, and sustainability through urban food activism” (Broad 3). This focus on the scale of community-level action puts him in step with the other important works already mentioned.

However, there is one interesting point where Broad distinguishes his argument. In his first chapter he calls upon the Foucauldian concept of governmentality to explain how community-based efforts offer a unique opportunity for activists in the food justice field. He notes that decentralization, or “governance at a distance” was identified by Foucault as “a primary political philosophy at the heart of what [Foucault] termed *neoliberal governmentality*” (Broad 19). He proposes that consequently, community-level projects offer a site of resistance for “social justice activism to endure” (Broad 21). This insight provides a more concrete understanding of why community-based approaches have been popular and how they can serve as tools to alter relations of power. By acknowledging “the enduring limitations of community-based food justice”, Broad frames community-level efforts, not as standalone solutions, but footholds to accomplish greater transformative change (Broad 62). In doing so he challenges criticisms that community-level projects only act as band-aids to cover up systemic imbalances of power.

In *Weighing In* Julie Guthman also utilizes neoliberal governmentality in her analysis, albeit in a fundamentally different manner. Instead of considering the opportunities it affords for resistance, she implicates it in the American obesity epidemic as well as larger issues food justice. Although she doesn’t address it by name she draws upon the concept of responsabilisation to illustrate the way neoliberal governmentality

shapes our views of each other. Responsibilisation refers to the process of framing social problems such as poverty, hunger or illness in terms of individual responsibility as opposed to state or social responsibility. Applying this to the subject at hand, she talks about healthism, “a set of norms of self-efficacy [...] that are strongly related to neoliberal notions of governance” (Guthman 47). According to these norms, issues such as obesity are understood largely in terms of what the individual does or doesn’t do. Therefore, the logic of healthism dictates that an individual is obese due to personal choices they have made, such as poor diet or lack of exercise. It fails to account for broader social forces and underestimates the role of numerous external factors. As a result, healthism and responsibilism influence and validate resentment toward those afflicted by these problems. By adopting this outlook Guthman offers a valuable lens through which to understand the attitudes and apathy of those unaffected by inequalities and the difficulty in garnering support for systemic change.

In “What does it Mean to do Food Justice” K.V. Cadieux and Rachel Slocum focus their analysis on more closely defining what qualifies as food justice scholarship and activism. In order to accomplish this task they trace the lineage of both food justice and food sovereignty. Drawing both parallels and divergences between the two, they diagram the traits and characteristics of each. Resultant from this exploration they identify “trauma/inequity, exchange, land, and labor” as four key points in both food justice and food sovereignty movements (Cadieux & Slocum 2). According to their analysis these four areas serve as common points in the literature surrounding both movements. This model provides a valuable structure for evaluating, contrasting, and

drawing linkages between works of food justice literature. More importantly it stands as a gatekeeping tool to help delimit the boundaries of food justice scholarship and activism. This effort will be vital in maintaining the continued integrity of the movement. While the borders of food justice need to retain flexibility and allow for the evolution of the movement, they also need to maintain the elements that differentiate food justice. As Cadieux and Slocum express in their conclusion, “If food justice means *anything*, it may stand for nothing—or, worse, serve to undermine the credibility and rigor of substantive food justice practices” (Cadieux & Slocum 15). For this reason we must remain vigilant in defining and sustaining the movement and body of work associate with it.

With a multitude of different approaches taken to understanding the aforementioned urban communities a similar abundance of conceptual and theoretical frameworks are adopted within the literature, contributing to the diversity of thought within the field. While they all employ methods grounded in ethnographic study of marginalized communities Gottlieb, Joshi, Alkon, Agyeman, and Broad utilize different concepts and theories to contextualize their case studies. Alison Alkon and Julian Agyeman for instance apply Michael Omi and Howard Winant’s ideas of racial formation and racial projects as a foundation to frame their analysis. In his own words Garrett Broad grounds his research in what he terms “communication ecology perspective”, which draws from his background in communications and media to explore how community organizations and networks find a balance between community needs and broader national movements (Broad 10). He, as well as Julie Guthman utilize the notion of neoliberal governmentality, which I previously touched upon. Meanwhile Robert

Gottlieb and Anupama Joshi largely eschew social theory, instead offering a crash course in the tenets of what they term the “food justice framework” (Gottlieb & Joshi 7). They establish the principles of this framework, which are the now oft-repeated facets undergirding the contemporary understanding of food justice. Such pillars include the exploitation of farmworkers, the under-distribution of supermarkets and other fresh food sources in urban minority neighborhoods, prohibitive access to transportation, and the relation of income and accumulated wealth to food access just to name a few. In doing so they systematically lay out an impressive overview of the issues present in food justice.

Taking a political ecology perspective as Julie Guthman advocates in *Weighing In*, is another way to investigate the food system, focusing on it as a component of the broader political economy. Under this conception affecting change in the food system is inextricably entwined with change in the larger political economy. “Political ecologists [urge] that individual behavior be understood within a ‘chain of explanation’ referring to the entirety of interlinking forces beyond the direct resource user”(Guthman 10)(Blaikie & Brookfield 17). For instance, the historically recent concentration of agricultural resources, increasing adoption of monoculture, and proliferation of toxic pesticides should be viewed not as free decision-making by individual farmers, but constrained and influenced by social forces within the political economy. Such a perspective is useful for this paper because it allows us to view the trends in food justice and criminal justice, not simply as individual decisions, but emphasize that they are made under pressure from greater societal forces. This is a vital tool for understanding my later analysis.

An approach similarly exploring the influence of social power-relationships over individual experience is utilized in *Notes on the practice of food justice in the U.S.: understanding and confronting trauma and inequity* by K.V. Cadieux and Rachel Slocum. They employ the concept of cultural trauma to frame their examination of food inequalities, acknowledging the temporal power-relations behind current end-state distributions. Emphasizing trauma recognizes the contemporary experience of afflicted groups as rooted in historical violence and subjugation. This in particular is an important awareness to keep in mind moving forward. Ultimately, the notion of food justice invites new points of inquiry and methods of conceptualization. With such a wide range of approaches demonstrated in the literature we see the versatility and flexibility of the food justice field in relating to existing social theory. Surveying these approaches I have simultaneously gleaned important insights while also finding gaps in which to center my own theoretical and conceptual understandings.

Synthesizing the important features of previous definitions, the greater narrative of the literature, and its origins in the environmental justice movement I have come to my own definition of food justice. In the context of my writings I define food justice as the achievement of a system that empowers decision-making on both an individual and community level and produces a just distribution of benefits and burdens regarding the production, distribution, and consumption of food. This definition recognizes both elements of resource distribution as well as issues of autonomy and control important to oppressed communities. In my mind both of these features must be present to fully define the breadth of work being done in food justice. Furthermore it acknowledges the

injustices long-suffered by oppressed peoples; not only in access to food, but also in the production of American food supplies. In the chapter “Framing Food Justice” by J. Michael Scoville he notes that “whether everyone working within the food system is paid fairly and able to work in a safe environment” is one “main focus” of food justice work (Scoville 3). Consequently, it is important to note that food justice is not only concerned with access to food, but the qualitative facets of food production, distribution, and consumption. In this way food justice is a holistic concept, aware of the interconnectedness that defines our ways of relating with food and living in the world.

Nonetheless, there is an abundance of unexplored territory within the bounds of the food justice framework. Through my investigation I have discovered that the depths of food system interconnectedness are still largely uncharted by the food justice movement. In order to map these yet undiscovered potentialities we will need to expand our field of view. In this spirit my following proposal seeks to highlight just one of these many existing opportunities. What I have found within the literature; or have not found rather is a deeper engagement with the criminal justice system as an actor in food justice. Alkon and Agyeman touch upon the idea, noting that laws and the legal system serve as racial projects. They cite a number of specific laws that directly limit food sovereignty, but they stop short of making any indictment of the criminal justice system itself, or exploring the myriad ways it is implicated in the indirect perpetuation of food-based injustice. Likewise, Gottlieb and Joshi note related issues such as “crime, drugs, and violence” in oppressed communities, but fail to explore the connections further (Gottlieb and Joshi 123). Moving forward studies acknowledging the relationship between

different institutions of the societal superstructure are needed to understand the larger picture and leverage change in the food system. As previously noted one area where this is abundantly evident is the interaction between criminal justice and food justice. The influence of the capitalist political economy upon the criminal justice system and the way that delineates and organizes individuals' conditions and opportunities is an important consideration so far under-examined within the food justice literature.

That being said, the rich history and legacy of food-based scholarship and literature cannot easily be summarized or represented here. This is by no means meant to be an exhaustive summary of the field. Even the breadth of what recognizes itself as contemporary food justice is beyond the scope of this chapter. The interdisciplinarity of food justice proves a substantial challenge in reviewing all relevant literature. To do so would take more time and space than I can devote to the subject in a master's thesis. Recognizing this I have touched upon what I see as some of the most important debates, questions, approaches, and concepts within the field of food justice. I have included some seminal works establishing the study of "food justice", and a few who work to further define exactly what food justice is. These elements have come together to shape my understanding of the field, and to influence the analysis I will complete in this paper.

Every selection for this review has been intentional in order to frame the understanding of my argument going forward. To accomplish this necessitated identifying the conceptual and theoretical frameworks currently employed in food justice. By doing so I can situate my own body of work and bring a new theoretical viewpoint with which to engage food justice. Fresh perspective is essential for the cultivation of

knowledge and the creation of novel solutions. Remaining static in approach is limiting and inspires rigidity of thought. By focusing on the relationships between capitalism, criminal justice and food justice this paper will diversify the literature and open up new avenues of inquiry.

Chapter Two: Theoretical Framework

The ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of its ruling class. - Karl Marx

In order to better understand the relationship between food justice and criminal justice we must begin to look at issues of food justice differently. A change in viewpoint can illuminate connections and uncover processes we may have not noticed before. Therefore I have constructed a theoretical and conceptual framework that grants a unique perspective on food justice. It is based in Marxian theory, particularly the methodological approach of dialectical materialism, but integrates elements of several different concepts and theories. Based on the ideas of Karl Marx, Antonio Gramsci, Margaret Somers, Michel Foucault, and Iris Marion Young; this framework gives us a way to interpret processes and forces shaping the distributional inequities and power imbalances food justice concerns itself with. Through this lens we can make sense of the historical evidence and lived realities covered later in the paper and facilitate a more complete understanding of the ways the food system and criminal justice system interrelate in society.

Food is a primary need to sustain human life. Throughout history it has been one of the primary concerns of human populations. The production of food has had longstanding effects on social relations and the structure of societies. Employing the model of the base and superstructure espoused by Karl Marx (Marx *A Contribution 3*)

one can imagine a constantly developing process where the mode of production wields its influence upon the societal superstructure of beliefs, practices, and institutions; only to itself be shaped concurrently by such forces as law, politics, media, and religion.

Applying this to current time we see that the structure and relations of capitalist mode give rise to the ideas and beliefs of society that inform our politics and legal system; which in turn act to maintain the capitalist mode. I will use this concept; the basis of Marx's dialectical materialism, (Marx *Kapital* 14) to examine how the mode of food production relates specifically with the institution of criminal justice in a process that continues to shape both.

Historical evidence suggests that this dialectical process has shaped societies throughout time. *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* by James C. Scott supports this finding by connecting concepts of "state space" and grain-based agriculture (Scott 13). Throughout history the development of civilization has been restricted by both geography and levels of technological advancement. As time has passed technological advancement has given humans increased capability to adapt their environments through the use of new tools and techniques of land management. However, at all times terrain has remained an important factor in the spatial development of societies. This is recognized by Scott when he acknowledges "the sharp limits terrain, particularly altitude, has placed on cultural or political influence" (Scott 21). It is due to these limits that he argues those seeking to escape society have traditionally taken to the hills. He argues that certain foods, conducive to bureaucratic state structure, are only capable of being cultivated in

particular types of landscapes. Therefore, societies that depended upon crops such as rice, corn, wheat, and barley developed in areas where the farming of these crops was most productive.

However, the impact of food production did not only shape where societies developed, but also the system of beliefs, practices, and institutions they participated in; which in turn maintained their mode of food production. Before the advent of mechanized transportation the concentration of both workers and agricultural areas for any state was restricted to a short range from the state's core. This created specific patterns of development and demanded certain social relations between members of the society. As such, agriculture in these societies revolved around crops that “foster concentrated, labor-intensive production...[which] requires a density of population that is, itself, a key resource for state-making” (Scott 41). Alternately those seeking to resist state control would choose to disperse into less heavily populated areas where these foods were harder to produce en masse. In other words the mode of food production and the organization of their society were mutually reinforcing. Dialectical materialism subsequently provides the perfect frame through which to understand this process and how it has historically shaped the continuous formation of societies across the world. Though technological progress, international trade, and globalization have made systems of food production more complex, the underlying relationships between the mode of food production and societal superstructure continue to ring true.

Promoting change within this system is no simple task. Any attempt to change the mode of production will meet resistance from the societal superstructure; and conversely

any attempted change to the societal superstructure will run into resistance from the relations of the economic base. Being aware of the influence the base wields in shaping our view is the first step in overcoming its sway. This notion is best understood through the concept of cultural hegemony. Cultural hegemony, as described by Antonio Gramsci, is a compelling explanation of how structures of power and domination are entrenched within societies. It proposes that the collective conscious of society, in the form of culture, is the basis by which the dominant class wields power. By embedding values, views, and ideals that support their rule and undermine challenges by other groups, the system perpetuates the position of the ruling class at the top of the social hierarchy. To further the effectiveness of this cultural hegemony the components of the dominant ideology are rendered invisible and naturalized in the collective consciousness. Utilizing this understanding, I propose that the metaphor of the social contract works as a tool of cultural hegemony in the United States. The social contract stands as but one example of the ideals, customs, and ways of thinking we have developed maintain the dominance of a white supremacist bourgeoisie in this nation.

By looking at the concept of the social contract as an instrument of cultural hegemony we can highlight some of the ways the dialectic between food production and the criminal justice system plays out. Emerging out of the enlightenment era, the notion of the social contract was parsed and promoted by influential thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and John Locke. Social Contract Theory, as articulated by Locke, involved the notion of rational individuals coming together to form a state apparatus in order to secure the natural rights and liberties of said individuals. References

to this concept are littered throughout the foundational documents of the United States, including the Declaration of Independence, which states “to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed” (Jefferson 1). The values and relations of the social contract have therefore been hardwired into our societal consciousness from the very beginning. Over the years market fundamentalists have fortified the position of the social contract even further entrenching it ever deeper in the collective consciousness of American society.

However, as Margaret Somers points out, the contractual model is faulty for a number of reasons. For example, the metaphor of a contract implies a relation that is “voluntary and revocable” (Somers 70) which itself supposes the individual as existing prior to the contract. However, in reality there is no existence of the individual pre-contract, meaning that the individual would not enter into it voluntarily, nor would the individual have input in the terms of the contract. Moreover she discerns that utilizing the terminology of the social contract infers a “market exchange of equivalent value” (Somers 72). Rousseau for example noted “the reciprocal engagement between the public and individuals” as the underlying structure of the social contract. This is important, because this framework can be used as a device to deny rights and protections to individuals on the basis of their contribution to society and conformity to established societal expectations. When the bonds between citizen and state are constructed as reciprocal and imagined as a contract, failure of the citizen to uphold the contract negates government responsibility toward that citizen. Such a system; where the benefits of government are allocated differentially dependent upon perceived contribution to society,

mirrors and maintains the capitalist system. As I will reveal throughout this work, this practice of voiding the contract can help explain the deprivation of rights and lack of protections for individuals in society such as minorities, the poor, criminals, drug addicts, the unemployed, and the homeless.

This whole process can be alternatively explained using Michel Foucault's concept of governmentality, "refer[ing] to general strategies of rule that come into play at different times and places that encourage subjects to think and act in particular ways" (Guthman 18). As Guthman rightly points out, neoliberal governmentality "shifts responsibility for care from public (welfare) spheres to personal (self-help) spheres" (Guthman 18). Appeals to personal accountability, initiative and self-reliance, which are inherent to neoliberal governmentality, frame issues like poverty and food insecurity as individual failures. They paint the oppressed and marginalized as complicit in their own downfall for not being competitive; lacking the diligence, ambition, or intelligence to succeed. Through this carefully crafted mentality the governing power is capable of shaping the thoughts and actions of individuals to comply with the governing power's interests. In this case neoliberal governmentality results in the continual reproduction of a market-friendly environment conducive to capitalist interests.

Whether conceived through cultural hegemony or governmentality the capitalist character of the American society is infused and tied together by values and norms that maintain the capitalist mode of production. These ideals are ingrained into individuals at a young age through socialization and constitute a way of thinking and being that works to preserve capitalist power. Many of these ideals correspond and draw upon with the

social contract model whether they explicitly mention it or not. Common sense notions, such as criminals having forfeited their rights by committing crimes, reify the social contract and justify the marginalization and exploitation of criminals. Likewise, the racialized rhetoric of “strapping young bucks” and “welfare queens” employed by Ronald Reagan in the 1980s sought to categorize certain bodies as undeserving and lazy, rationalizing their marginalization (Haney-Lopez 58-59). Similarly, the indifference of government officials as poverty stricken minority neighborhoods were ravaged by Hurricane Katrina demonstrates their status as disposable in the eyes of the state (Somers 63). Each of these ideas draw upon the notion of a reciprocal relationship between citizen and state, where you “pull your weight” or you lose your place. Each of these ideas is a tool to naturalize the current social hierarchy and justify the oppression of the lower strata. However, the true power of these ideas is found in the fact that they are so common and accepted that many of us never notice them.

Nowhere is this more evident than the criminal justice system. Law and order are essential components of any capitalist state, and as such, a robust criminal justice system is a hallmark of capitalist society. Laws are often thought of as being implemented for the good of the citizen. After all, none of us wish to be robbed, or raped, or murdered. However, there is another reason for the criminal justice system that many never recognize. It is a function of the criminal justice system to create an environment favorable to the interests of capital through codifying and imposing norms that benefit the capitalist system. One such example would be the acknowledgement and administration of private property rights. Without a system of law to reify and enforce the concept of

private property, capitalism is impossible because private ownership of the means of production would not be possible. Subsequently, concepts of law and order are vitally important to a functioning capitalist system. Without a structure of law and order, violence and extortion threaten to fundamentally undermine the free market system. In contrast to neo-liberal claims seeking to naturalize markets, they are socially constructed and cannot exist in any recognizable sense without a superstructure of law, politics, ideology, media, and so on to provide the elements essential for such markets to function and thrive. Without the support of specific societal institutions the very structure of capitalism itself would collapse.

Yet beyond the establishment of law and order the capitalist mode of production depends on the criminal justice system in other, less visible ways. In particular the entrenchment of social hierarchy and class divisions is one way the criminal justice system produces and reproduces the capitalist ordering of society. This ordering of society maintains important pillars of capitalist production, such as a “reserve army of labor” (Engels 98) and an easily exploitable pool of workers to fill the roles of labor, particularly those shunned and ignored by the majority of society. This process is aided by the Marxian concept of racialization, denoting “a process that accompanies the exploitation of labour power, whereby people are categorized into distinct ‘races’.” (Miles 7) This separation and categorization produces divisions among the proletariat, making it more difficult for workers to unify and coordinate in order to oppose the dominant group. The resultant stratification of social standing maintains the status of the dominant class and their power over the allocation of societal resources, including food.

Thus, the criminal justice system works as one of many apparatuses to stratify society and render certain groups vulnerable to control and domination by the mostly white, patriarchal, capitalist class.

Capitalist societies such as ours produce and reproduce social hierarchy in a manner that is self-perpetuating because the social hierarchy results in relations of power (and these relations of power simultaneously reinforce the hierarchy). Just as the divide between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat results in growing disparities in wealth and social influence, so too are there disparities within the proletariat. To illustrate this we need to understand that under the Marxist interpretation proletarians sell their labor power as a commodity. The price of this commodity is their compensation (wage, salary, benefits) and is determined by the value of the workers labor power. Workers with highly valued skills, experience, and knowledge such as doctors and engineers can charge a higher price for their labor than a worker without such assets. This is perpetuated by the fact that workers with less valued skills, experience, and knowledge have difficulty attaining the needed qualifications for higher pay because higher education and technical training themselves are commodified and financially prohibitive. Therefore socio-economic status delineates access to means which improve a worker's social mobility in a manner that perpetually disadvantages those at the lowest level of stratification. In order to break this cycle we must dissolve the structures of power that leverage certain individuals over others. In the words of Iris Marion Young we must focus on the "elimination of institutionalized domination and oppression (Young & Allen 15). The criminal justice system is one of these structures, and its reformation will have lasting

effects on issues of food justice.

By focusing on the dialectic interplay between the base and superstructure we can observe the far-reaching effects of the criminal justice system as it simultaneously maintains, and is shaped by, the existing mode of production. Within this framework it is possible to observe how the criminal justice system functions as an institution; exercising power over oppressed elements such as the poor, the homeless, criminals, undocumented migrants and the unemployed. These individuals often find themselves portrayed as having broken the social contract, and so they are relegated to a liminal position of powerlessness, marginalization, and exploitation. Existing norms that comprise the dominant cultural hegemony normalize this view and obscure the causes of their subjugation. The commodification of tools needed for upward mobility creates a cycle of futility perpetuating their low social standing and oppression, and this reinforces the structures that leverage societal power over them.

The chapters that follow will be contextualized through this lens of theoretical and conceptual understanding. Drawing upon the mentioned concepts and theories my primary theoretical understanding is that the criminal justice system and food system mutually reinforce the inequalities found within each other. The criminal justice system destroys economic opportunity and political voice in minority communities. It creates a racialized caste with diminished access to resources and decision-making processes. This includes food resources and food sovereignty. Through long-term issues with food insecurity members of these communities see severe impacts to their health, education, and economic productivity. These impacts can lead individuals to commit crimes such as

theft and drug dealing in order to provide for themselves and their loved ones in the absence of viable economic opportunity. The resulting arrest and punishment for these crimes feeds into a cyclical process that encourages recidivation and perpetuates problems of food insecurity for the households involved. The exploration of my chosen case studies will flesh out this understanding through the creative expression of lived realities in poor black neighborhoods. Such an approach will provide a unique starting point to dive into the historical and cultural evidence later chapters will investigate. Utilizing the concepts and theoretical elements covered in this chapter will provide a way of organizing and interpreting these materials.

Chapter Three: Historical Background

Our white countrymen do not know us. They are strangers to our character, ignorant of our capacity, oblivious to our history and progress, and are misinformed as to the principles and ideas that control and guide us as a people. - Frederick Douglass

This chapter will focus on laying a historical foundation upon which to build my analysis. It will have two primary focuses, and thus be separated into two separate stages. The first stage will provide a survey of important events, laws, attitudes, and other factors contributing to the oppression of the black community prior to the era of mass incarceration. The second stage will examine the era of mass incarceration and the rise of the prison industrial complex in greater detail. This historical background is vital in orienting the analysis and contextualizing the ways theory intersects with both real life experience and forms of artistic expression.

The oppression of the black community is not static; it is ever changing, adapting, and evolving. From slavery, to Jim Crow, to mass incarceration, the subjugation of black Americans shifts to meet new challenges threatening its hegemonic power. We should not view this relation as a fixed point, but a dynamic process unfolding over time. Moments in the present can only be fully understood when placed within the larger picture of historical experience. The roots of black pain and trauma are old and deep. Excavating these roots is the first step in understanding the obstacles of the present. Only by embracing the knowledge of this past can we hope to change the future.

The history of black subjugation and the causes of black poverty in America can be traced back to the period of slavery itself. Hundreds of thousands were brought to the United States aboard grim and disease-ridden slave ships. Many died during the long and arduous journey, and those who survived faced hard lives of violence and toil. Bought and owned by other men slaves had no right to private property or claim to fair compensation for their labor. They were beaten and raped, flogged and murdered. Most slaves were kept illiterate, with many states prohibiting the act of teaching slave to read or write. For instance, the “1740 South Carolina Negro Act” criminalized the act of educating slaves in reading and writing (Rasmusen 201). This prohibition kept slaves dependent upon their masters and severely limited their options beyond menial labor. Similar motivations belied the disenfranchisement of slaves, further undermining their ability to resist their own oppression. Indeed, prior to the American Civil War only six states allowed black men to vote (Hume & Gough 316). With the enactment of the emancipation proclamation in 1863, and the ensuing passage of the 13th Amendment, slaves were freed from their bonds and granted the rights of citizenship.

The state of liberty, so long yearned for, bared little resemblance to expectation. With the proliferation of black codes and the adoption of Jim Crow laws across the southern states, black Americans faced vindictive challenges to their newfound freedom. Though guaranteed equal rights under the Constitution the realization of this promise fell short. Former slaves ran into discrimination when seeking employment, and many were forced to continue the same work they did as slaves for miserable wages just to survive.

Southern states, where almost nine of every ten slaves remained in the years following the war, “sustained an economic system -tenantry and sharecropping- that left little room for ambition or hope” (Litwack 7). Those who could not find work due to their lack of education and appreciable skills could be arrested for vagrancy and sold into slave-like conditions under convict-lease programs (Mancini 4). Former slaves were prevented from owning land and black homes and businesses faced extreme violence and prejudice. Though constitutionally guaranteed the right to vote, poll taxes, literacy tests, and other measures continued to disenfranchise black Americans for years (Davis R. 4)(Davis R. 6).

In the following decades Jim Crow regimes were successful in maintaining white supremacy through both codification and custom. Complex systems of social control based on segregation, disenfranchisement, and systematic discrimination continued to marginalize black Americans. Discriminatory practices in bank lending and government policies such as the *Federal Housing Act of 1934* largely diverted funds away from black communities making investment and growth in these neighborhoods more difficult (Lipsitz 5) (Lipsitz 14). Moreover these policies and practices maintained the segregation of neighborhoods and urban areas, forcing blacks into poorer areas with fewer opportunities and greater environmental hazards. Other consequences would include the empowerment of predatory lenders over black Americans and gentrification of minority neighborhoods. These phenomena subsequently limited the accumulation and maintenance of black wealth as “most white families have acquired their net worth from the appreciation of property that they secured under conditions of special privilege in a

discriminatory housing market” (Lipsitz 14). This alone placed a significant burden on black communities and attributed to historical social problems in their neighborhoods.

Furthermore educational opportunities for black Americans proved another barrier to building wealth in these communities. Since public school funding is tied closely to property taxes in most localities, black neighborhoods often faced funding issues and severe deficits in quality of education (Lipsitz 38). Additionally we must remember that the de jure segregation of schools was permitted and common prior to *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954). Even afterward it would be a long and arduous process to impose the decision reached upon obstinate school districts and cities across the country. To further exacerbate these problems the commodification of higher education proves financially prohibitive for many of those affected by these issues. With black parents on average being less financially able to help their children, and less able to secure loans for their children’s education, they have faced significant challenges to their social mobility. The results of hampered educational opportunity feed into a perpetual cycle that continues to privilege white Americans and reinforce parallel social inequalities affecting the black community.

It is the culmination of these practices and processes that resulted in the social reality faced by black communities going into the 1960s. During this era of civil rights activism and social tumult the roots of today’s mass incarceration regime were planted. The effect has not only been individual, but generational and mutually reinforcing with interconnected issues of poverty and socio-economic status. Problems of urban crime and drug use disproportionately highlighted by politicians and the media during the past forty

years are a distinct product of this social reality. In the face of dramatic upheaval in the social order at the time, mass incarceration emerged as an alternate form of social control to continue the marginalization of the black community (Alexander 4). As Michelle Alexander notes in *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* this “system of social control permanently locks a huge percentage of the African American community out of the mainstream society and economy” (Alexander 14). The rest of this chapter will be devoted to highlighting the historical emergence and proliferation of mass incarceration and the prison industrial complex. This context is vital to understand how changes in the criminal justice system can generate positive changes in food justice.

President Lyndon B. Johnson is remembered for many admirable achievements. He played a vital role in passing the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the Fair housing Act of 1968. In his advocacy for the Voting Rights Act of 1965 he railed against racial divisions declaring:

But even if we pass this bill the battle will not be over. What happened in Selma is part of a far larger movement which reaches into every section and state of America. It is the effort of American Negroes to secure for themselves the full blessings of American life. Their cause must be our cause too. Because it's not just Negroes, but really it's all of us, who must overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice.

And we shall overcome (Chicago Tribune 1965).

His premise of the “Great Society” and the well-intentioned war on poverty were idealistic efforts laudable in their ambition. However, Johnson also laid the foundation for the continued subjugation of black Americans for decades to come. Whether or not this was a calculated decision by a masterful politician is up for historical debate. Johnson’s personal struggles with racism and bigotry were far from hidden. His regular and unapologetic use of racial epithets and demeaning encounters with black individuals deeply complicate his relationship with the black community in America. It is possible that he, recognizing the momentum of the Civil Rights movement, positioned himself as the hero, while working to mitigate the actual impact of the movement itself. This take seems to be corroborated by Johnson’s words to fellow Democratic Senator Richard Russell, regarding the Civil Rights Act of 1957.

These Negroes, they're getting pretty uppity these days and that's a problem for us since they've got something now they never had before, the political pull to back up their uppityness. Now we've got to do something about this, we've got to give them a little something, just enough to quiet them down, not enough to make a difference (Goodwin 130).

However, reality is rarely ever straightforward. It is true that Senator Johnson, representing the state of Texas, worked behind the scenes to drastically alter the content,

of the Civil Rights Act of 1957, gutting most of the key provisions. However, eight years later President Johnson championed a bill that would become the Voting Rights Act of 1965. That act would make good on the broken promises of the earlier Civil Rights Act of 1957. Some would look at this as the ultimate act of redemption, but others might characterize it as just another in a long line of calculated moves by a skilled opportunist. While the truth likely lies somewhere in the middle, that will come as little relief to the millions of black lives destroyed by one of his less celebrated accomplishments, the launching of the “War on Crime”.

Following the success Johnson encountered in the passage of seminal Civil Rights legislation in 1964 and 1965 he turned his attention to a new subject, rising rates of crime across the country. Ironically, or intentionally, this would lead to the antithesis of his apparent crusade for Civil Rights. Johnson declared his “war on crime” in a special message to Congress on March 9th, 1966, stating “We must mobilize all of the resources of our creative federal system if we are to repel the threat of crime to our common well-being”(Johnson *Special Address*). This, perhaps better than anything, illustrates the transition from de jure to de facto racism. No longer able to overtly discriminate against blacks, the exercise of white supremacy took more subtle and covert forms. Laws enforcing segregation and discrimination were no longer allowed, but cleverly disguised systems of social control took their place. This included the pronounced association of poor, urban blacks with crime and disproportionately targeting them with increasingly punitive measures in a “tough on crime” narrative. Thanks to Johnson’s efforts to pass the Law Enforcement Assistance Act of 1965 and his ensuing emphasis on crime, the

rhetorical and logistical groundwork was set for the unprecedented expansion of policing and corrections to come.

This expansion accelerated through the 1970s with the proliferation of these “tough on crime” policies under the Nixon administration. Such policies sought, at least on the surface, to address the untimely rise of crime rates across America. Promising “law and order”, Nixon advocated to further advance Johnson’s “war on crime”, promising to double federal spending on local law enforcement in his 1970 State of the Union address (*Nixon Address*). With the help of Congress he took the building blocks of Johnson’s cause and put them to use, calling for victory in “the war against the criminal elements which increasingly threaten our cities, our homes, and our lives.” Part and parcel to this wave of anti-crime sentiment was Nixon’s assertion that “public enemy number one in the United States [was] drug abuse” (*Nixon Remarks*). This bold statement paved the way for the United States’ controversial and oft maligned “war on drugs”. Subsequently, Nixon set the tone for years of public policy in regards to illicit drug use. Although he championed both crime-based and public health-based approaches, it is his legacy of drug criminalization, mandatory sentences, and no-knock warrants that shaped the years to come.

It could be argued that blaming the horrific ramifications of the drug war on Richard Nixon is unfair. It is entirely possible that Nixon simply failed to anticipate the collateral damage wrought on minority communities. Perhaps Nixon’s crusade against drugs was a sincere act by a man who abhorred the tragic loss of life and economic burden attributed to increasing rates of drug abuse. Perhaps the negative consequences

inflicted by his policies were unintended, the simple product of well-meaning naiveté. However, recently released commentary from one of Nixon's former aides calls this premise into question. Instead what begins to take shape is the dark underbelly of this "all-out offensive" (Nixon *Remarks*) on drugs. In an interview with Dan Baum, John Ehrlichman, Nixon's chief domestic adviser, confided that the war on drugs was a politically motivated measure to deal with the Nixon Administration's enemies. He said:

The Nixon campaign in 1968, and the Nixon White House after that, had two enemies: the antiwar left and black people. You understand what I'm saying. We knew we couldn't make it illegal to be either against the war or black, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and blacks with heroin, and then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities. We could arrest their leaders, raid their homes, break up their meetings, and vilify them night after night on the evening news. Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course we did.

While the veracity of this admission has been questioned by family and former colleagues, it highlights a very real issue that has crippled communities in the United States for over 40 years. The quote is corroborated, albeit circumstantially, by excerpts from the diary of H.R. Haldeman, Nixon's former Chief of Staff. In it Mr. Haldeman reveals "[President Nixon] emphasized that you have to face the fact that the whole problem is really the blacks. The key is to devise a system that recognizes this while not appearing to" (Haldeman *Diary*). This damning account of the former president's racism is also supported by earlier comments from Ehrlichman in his book *Witness to Power*:

The Nixon Years, and the President's own recordings. Ehrlichman noted in 1982 that "Nixon said he believed that America's blacks could only marginally benefit from Federal programs because blacks were genetically inferior to whites. All the Federal money and programs we could devise could not change that fact" (Ehrlichman 223).

These comments help to solidify the image of a president who held black communities in contempt, making the disproportionate destruction dealt to minority communities hard to ignore. Whether or not it was done intentionally, what we see described by Mr. Ehrlichman in his admission perfectly details the effect the war on drugs has had on black neighborhoods across the country. Disruption, arrests, vilification, these are the results of a drug war and subsequent plague of mass incarceration targeted at the heart of black America. These forces would carve a swathe of destruction through black communities for the next forty years. Despite using drugs, and committing drug offenses at rates remarkably similar to whites, (Alexander 7) blacks would become the largest population under state or federal supervision for drug crimes (Carson 30). This is bearing in mind that blacks have always been a small fraction of the total population. It may not be evident how reliable Mr. Ehrlichman's remarks are, but when examining the history of black communities over the past four decades it is hard to ignore the similarities between his account and reality.

In the words of Nixon's advisers and the "War on Drugs" itself we see the influence of the social contract model. There is a strong insinuation that black communities were not contributing to society, and were threatening the existing social order. There is a sense that they were not fulfilling their unwritten obligations to society,

and so they were not deserving citizens. Richard Nixon harnessed the fears of white Americans following the triumphs of the civil rights era and turned them toward the black community in the form of targeted, punitive, crime policies. Black communities of the time were restless, yearning for social equality and political voice. They would not silently endure their oppression, and so the political establishment castigated them as trouble-makers and criminals. This notion fit perfectly with prior racialized conceptions of blacks as predisposed to crime and vulgarity. Thus the narrative of black criminality became further embedded in the American consciousness. As politicians and the media stoked fear of crime and drugs the view of black citizens as criminals slowly became common sense, reinforcing a criminal stereotype of black Americans that lingers to this day. Nixon cultivated and preyed on these fears to promote his efforts in the war on drugs.

It is beyond doubt that Richard Nixon led a very public and very charged crusade to criminalize drug users and facilitate law enforcement efforts to apprehend them. By promoting what would become the “Comprehensive Drug Abuse Prevention and Control Act of 1970”, and signing it into law, Nixon completed the first step in criminalizing drug use on a national level. This legislation unified existing laws and granted the federal government broader authority in controlling public drug use. It also laid the building blocks for the war on drugs by establishing a comprehensive classificatory system based on medicinal value and potential for abuse. This system was used to criminalize drugs that were deemed as having no medicinal value and high potential for addiction. For such criminalized substances mandatory minimums were established, depending on the

classification and amount of the drug in question. Further notable features included the doubling of maximum penalties for the distribution of such substances to individuals under the age of twenty one, as well as the manufacture of such substances in or near schools (U.S. 1970).

In addition to this, Nixon worked with congress to pass the “District of Columbia Court Reorganization and Criminal Procedure Act of 1970” which notably legalized measures such as no-knock searches and preventative detention. These two practices undermined the Constitutional protections of the fourth amendment and exacerbated existing power imbalances between the police and citizens, particularly those in marginalized communities. To top it all off the “Omnibus Crime Control Act of 1970” authorized more than 3.5 billion in federal aid to local and state law enforcement authorities from 1971 through 1973. This influx of funds lead to upgrades in police equipment and technology which in turn accelerated issues of militarization and targeted policing; disproportionately directed at minority neighborhoods. His dedication to drug criminalization and belief that “doubling the conviction rate in this country would do more to cure crime in America than quadrupling the funds for [Hubert] Humphrey’s war on poverty” (Winterdyk 322) poignantly summarizes his contribution to the establishment of runaway mass incarceration.

Nixon also championed prevention and treatment efforts, opening up unprecedented funding to be used in combating drug abuse as a public health crisis. However, this was at least in part due to the public’s association between drug abuse and Vietnam veterans at the time(Sirim 94)(Provine 95). At the time approximately half of

enlisted men had tried heroin at least once (Provine 95)(Cortright 169). Due to this association Nixon knew that he had to temper his punitive approach in order to make it politically palatable to the American public. It is one thing to wage a war on a racialized other, but an attack on the nation's veterans would be political suicide. As time went on future administrations and Congresses continued and expanded upon "tough on crime" mandates advocated by Richard Nixon, while slashing the funding he established for rehabilitation. It would not be fair to heap the blame solely upon Nixon, but there is no doubt that today's Prison-Industrial Complex (Davis) bears the mark of Nixon's fingerprints.

With the Watergate Scandal and Nixon's subsequent resignation Gerald Ford stepped into the Presidency. As Vice President he had played a substantial role in Nixon's policy efforts, and so he made no effort to remove or alter Nixon's "tough on crime" approach. During his short tenure as President, Ford he did move the war on drugs into the background however, focusing on other issues. His successor, Jimmy Carter, took a less straightforward approach to combating crime and drug addiction. Having run on a platform seeking to decriminalize marijuana, he stated in an address to Congress that "Penalties against possession of a drug should not be more damaging to an individual than the use of the drug itself; and where they are, they should be changed." (Carter *Drug Abuse Message*) This positioning followed popular support for leniency, largely due to the increasing prevalence of small-scale possession among middle-class youth (Rosenberg 25). Criticism within the scientific community that questioned the dangers of marijuana use further buoyed the move to decriminalize the drug. These efforts signaled a

change of positioning in relation to the previous administration, who fought vociferously against such decriminalization.

However, this relief was not long-lived. With skyrocketing rates of cocaine use and the widespread perception of marijuana as a *gateway drug* to more dangerous substances, the wave of public opinion shifted policy away from decriminalization yet again (Collett 35). The rest of Carter's drug-policy remained similar to Nixon before him, focusing heavily on supply-side efforts. Buckling under public pressure the Carter administration began to prosecute drug offenses more harshly, including the use of marijuana (Mallea 13). Though he was less vocal about being "tough on crime", Carter did not move to further alter the direction of the nation's crime and drug policies. Sure enough the prison population slowly grew under Carter as he and the Congress quietly continued the wars on crime and drugs. Heading into the 1980s and fighting with Ronald Reagan for re-election, the time for leniency was over.

Winning big in the election of 1980, Ronald Reagan ushered in a new era of "just say no" and "zero tolerance" (Rosenberg 27). More than any other it was Reagan who gutted public health funds for drug addiction and worked to stigmatize drug users as criminal and morally bankrupt. Drug interdiction funding soared under the first term of the Reagan Presidency, while money for public health measures dwindled (Rosenberg 26). The fevered rhetoric of Richard Nixon's 'war on drugs' met new heights under the Reagan Administration. In a radio address delivered on October 2nd, 1982, President Ronald Reagan declared:

The mood toward drugs is changing in this country, and the momentum is with us. We're making no excuses for drugs—hard, soft, or otherwise.

Drugs are bad, and we're going after them. As I've said before, we've taken down the surrender flag and run up the battle flag. And we're going to win the war on drugs (Ronald Reagan *Radio Address*).

This rallying cry brought drug policy again to center stage. As various social programs saw their funding cut the Reagan Administration continued allocating increasing amounts of resources to war on drugs. The escalation in federal money toward the drug war was nothing short of drastic and the results were staggering. On September 14th, 1986 Ronald Reagan announced “by next year our spending for drug law enforcement will have more than tripled from its 1981 levels” (Reagan *Address*). In this same timespan the United States’ prison population rose by 159,511, an increase of nearly a third (Langan et al 1988). It is here that America’s love affair with mass incarceration truly begins to take shape. Reagan harkens to it in his remarks at the Department of Justice on October 14th, 1986. In this speech he stated that “millions of dollars will be allocated for prison and jail facilities so that the mistake of releasing dangerous criminals because of overcrowded prisons will not be repeated” (Reagan *Remarks*). However, this would just be the tip of the iceberg.

Later that month new legislation would install the harshest penalties yet in the now burgeoning war on drugs. The Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986, and its successor, the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1988 were cornerstones of Reagan’s punitive policy, and under his leadership Congress passed both to devastating effect (Mallea 34). The acts

authorized numerous criminal and civil penalties for those convicted in relation to drug offenses. One of the most devastating of these was the implementation of brutal mandatory minimums when dealing with drug offenses, including the now oft-maligned 100:1 sentencing disparity between crack and powder cocaine. Under such regulations an offender convicted of possessing 5 grams of crack cocaine would face the same mandatory minimum sentence as an offender possessing 500 grams of powder cocaine. These penalties hit hardest among targeted urban communities that were predominantly black. While powder cocaine was associated with wealthier whites, crack became connected to blacks (Alexander 53). Plagued by generations of poverty and having become the image of crime in America, these communities were caught in a cycle of powerlessness and violence. Perhaps more than any other example, the differences in sentencing between the two types of cocaine serves to illustrate the double-standard urban blacks faced, and continue to face from the criminal justice system.

Undoubtedly this sentencing discrepancy was one of the many racialized components resulting in the growing disparity of incarceration rates between the two races. Looking back to 1964, the year of the Civil Rights Act, the black prison population was nearly half of the white prison population. However, the black prison population was steadily gaining throughout the 1970s and 1980s. By 1990 the black prison population nearly reached parity with whites, despite the fact that blacks only consisted of 12.1 % of the total population according to the 1990 Census. By the very next year the black prison population became the majority, racing past the prison population for whites (Beck & Gilliard 8). President at the time, George Bush Sr. would continue the crusade on crime

and drugs, maintaining the policies of his predecessor and again doubling the budget for the drug war in 1990 (Mallea 35). With the entrenchment of Reagan's approach under the Bush administration and growing public support, the War on Drugs became all but unstoppable.

After being elected in the 1992 Presidential race Bill Clinton had the opportunity to stand against the growing wave of mass incarceration and mitigate its most damaging effects. However, this was not to be. His campaign made a conscious decision to avoid the mistakes of Democrats before him. In a concerted effort not to look "soft on crime" he instead promoted punitive policies in the vein of his most zealous predecessors. In an uncompromising political climate this meant fighting to usurp control of the crime issue from Republican dominance (Alexander 56). In what can only be described as a race to the right, Clinton took the policies of the Reagan/Bush era and put them on steroids. His subsequent victory over George Bush Sr. came at the expense of minority communities across the nation. Having run on a crime platform straight out of his opponent's playbook he entered the Presidency with a mandate built on decades of racist rhetoric and crime-based fear mongering.

Once in office he slowly began to fulfill on a promised platform of "tough on crime" measures. With his support the Republican Congress passed the *Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994*. This legislation "created dozens of new federal capital crimes, mandated life sentences for some three-time offenders, and authorized more than 16 billion for state prison grants and the expansion of state and local police forces" (Alexander 56). One of the most damaging impacts of the law was

the implementation of federal “three strikes” statutes (*1032 Sentencing Enhancement*). Offenders convicted of their third felony could face life imprisonment, swelling the ranks of American prisons to the point of overcrowding. The overpopulation of America’s prisons was further aggravated by the act’s encouragement of states to adopt “truth in sentencing” provisions. Such policies stipulated that offenders must serve at least 85% of their sentence, with the intent of eliminating discretion-based parole processes. When the U.S. Sentencing Commission proposed eliminating the disparity in sentencing for crack and powder cocaine, Clinton decided to sign into law a bill that preserved the racialized discrepancy (Savage & Richter). The results were nothing short of astonishing. At the close of Bill Clinton’s presidency a net total of almost half a million more Americans were incarcerated by state and federal prisons (Beck 1). This surge in the prison population necessitated the massive expansion of prison and correctional systems thereby promoting the proliferation of for-profit prisons and increased corporate involvement in the criminal justice system. In the end the confluence of these factors resulting in the normalization of the drug war and system of mass incarceration.

This normalization can be seen in the years following. To the public and the government, regimes of mass incarceration and the punitive drug war had become a factual reality, with many of us not recognizing any other way. Years of inundation by politicians, special interest groups, and the media had created a chasm between public perceptions of crime and reality. With the prison-industrial complex (Davis) as the new normal, movement away from such policies became difficult to defend. The growing power of corporate interests and enduring support of a fear-stricken public underscored

mass incarceration's grip on American society. In the following years both George W. Bush and Barack Obama would contribute to the problem, with their agendas growing out of a social and political environment shaped by the decades before them.

President George W. Bush didn't need to emphasize the fight against drugs and crime the way his father did as he followed Reagan's legacy in the late 1980s. By the election of 2000 the American mentality was so accustomed to the "tough on crime" approach that it remained little more than a footnote in his campaign. However, with the traumatic terrorist attacks taking place on September 11th, 2001 Bush found a renewed interest in the War on Drugs. He framed the fight against drugs as an important battle in the War on Terror, stating "If you quit drugs, you join the fight against terrorism" (Staff CBSNews). His assertion followed the logic that terrorist cells, such as Al-Qaeda, fund their efforts through illicit drug smuggling and distribution. At a time when America was dealing with the aftermath of historic loss this rhetoric had particular appeal. In his zeal to combat both drugs and terror he increased federal spending on the drug war to new levels. At the height of his funding fervor George Bush budgeted nearly 22 billion dollars for drug control with over half of it directed toward law enforcement efforts (National Drug Control Budget 18). With this growth in federal funding and shifting attitudes on terrorism we see a parallel explosion in the militarization of police forces.

The militarization of America's police has grown steadily since the establishment of the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration in 1968, but there has been an acceleration since the Clinton presidency. Police paramilitary units, such as SWAT teams, have proliferated over the past fifteen years, and the use of armored personnel

vehicles and other military equipment has expanded exponentially. From the mid-1980s to 2007 the U.S. saw a 60% increase in police paramilitary units (PPUs) in cities with 25,000 to 50,000 residents (Kraska *Militarization* 506). Furthermore, these units saw heavy use, with an approximate 45,000 PPU deployments in the year 2007 (Kraska *Militarization* 506). This is an increase of over 15,000 annual deployments since 1995 (Kraska *Militarizing* 7). Remarkably, 80% of these deployments were for no-knock raids looking for contraband, particularly drugs (Kraska, *Militarization* 507). It is not hard to see how the expansion of PPU's and their indiscriminate use has contributed to the continued growth of the black prison population and the oppression of black communities.

With the election of Barack Obama in November 2008 there was hope for a change of direction. However, the legacy of President Obama would be a mixed bag. In many ways he made great strides in slowing down the onslaught of mass incarceration. He was the first sitting President to visit a prison (Horsley), and throughout his two terms commuted the sentences of 1,715 inmates (National Archives). He advocated and signed into law the *Fair Sentencing Act of 2010*, which repealed the mandatory minimum for crack-cocaine, and significantly diminished the sentencing disparity between it and powder cocaine (Mallea 36). He even loosened rules for marijuana research and relaxed the prosecution of federal marijuana laws (Mallea 20). As a result of these efforts we have seen the first decrease in the population of U.S. citizens under state and federal incarceration in nearly forty years.

However, these successes have barely scratched the number of Americans behind bars, with blacks still accounting for the largest racial group incarcerated in 2014 (Carson 30). Despite his best efforts the criminal justice system has continued to suffer from issues related to mass incarceration and drug control. Most notably racial profiling, excessive force, police militarization, and the stigma of the black criminal stereotype. Dr. Peter Kraska estimates that the U.S. now averages between 50,000 and 80,000 PPU deployments per year, a significant increase from the numbers under George W. Bush (Balko). Matching this increase, the amount of money spent on drug control also increased under the Obama administration, ultimately to the tune of roughly eight billion. This was true of both public health and law enforcement funding, with public health initiatives seeing a greater rate of increase toward the end of his second term (*National Drug Control Budget*). It is likely too much to ask any single man to tear down the legacy of mass incarceration. Undoubtedly Barack Obama did more to restore black communities than any president of the past forty years, but in the end it merely amounts to a drop in the ocean. Mass incarceration has taken the lifeblood of black communities, leaving them stagnant and hollow. Generations of potential have been wasted and squandered. Leaders, parents, and whole generations of youth have grown up under the racialized control of an oppressive criminal justice system. The effects of this system go far beyond the prison yard, reaching into the heart of black communities, and even onto their dinner plates.

It is within this historical framework that I situate my forthcoming analysis. Recognizing the roots of black oppression and the longstanding war against black

communities is necessary to contextualize their journey and understand their current oppression. By doing so, we can connect the artistic expression of lived realities from a black perspective to the documented historical realities of the time, as well as the challenges faced by these communities today. Bearing this in mind I will include the year each creative work I analyze was published or released. This will allow us to construct a more complete picture of the issue by providing pieces of the puzzle often overlooked. In doing so linkages between the food system and the criminal justice system will become apparent through the art of individuals within the black community.

Chapter Four: Analysis of Creative Works

You see you wouldn't ask why the rose that grew from the concrete had damaged petals. On the contrary, we would all celebrate its tenacity. We would all love it's will to reach the sun. - Tupac Shakur

In the above excerpt from Tupac Shakur's book of poetry *The Rose that Grew From Concrete*, the titular rose is autobiographical, but it can be symbolic for the black community at large. It is a symbol of every child born into a poor black family in urban America. When he says "the seed must grow, regardless of the fact that it's planted in stone." He is referring to the environment poor black children are born into, not just physically but socially. Poor urban neighborhoods are not fertile soil for the development of a child. In Tupac's poems they are stone, cold and unforgiving. Poverty, crime, stress, the lack of food, education, and healthcare, this is the harsh environment in which the children must grow. The connection between children and seeds emphasizes the importance of environment. We would not expect a rose to grow from concrete, so why do we expect children from these communities to achieve regardless of the adversity they face. Why do we blame a failure to bloom on the seed itself and not the fact that it has been planted in concrete?

I hold that it is because of the influence of the social contract model, and capitalist hegemony. As I noted earlier in the theoretical chapter, the social contract model places expectations upon the citizen that they must fulfill in order to expect the full benefits of citizenship. Participation in crime, joblessness, and drug abuse are a few examples of breaching the social contract. This model emphasizes personal responsibility and

individual choice. It is both reinforced by and shapes beliefs that “they choose to live that way”, or “they just need to reform themselves”, and fails to account for larger social agents. The responsibility for failure becomes centered on the individual. Societal context and chains of explanation become irrelevant, and any lack of success is framed as a personal deficit in ambition, intellect, or diligence. In this way the mass incarceration of black Americans can be rationalized and the programs to help feed them can be gutted by categorizing them as jobless, criminal, drug abusers. This is part of the process that has made black households twice as likely to be food insecure, and six times as likely to be incarcerated when compared to their white counterparts. These are not merely coincidental correlations. The food system and criminal justice system both directly and indirectly influence the other in meaningful ways.

I theorize that there are three major ways criminal justice and food justice interrelate. These three keys are as follows: 1.) The prevalence of food insecurity in poor neighborhoods. 2.) The limitation of economic viability through criminal conviction. And 3.) The destruction political voice through conviction. You can start on any point from one through three and look at the others as subsequent effects, creating a chicken and egg paradox. However, in reality they are all simultaneously working to mutually reinforce one another. Due to the racialization of our criminal justice system, these three keys all affect the black community at disproportionate levels, but can be observed among other racial groups as well. For the purposes of this paper, I will examine them through the context of poor, urban blacks. However, in the future I hope to extend this analysis to other racial, ethnic, and geographical areas. Understanding the ongoing dialectic between

the food system and the criminal justice system can be visualized through these three principles and the negatively reinforcing loop they perpetuate. Each of these different dynamics will be explored at greater length throughout this chapter as I sketch out my theoretical understanding and illustrate it through the analysis of expressive art forms from the black community.

Imagine three young children, their stomach racked with hunger pangs, trying to sleep on a hot and balmy Louisiana night. Sweat drenches their dark skin as they toss and turn, unable to sleep. They slip down from their room upstairs to ask their mother for something more to eat, their light, timid footfalls drawing her attention. It's the end of the month and like clockwork the food in their small house is running low. Luckily, the children's godmother had brought by half a loaf of bread and their mother relents, allowing each a syrup sandwich, "commodity peanut butter and syrup slithered on bread" (Davis, J 12). As the children bolt into the kitchen to fix their sandwiches their mother sits on the sofa lost in a sea of thought. A commercial comes on the television depicting starving children in Africa, and tears well in her soft brown eyes. This is how Johnny Davis opens his novel *Been Bout Dat*, acknowledging the centrality of food to his story, and grounding it in the common experience of children in poor black neighborhoods, just like the New Orleans ward where his story takes place. When he refers to these syrup sandwiches as a "ghetto classic" (Davis, J 12) he is confirming the commonality of this meal, or others like it. In the hip-hop song "Ghetto Story Chapter 2" released in 2006 by Cham featuring Alicia Keys, we see a similar reality painted through Keys' sultry voice. She laments, "remember those days when I went to bed hungry, all I ever ate was white

rice and honey, big dreams in my head empty my tummy”. These two voices speak to a similar experience for children in black households and black communities.

It is the clawing pain of hunger and the suffering of his siblings that motivates the young protagonist, Fattz, to leave home and begin a life of crime. He remembers nights where he and his brother would drink jars of sugar water to fight back the growling of their empty stomachs. Just like the Keys’ character in “Ghetto Story”, going to bed hungry was a simple fact of life for Fattz and his siblings. “Before he walked out of the room he took a long look at his siblings and said to himself ‘no more water nights for us, I promise ya dat” (Davis, J 14). This experience of hunger is a common thread running through the hip-hop genre. With the release of “Changes” in 1998 Tupac Shakur made his own commentary on the influence of hunger in black communities across the country. He draws out the connection between food and crime rapping “I’m tired of being poor and, even worse, I’m black. My stomach hurts so I’m looking for a purse to snatch. Cops give a damn about a negro. Pull the trigger, kill a n***a, he’s a hero. Give the crack to the kids: who the hell cares? One less hungry mouth on the welfare.” Much like Fattz, the unnamed character of Tupac Shakur’s verse is compelled to crime by the pain of hunger. In his world the question becomes one of crime or going hungry. In his 2008 hip-hop track “Hip-Hop Saved My Life”, Lupe Fiasco references a similar need to provide food, rapping “he turns down the beat, writer's block impedes, crying from the next room, a baby in need, of some Pampers and some food and a place to sleep”. However, the difference is that Lupe Fiasco’s character is one of the lucky ones, able to pursue financial stability through his talent as a hip-hop artist. Sadly, this is not a viable option

for many living in crushing poverty and poor neighborhoods. These neighborhoods become grave sites, slowly killing the community through lack of opportunity and the weight of racial discrimination. This is the reality that has produced an underclass of black Americans, condemned to lives of overwhelming poverty with little chance at upward mobility.

With limited educational and economic opportunities, crime becomes particularly attractive in these areas. This is reflected in the lyrics already shown, as well as Ludacris' 2006 song "Mouths to Feed" (2006). In it he states "listen, look I gotta feed my family by all means necessary. Cause paychecks are coming up shorter than February. Can't get a real job, I never finished school. Can't get no new clothes, I wore the same tennis shoes." Ludacris makes mention of the difficulty finding a "real job" and the limitations of never finishing school, two well-documented realities for black Americans (Bertrand & Mullainathan)(Noguera)(Lynn et al)(Schott Foundation). It is vital to remember that statistics show that blacks do not in fact engage in drug crime at a higher rate than whites (Alexander 7), but they do face unique challenges that push them toward crime and drugs as opportunities in the informal economy. Further agreement comes from Mos Def's brilliant "Mathematics" (1999) where he relates:

When the average minimum wage is \$5.15

You best believe you gotta find a new grind to get cream

The white unemployment rate, is nearly more than triple for black

So front liners got they gun in your back

Bubbling crack, jewel theft and robbery to combat poverty

And end up in the global jail economy

Here Mos Def lays the issues of violence and crime in poor black neighborhoods at the feet of the capitalist political economy and racialization of labor. He cites a barely liveable minimum wage and rampant black unemployment as barriers to black prosperity, with crime as their only viable alternative to provide for their families. Looking back to the historical reality, his words ring true. The unemployment rate for blacks has been consistently double that of whites, sometimes even more (DeSilver). Blacks have been systemically oppressed in this country through a complex system of laws, institutions, and social attitudes. A never-ending succession of racial projects has maintained white supremacy and limited the opportunities available to blacks. With few legitimate options in the economy, the turn to crime is a staple in hip-hop music.

Yo, it's one universal law but two sides to every story

Three strikes and you be in for life, mandatory

Four MC's murdered in the last four years

I ain't tryin to be the fifth one, the millenium is here

Yo it's 6 Million Ways to Die, from the seven deadly thrills

Eight-year olds gettin found with 9 mill's

It's 10 P.M., where your seeds at? What's the deal

He on the hill puffin krill to keep they belly filled

Here we see Mos Def expand his argument further, talking about dealing drugs to stave away hunger. There's a lot going on through these verses. Early on we see a reference to three strikes laws and mandatory minimum sentencing. As a major contributor to the incarceration of black citizens these laws shaped the urban landscape Mos Def was writing about in the late 1990s. His line referencing eight year olds with "9 mills" is talking about nine millimeter handguns, a common weapon used in poor urban neighborhoods. This matches up with Fattz's life in *Been 'Bout Dat* where he takes to the streets at the age of eight, and quickly learns the ways of the thug life, including how to use a gun.

A few lines later he gives a nod to PSA's from the late 1960s through the 1980s. These PSA's originated following civil unrest and rioting in urban neighborhoods during the summer of 1967, and asked "It's 10 PM, do you know where your children are?" This is an important reference to black history and the struggle of the black community. He follows up immediately with the claim "he on the hill puffin krill to keep they belly filled". Puffin krill is slang for smoking crack cocaine. Connecting this line to the one that precedes it we can see the "he" being mentioned is the son of the parents already referenced. The change from "he" to "they" indicates that the belly being filled by the son smoking crack is a third party, most logically drug dealers working to make a living and feed themselves or their families. This again relates back to Fattz's experience on the streets of New Orleans. While he was selling drugs and working out on the streets he would send half of his earnings back to his family to feed his siblings and support his mother.

The idea of sending money back to your family, or remittances is something that can be seen in historical situations from European immigrants in the early 20th century, to today's Mexican migrant workers. The practice is also captured in hip-hop verses, like Tupac Shakur's "Dear Mama" (1995) where he says "I moved out and started really hanging. I needed money of my own so I started slanging. I ain't guilty cause, even though I sell rocks, it feels good putting money in your mailbox." In the story created by these lines, the narrator shares a similar experience with Fattz. He moves out at a young age and starts hanging around with older thugs on the street. He quickly learns the ropes and becomes a drug dealer, sending money back to a poor mother just trying to get by. In Fattz's own words "he could care less what the watchers thought or said. For he knew none of the nosey people would help his mother pay their rent, clothe them, or put food on their table...all of which he was doing" (Davis, J 23). This glimpse into Fattz's mind shows that just like the narrator in "Dear Mama", any sense of guilt for his crimes is alleviated by the fact he is providing for his mother and siblings. Dealing drugs becomes his way of pulling his family out of the poverty that surrounds them. It doesn't matter that it isn't a sustainable fix, or that if he goes to prison like his father the family will be right back where they were.

The weight of chronic stress associated with poverty has been demonstrated to alter decision-making and in conjunction with his youth can account for Fattz's focus on a short-term fix (Haushofer & Fehr). The direness of his condition discounts the efficacy of long-term solutions in his mind. Like many populating our prisons and jails, the allure of quick money and a better life sooner than later is overwhelming to a desperate Fattz.

Rising above hunger and the everyday debasement of poverty becomes the driving force in his young mind. As a juvenile he finds no alternative manner to provide for his family, and so he takes to the streets. Long-term investments like education or vocational training offer no reprieve from his family's current poverty, even if they were available to him. Therefore he adopts the short-term, and shortsighted solution of dealing drugs. It is important to consider this in the context of the character's lived reality. Someone from a different experience could question the decision, but they are not dealing with the myriad of factors shaping his choice. They have not grown up under the same conditions that influenced his perception of reality, and that is important. Someone who has never suffered from chronic hunger and perpetual poverty cannot possibly understand the depth of its effect.

When looking at the role of food insecurity and hunger in the story of urban black America it becomes more than just the body's physical need for nourishment, but also a manifestation of the hopelessness and desperation found in these neighborhoods. The persistent ache of hunger, day in and day out, transcends simple physical requirements for life and becomes a symbol of their oppression. The impetus to engage in criminal acts to escape this oppression is more than just the fulfillment of pressing physical needs, but the attainment of a position where the worries of poverty are alleviated. It is the shedding of a psychic weight over the chronic stress of limited food, lack of healthcare, physical poverty, and personal shame (Santiago et al 218). This shame can be particularly potent for parents who cannot provide for their children. The motivation to rise above poverty can easily become desperation. In response, the pursuit of financial stability through

crime serves as an alternative means of attaining status and security in a system rigged heavily against them. The need to resort to crime in these impoverished areas reveals a coinciding lack of legitimate economic opportunity (Squires & Kubrin 47)(Allard & Danziger 675). This lack of opportunity can be traced back to a number of different roots already covered in the previous chapter, including discrimination in the workforce, education, investment, and housing (Lipsitz 1-23). Due to these historical oppressions alternative methods of financial gain, particularly crime, become a means to meet the needs of the desperate and chronically poor. As Fattz puts it he “could only sit around and watch his family struggle for so long- without getting up, going out, and getting it” (Davis, J 55). For Fattz the lack of legitimate options becomes a gateway to street life, necessitating his move into the shadow economy of the drug trade.

Yet, turning to crime never truly fulfills the needs of struggling black families in America. Ultimately it undermines community cohesion and serves as a means to further their own subjugation. The perpetration of such crime reinforces negative stereotypes about black criminality, and feeds into unreasonable fear of the black body. Successfully affiliating urban blacks with crime and drugs was at the heart of drug war rhetoric in the 1970s and 1980s, and continues to shape the perceptions of the public today. For example, “white respondents in a 2010 survey overestimated the actual share of burglaries, illegal drug sales, and juvenile crime committed by African Americans by 20-30%” (Ghandnoosh 3). This unrealistic perception shapes deeply held beliefs and strongly influences public policy, feeding a cyclical relationship between perceptions of criminality and dubious policies like racial profiling that devastate marginalized

communities. Not surprisingly “white Americans who associate crime with blacks and Latinos are more likely to support punitive policies – including capital punishment and mandatory minimum sentencing – than whites with weaker racial associations of crime” (Ghandnoosh 3). The effects are not only limited to white communities though. Americans of all races continue to demonstrate a heightened perception of risk from crime, despite a steady downward trend in crime rates over the past thirty years (Gramlich). The resilience of these perceptions is proof that the false narrative associating crime and the black community has been successful.

Over forty years of manipulation by politicians and the media has coalesced into cultural attitudes that view blackness and criminality as interchangeable. The myth has become so ubiquitous it has become accepted as reality, even within the very communities it stigmatizes and victimizes. The results of this process have been striking. As scholar Michelle Alexander notes “more African American adults are under correctional control today [2007] --in prison or jail, on probation or parole-- than were enslaved in 1850, a decade before the Civil War began” (Alexander 180). For some the siren song of crime and drug dealing may promise a better life, but in reality it feeds young black men (and women) into a system that devours them and spits out their remains. Those who are lucky enough to return to their communities are not the same as when they left. As Tupac addresses in his song Trapped (1991), “too many brothers daily heading for the big pen. Niggas commin' out worse off than when they went in.” Stigmatized and stripped of their rights and already limited economic viability, the potential for a better future is all but gone. This process dramatically alters the

communities where it is most active, reshaping their economic, political, and social character. By facilitating this the existing system of criminal justice simply fuels a downward spiral, exacerbating existing inequalities. In the words of Mos Def:

Stiffer stipulations attached to each sentence

Budget cutbacks but increased police presence

And even if you get out of prison still living

Join the other five million under state supervision

Thus, the criminal justice system works to delineate who has access the food produced in our society. After all, few things in our society destroy economic opportunity more effectively than criminal conviction. The consequential loss of economic opportunity becomes central because access to the commercial food system is dependent upon money. As Marx noted in the *Grundrisse* “the quantity of grain available is completely irrelevant to the worker if he has no employment; that it is therefore the means of employment and not of subsistence which put him into the category of surplus population” (Marx *Grundrisse* 540). Indeed, in a system where food is commodified, access to said food is dependent upon financial means which in turn are dependent upon economic participation. This is supported by statistics noting the correlation between unemployment and poverty (DeNavas & Proctor 70) and subsequently poverty and food insecurity (Coleman-Jensen et al). The unavailability of economic opportunity in socio-economically depressed black neighborhoods limits such participation, and criminal conviction compounds these limitations further as Mos Def observed. Social programs such as food stamps attempt to alleviate issues of food insecurity that derive from

poverty, but are not sufficient to address the problem. In many states felony conviction can result in being barred from such programs, blocking needy families from vitally needed nutritional assistance (Alexander 57). This is most devastating to the very economically limited households that already cannot afford to feed themselves or their children. These households face legal discrimination on multiple fronts, an unfortunate reality that many convicted criminals face. Within our current criminal justice system the legal, political, and social debts incurred by their transgressions do not end once they have done their time and re-enter society. In fact, former prisoners carry a life-long stigma from their convictions that often leads to issues with employment, compensation, access to social programs, admittance to higher education, and acquiring loans. As a consequence these economic issues complicate food access for convicted criminals and their families, sustaining and enhancing unequal distributions of food insecurity in the poor urban neighborhoods.

Whether currently incarcerated or released back into greater society, convicted criminals and their families face diminished financial means with which to access a steady and healthy food supply. Consider that for instance 2.7 million children have parents incarcerated in the United States. Consider further that 1.2 million prisoners, virtually one half the imprisoned population, are parents of children under the age of 18 (Western & Pettit). If a father or mother is incarcerated that often means that parent no longer is a source for income to feed that child. In cases where that parent is working as prison labor their pay may be as little as \$0.23- \$1.15 per hour according to self-reporting from Federal Prison Industries (UNICOR). Although the incarcerated parents themselves

are fed by the prison, this wage is not enough to support their dependents. This can make it exceedingly difficult for the remaining parent to secure reliable food access and maintain a healthy diet for both themselves and the children. Fattz's family is a perfect illustration of this hard reality, as is Tupac's family in "Dear Mama". Likewise, in "Poppa was a Playa", Nas recognizes the importance of having two parents growing up. He states:

My old dad important to the family structure

A provider, A God

My mom's a queen, that universal team civilized us

My pops maybe was late but always came home

My mom would put us to bed and she would wait on

The depiction of these poor urban families is supported by figures which state that households with only a father present have nearly double the national prevalence in food insecurity, while households with only a mother are approximately three times the norm (Coleman-Jensen et al). While criminal conviction and incarceration are not the only cause of single parenthood, these statistics nonetheless illustrate the impact criminal conviction can have upon entire families and their level of food security. According to prison statistics, this is a reality that plagues millions of households in the United States.

In the case of Fattz's family, the poverty we are introduced to in the beginning of the novel is a consequence of his father's incarceration. We see it in the nights the children would go to sleep hungry, filling their bellies on glasses of sugar water just to make it through to morning. "Fattz had often prayed for his father to be released from

prison and for GOD to give his mother money to help better their living conditions” (Davis, J 55). We feel the young boy’s pain as his prayers go unanswered and his family continues to suffer. His poor mother cannot earn enough money to keep her family fed, depending on the kindness of neighbors to just get through the end of each month. It is this cruel reality that necessitates Fattz taking on a role of provider in his family, despite his youth. Too young to work legally, Fattz sees street life as the only opportunity to provide for his mother and siblings. Waiting through school for a chance at a better future was not an option. His family’s dire situation required a quicker fix, and so he turned to a life of dealing drugs, becoming in the words of Mos Def a “[y]oung soldier[] trying to earn [his] next stripe”.

However, the punishment of incarceration does not end with the completion of your sentenced term. Even upon re-entering society former inmates continue to face obstacles in providing for themselves and their dependents. Upon release convicted criminals find it much more difficult to secure work thanks to social stigma and laws which allow employment discrimination based on criminal record. Research has indicated that 80% of former inmates in California remain unemployed up to a year after re-entry (Petersilia 119). One analysis, conducted in New York City found that applicants with a criminal record were 50% less likely to receive a callback from employers (Pager & Western 6). This is further corroborated by another study which found that out of 3,000 surveyed employers roughly 60% indicated they would “probably not” or “definitely not” hire an applicant with a criminal record (Holzer 57). Even when ex-offenders can find employment, studies indicate that conviction can diminish income up

to 30% when former inmates return to the workforce (Waldfoegel 62). The impact of these barriers is two-fold. First it directly affects the available financial means of a household where one or more parent is (or has been) incarcerated. This means not only that the household will have difficulty in their ability to directly pay for food, but also that additional factors such as their residential area and mode of transportation further impede food security. Second, ex-offenders facing these situations often turn back to crimes such as drug dealing or theft to meet financial needs for themselves and dependents. This fuels strong rates of recidivism, which Bureau of Justice Statistics research has indicated are as high as 67.5% within three years of release (Petersilia 12). Re-arrest of course aggravates the situation and perpetuates the household's financial issues, creating a recurring cycle of poverty and crime that is extremely difficult to escape. With each conviction the sentences become harsher, a fact captured by Mos Def rapping "stiffer stipulations attached to each sentence". For many, this creates a certain image of oppression that revolves around the prison experience, but that image is only a piece of the larger picture. Recognizing the importance of physical incarceration in prison facilities should not be understated, but as Mos Def acknowledges just lines later there is more to it than prison alone. As he notes, even those who are on probation or parole "[j]oin the other five million under state supervision". This is an important and often overlooked reality.

The imprisoned are not the only ones who deal with these issues. Even those who never see a day of prison time, particularly those on probation, face many of the same obstacles. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, nearly five million adults were under community supervision in 2013. Of those individuals a substantial 82% were on

probation (Herberman 1). In many states across the nation the external costs of being on probation are very similar to those already discussed about physical incarceration. As employers have become increasingly likely to look into the criminal backgrounds of potential hires, (Holzer et al 11) costs in economic opportunity have also risen for ex-offenders. While several states and municipalities have banned the use of the felony checkbox in the job application process, many more still utilize it. For the 55% of probationers with felony convictions this can mean near automatic disqualification for most employment opportunities (Herberman 17). Even those with misdemeanors can face significant employment discrimination. Just as with other segments of the criminal justice system, this affects poor, urban blacks at a disproportionate rate. Blacks made up 30% of the probation population in 2013, despite being only 12.6% of the total U.S. population according to the 2010 U.S. Census (Herberman 20). Therefore the damaging effects of community supervision, just like imprisonment exact an inordinate toll on poor black communities. Facing such obstacles it is only logical that convicted criminals, both imprisoned and on community supervision, may very likely face significant issues of food insecurity. This fact aligns with the reality that poor, urban blacks are both significantly more likely to be criminally convicted and food insecure than the national average. However, further analysis is needed to explicitly connect criminal conviction and food insecurity.

It is vital that such research take place because the very limited data we currently possess indicates that criminal conviction and consequent incarceration may have profound effects on food security. This is supported by correlation in state by state

measures of per capita incarceration and food insecurity. The states with most prisoners per 100,000 people in 2013 were Louisiana, Oklahoma, Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia (U.S. DOJ). Comparatively the incidence of food insecurity was most severe in Mississippi, Arkansas, Louisiana, Alabama, and Kentucky (Coleman-Jensen et al). Although there is not a perfect mirroring of these states in both lists, the fact that there is overlap between three states out of five indicates a need for further examination. To further strengthen this argument, the remaining states where there was not direct overlap still had above average levels of the parallel statistic. Arkansas and Kentucky share higher than average prison rates, whereas Oklahoma and Georgia boast higher than average food insecurity. Interestingly, Louisiana, the state in which *Been 'Bout Dat* takes place, is ranked within the top three in both categories. The story of Fattz and his family struggling with hunger is representative of a grim reality faced by many in New Orleans. At a county level Orleans Parish has a 23.7% food insecurity rate according to Feeding America's Map the Meal Gap project (Map the Meal Gap). In conjunction Orleans Parish also has an extremely high incarceration rate, measured at 861.4 incarcerated individuals per 100,000, one of the highest in the nation (Justice, Vera Institute of). In this overlap we see the story of Fattz emerge, shaped heavily by both factors.

Rates of food insecurity also correspond vaguely with rates of incarceration when viewed racially and ethnically. In both cases blacks experience the highest rates, followed by Hispanics, and then whites. This is illustrated by figures from the Economic Research Service (Coleman-Jensen et al) and Bureau of Justice Statistics (U.S. DOJ). Ultimately though, these are merely indicators that further investigation is required. Until more

research is done and rival causal factors identified we cannot say for certain whether there is a direct statistical causality between incarceration and food insecurity. As I have explored throughout this paper, there is a relationship between criminal justice and food justice. Historical evidence and the black experience as expressed through creative works both give context to this relationship, but much more data is needed to improve our understanding of this phenomenon.

To further comprehend this relationship we must also recognize the repercussions of criminal conviction on political voice in the urban black community. States such as Florida, Iowa, and Kentucky punish conviction for any felony offense with lifetime disenfranchisement. Seven other states use lifetime disenfranchisement for at least some crimes. In the whole nation a mere two states have no disenfranchisement for people with criminal convictions, Vermont and Maine (Brennan Center). Blacks account for less than 2% of the population in both Vermont and Maine, highlighting further the racialization of crime-based disenfranchisement in the overall system. Meanwhile in Florida one in thirty-seven blacks were incarcerated according to the 2000 U.S. Census, making them far more likely than whites to lose their voting rights (Florida's Prisons). Despite being roughly 15% of the total population, blacks comprise 48% of the prison population in Florida, resulting in an overwhelming loss of political voice in the black community (Florida Department 38). With his song "My President", Young Jeezy brings attention to this, rapping:

Yeah, our history, black history

No president ever did shit for me

Had to hit the streets, had to flip some keys
So a nigga won't go broke
Then they put us in jail, now a nigga can't go vote

The loss of voting rights however is more than the product of legalized discrimination. It also results from the ignorance of individuals who are never told that in some cases they can restore those rights. In numerous instances former offenders don't even know they are eligible to do so. While many are legally barred from voting in states across the nation, from Arizona to Alabama, even more suffer disenfranchisement from this widespread lack of knowledge. They either mistakenly believe that their rights cannot be restored, or they simply do not know how to go about restoring them. As rapper 2Chainz explained in an interview with the Huffington Post, "I've been a felon since I was 15, so when I found out that I could be reinstated and all of that and get my votership back, I've been a voice for that." He goes on to say, "I remember being in the mall around '08 and lady just telling me, 'Come sign up to vote,' and I just felt it was too late; I made a mistake when I was young and just couldn't fix it" (Landon). However, in some states you can fix it. Unfortunately ex-offenders are often not notified of this when they are released. Others are afraid that petitioning the government for the reinstatement of their rights will draw more unwanted attention to themselves, and land them back in prison for being defiant (Alexander 160). Whatever the reason, significant numbers of men and women in the black community continue to have their political voices silenced. One would think that this system would be unacceptable in a country that prides itself in

its democratic roots, such as the United States. Informing prisoners if, when, and how they can restore their voting rights should logically be an obligation of the government.

Yet, even knowledge is not enough in and of itself. In some states the burden of the restoration process is so complicated, expensive, or difficult that many remain disenfranchised for life, even in states that allow for reinstatement. Financially prohibitive fines and court fees keep the impoverished from any possibility of regaining their rights, and creates graduated levels of citizenship based on financial status. Those who can pay have their rights restored, while those who cannot simply have to suffer through the indignity and disadvantage of second-class citizenship. For poor urban blacks who are disproportionately targeted by law enforcement, this results in racialized discrimination and effectively bars them from participating in the democratic process. These impoverished citizens, struggling just to pay rent, feed their households, and clothe their children, cannot afford to pay fines or hefty court fees that can run in the hundreds or thousands of dollars. Those who are able to attain employment cannot often get off work to spend a day at the courthouse filling out complicated documents, and those who can still face difficulties in getting to courthouses that may be many miles from their neighborhoods. In particular studies show that a mere 28% of urban black fathers have a vehicle they can access regularly, a number that shrinks further when considering only those who live in poverty-stricken areas (Alexander 51). Together these interlocking barriers result in the stark and shocking disenfranchisement of former offenders, particularly within the black community.

The result of all this disenfranchisement is a community that is disengaged with the political process. They lack representation in their own government, their voices silenced by a regime of racialized disadvantage. Without a political voice these communities are ignored, their problems out of sight and out of mind. The allocation of societal resources is funneled to more well-represented areas, and social inequalities in predominantly black neighborhoods persist. While political disenfranchisement may be less tangible than the economic straightjacket incarceration creates, it is no less damaging to the black community. The mass disenfranchisement of black Americans has effects from the top down. Not only can former offenders not vote for their President, Senators, or Governor; they are also barred from making local decisions that affect their households strongly. They cannot vote for the school board members that run their children's schools and they cannot vote for the judges and justices that oversee their legal jurisdictions. They cannot vote for propositions that would be beneficial for their families, or for tax plans that could further their existing poverty. When it comes down to it, the stripping of political voice in the black community means that they have little say in the decision-making process that shapes their communities, lives, and opportunities. This includes numerous factors that influence the establishment of alternative food systems, and the exercise of local food sovereignty. Instead of possessing the leverage to challenge dominant food systems that marginalize them, black communities are forced into positions of powerlessness, limiting their ability to affect change through political means.

Conclusion

There is a time and a place in ceaseless human endeavor to change the world, when alternative visions, no matter how fantastic, provide the grist for shaping powerful political forces of change. - David Harvey

A transformation of the American food system is entirely possible. We must not be daunted by the barriers before us; the status quo depends upon our uncertainty and indifference. All the weight of our amassed customs and norms, the institutions and structures that shape our world, can be rewritten with persistence and effort. Where there is hope for a more just tomorrow that possible future continues to exist. As the famous Chinese proverb ascribed to Laozi states “the journey of a thousand miles starts from beneath your feet (Laozi & Mitchell 38). Likewise, the fundamental change necessary to achieve food justice begins with the acknowledgement of injustice and the desire to overcome it. We must dedicate ourselves to action, even if that is but a single step. We all play a part in the realization of justice. It is our duty as scholars to break down the walls of ignorance and apathy and give the people the tools to see the world as it really is. It is our responsibility to spread awareness and spur the will to change.

In order to bring about food justice we must acknowledge the interconnectedness of social institutions. The American food system does not exist in a vacuum, separate from institutions of justice, education, politics, religion, or health. We must consider the manner in which these disparate structures relate in order to combat the inequalities that

shape our food system. This a fact that squares solidly with the black experience in America. In his *Letter From the Birmingham Jail* Martin Luther King Jr. said that “injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” Nowhere is this truer than the American social landscape. Oppression in the legal system begets oppression in the food system, and oppression in the food system feeds oppression in the legal system. The creative outlets of the black community express this reality in myriad ways, as I have explored in this work. These mutually reinforcing systems sustain each other and fuel a cycle of subjugation that relegates poor urban blacks to positions of powerlessness and marginality. The materials examined in this paper are but a sampling of the artifacts documenting this harsh reality.

As these case studies show, the criminal justice system stands as a vital point to leverage important change in patterns of food injustice. Reform in the criminal justice system could have profound effects regarding oppressed communities’ access to healthful food and their ability to make choices about their relationship with that food. The economic, political, and social ramifications of disproportionate conviction and incarceration have ravaged minority communities in the United States for too long. The path to food justice for these communities is long and arduous, but it runs directly through the heart of the criminal justice system. With the current system of criminal justice in place, food justice will forever remain elusive. For black communities in urban America the attainment of food justice is inseparable from the fulfillment of their economic potential, political voice, and successful leadership. Although it is only a beginning, the dissolution of mass incarceration as a racialized regime of social control is

essential. It is one step of the many necessary to realize the vision of food justice for all. In this vein, I see my work as generative of Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow*, taking her great work in a new direction and highlighting how it applies to issues of food justice. This provides us as scholars a new way to see the far-reaching implications of criminal justice reform. We cannot ignore the injustices of the criminal justice system; they are inextricably tied to the injustices of the food system and the widespread malnourishment it creates. There is no silver bullet, no grand panacea to solve the problems of food justice in the United States. It is important to remember this as we move forward in scholarship and activism. I do not propose that criminal justice reform is such a cure-all, but I do suggest that it is an important puzzle piece, and one that deserves more attention by food justice scholars and activists alike. In the future I hope to look deeper into this topic, and perhaps have the opportunity to analyze different social groups such as American Indians and other indigenous peoples in their own unique contexts. This project has been limited in scope because I wanted to focus specifically upon the black community, but future research will give me the freedom to engage with the topic from different perspectives. I am excited by the opportunity to move forward. There are so many promising avenues to explore, and so many stories to tell.

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