“LANGUAGING” THE ORGANIZATION:
NEGOTIATING POLITICS AT A COMMUNITY FOOD PROJECT

by

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(Under the Direction of Amy Trauger)

ABSTRACT

Scholars have devoted significant attention to the racial politics of community food organizations, highlighting how activists often unwittingly reproduce social exclusions while striving to build alternatives to the status quo. This thesis presents a case study of a community food project where multiple frameworks of food activism compete for dominance. Interviews with participants illustrate on-going confrontations around the organization's mission and operations, informed by multiple value systems including democratic politics and common practices of non-profit governance. Through episodes of conflict participants struggle to negotiate the terms of their collective political project, mobilizing a range of aspirations from professionalization and organizational growth to justice and legitimacy. This thesis makes the case that anti-democratic power structures in such organizations present fundamental problems for groups’ ability to pursue a mission of social justice in any coherent way. The theory and practice of radical democracy offer insights into how to build properly democratic institutions.

INDEX WORDS: Activism, voluntary sector, non-profit organizations, political organizing, social justice, food justice, democracy, racism
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by

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“Yeah, we could be better at our languaging for the organization, but then, how does that actually get us to where we need to be as far as stability?”

—Kait, former staff member, Growing Justice

For everyone striving to do more than “language” for food justice.

1 All names are falsified in this document, including that of the organization.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

“I think my favorite, and arguably the most radical, suggestion was returning the farm to its original incarnation and creating a Poor Farm. I liked this idea because it speaks to a time when towns enabled people to contribute to their self-sufficiency and gave them the tools and the place to do that. Whatever form the farm takes in the future, incorporating the ideas of community access in the service of food production, and cooperative self-reliance, seems like the best way to honor the tradition behind the farm’s original mission. It’s a matter of pride, and taking pride in something that belongs to everyone in this town. That is an idea that can grow into something big, and vital, and so needed in these uncertain times.”

Growing Justice, follow-up booklet to 2010 public forum

In 2010 a group of gardeners in the small, rural town of Middlefield organized a community forum to discuss repurposing the town's former “poor farm.” From the middle of the nineteenth century until New Deal programs rendered them obsolete, these public charities were often the only form of welfare provision available in rural areas (Wagner 2005; Rothman 2002). As the quote above demonstrates, the volunteers who hosted this forum held romantic views about poor farms and framed them in terms of a town 'providing for its own.' It was appealing, then, to imagine how to build a modern equivalent to such a benevolent public institution. This idea fundamentally shaped the community farm that these volunteers founded after their forum, but when I spoke to participants five years later they had learned much about the unfortunate and sometimes brutal history of poor farms—that during their heyday they were primarily disciplinary institutions, that they were designed to sequester troublesome or unruly residents, that they were disinclined to accept residents who were considered degenerate (Irish) or
immoral (unwed mothers) and instead expelled them from the township or sent them to the state workhouse. But even as these present-day community farmers were learning to question older forms of public charity, their own collective project was running aground on the contradictions of modern activism.

'Poor farms' of the nineteenth century were founded to address the social crises precipitated by the expansion of capitalism (Post 1995), and the community farms that espouse 'food justice' today are not different in that regard. Despite years of economic growth hunger remains a persistent threat among marginalized communities in the United States, and the emergency food system which has grown to help those in need has proven ineffective against this seemingly permanent state of emergency (Poppendieck 1998).

The failure of such top-down approaches has led to calls for more comprehensive solutions, frequently by steering the energies of the alternative food movements towards grassroots, community-based provisioning of food (Gottlieb & Fisher 1996; Gottlieb & Joshi 2010). But many of the groups who answer calls for 'food justice' face a problem: what is the justice that they seek? Many people agree that justice entails some form of redistribution—in this case, distribution of food. Yet it is not merely a dearth of material goods and sustenance which constitutes the present state of injustice, but also forms of domination and oppression which are not easily addressed by charitable programs focused on material goods (Young 1990). As social movements have made clear, justice is a political problem that leads back to power and institutions. Community farms can play an important role as institutions in working for justice, but even they cannot redistribute political power in any direct way. If such organizations aim to reconfigure
power relations in society and enact justice, they must become spaces that enable properly political engagement.

In this thesis I present a case study of a community farm organization, a form of “community food project” (CFP) closely associated with food justice activism (Tuckerman et al. 2007). Through this case I seek to understand food justice organizations as political spaces, taking justice claims as my starting point. I find these politicized claims woven into group conflicts which often seem merely interpersonal or procedural, but I argue these conflicts all return to the problem of negotiating the terms that govern the group as a collective. Illustrating once again that ‘the personal is political,’ participants’ competing claims about what the group should be doing or how it should be structured mobilize different visions for political action. For some, the primary concern is to be a stable, successful organization, while others prioritize the legitimacy that comes from being a properly public institution, one that is directly accountable to the community it serves. This inquiry necessarily winds through theories of democracy because, as I will show, justice and legitimacy are the pivot points for any normative framework of democracy. A commitment to justice necessarily de-centers a distributionist approach to social goods and instead centers democracy. But democracy, because of its egalitarian basis, is radically at odds with most familiar forms of organization, social administration, and service provision—forms developed to administer a violently racialized, classed, gendered state (Brown 1995; Gilmore 2002). When so many food justice organizations operate as bureaucratic service providers, the tension between bureaucratic administration and social justice risks rendering ‘food justice’ incoherent. This is because democracy requires political spaces that are open-ended and always
available for contestation (Mouffe 2000), producing uncertainty and destabilizing power relations in ways that are incompatible with—even unthinkable within—organizational settings that systematically impose certainty and hierarchy.

For these reasons, my argument here necessarily engages with institutionalized forms of power. Among food justice groups and among the broader alternative food movements, the non-profit is a favorite model for formal organizations. Thus even as I investigate a single food justice non-profit, I also make claims about forms of power that are widespread and enjoy privileged status in food activism generally. Furthermore, many of the problems that I describe from this case study are common features of non-profits: lack of resources relative to the scale of the problems they address; strong internal hierarchies which are both inefficient and demoralizing, often built around a founder's 'cult of personality'; compensation structures that favor the careerism of staff over the interests of the community; workplace cultures that promote territoriality and building one's personal power base over collaboration towards common goals; and an array of fragmented accountabilities which tug an organization's goals away from social justice towards less ambitious, more conservative programming (INCITE! 2009; Barrington-Bush 2013; Block 2004). That said, I will discuss some organizational forms that explicitly try to address these problems, and I will highlight ways that participants in my case have challenged such conditions. However, throughout this thesis, when I refer to 'non-profits' I primarily mean the sort of professionalized, hierarchical, bureaucratic non-profits that most suffer from these issues. As I argue, these organizations present problems for democracy and warrant careful consideration by those social movement actors who work in and through them. This is especially so since some novel forms of the
non-profit—for example, that of the ‘social enterprise’—can exacerbate issues such as the personality cult around founders (McAndrews et al. 2011).

However, I do not argue against organizations per se. Institutions are necessary forms for organizing, building, and actualizing collective power. It is for this reason that institutions are a primary mechanism for reproducing and enforcing anti-democratic state power; but the power of institutions makes it all the more imperative that radical movements claim and build institutional power for themselves, in ways that advance a democratic politics. Institutions such as non-profits are thus important sites both for resistance to the state and for the advancement of democratization. Thus I suggest we approach non-profits not as neutral vehicles for movement goals, but rather as spaces for re-imagining institutional forms of power. If in the chapters that follow I seem skeptical about the democratic potential of non-profits, it is because I believe that democratizing such organizations will leave them so transformed as to be hardly recognizable.

Before I advance these arguments, I must first introduce my field site and the nature of my research there. In what follows, I describe how I aim to address such political questions through a single, richly-detailed case study.

I. Field site description: Growing Justice

The research I present here is based on fieldwork which I completed in the summer of 2016 at a community food project called Growing Justice.² This organization is a non-profit, formally founded in 2011 and based in a small, rural New England town. Its programming centers around a ‘community farm’ using town land and espousing principles of food justice, a framework typically associated with community-based

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² All names have been falsified, including those of the organization and the town, in order to protect the confidentiality of my research participants as much as possible. I have also falsified some personal details of participants.
organizations or groups attempting to address issues of social justice in and through food system work (Gottlieb and Joshi 2010). Considered in the broader field of non-profits, Growing Justice could be fairly characterized as a grassroots or community effort—although, as later chapters will show, such a description is debatable and likely to meet with disagreement from some participants. Suffice it to say that the group qualifies as grassroots insofar as they have relied heavily on volunteers for core functions and many of their key personnel have lacked prior direct experience in non-profit management. For that reason, the history of the organization has been one of a loose collectivity defining their identity together, developing an organizational model and a set of programming, and building their capacities to work together. One participant who already had decades of experience directing another non-profit—Ron, who later become this group’s first executive director—was instrumental in steering the group toward a social enterprise model. Citing the many burdens imposed by the need to constantly seek out grants, Ron originally proposed this alternative, more entrepreneurial approach in the hopes of the group generating their own income to fund the work of their mission. Unfortunately these hopes have not panned out, and after six years of operations Growing Justice is almost entirely funded by large grants from foundations, state and federal agencies, and a few wealthy donors. By contrast, only a small fraction of their budget is funded by donations from the community or by sales of produce.

The organization's stated mission is to increase food access, through three distinct areas of programming: education via curriculum and workshops for schools, hobby workshops for the general population, and an intern program for youth and prisoners; land access via a community garden open to all town residents; and food distribution via
donations to food pantries and subsidized produce sales for low-income residents. The group distilled these three directions from a community forum they hosted in 2010, a forum which was significant for various reasons. First, the forum was the group's first public event, and it was a remarkable success judging by attendance and by the excitement of those participating. Second, it motivated the core group to formalize their association and officially propose a plan for founding a community farm on town land. Third, the forum was key for both generating and demonstrating public support for their plan, which played a big part in securing the eventual cooperation of the town government (in the form of a no-cost long-term lease on the farm land, as well as material and financial support).

However, it is impossible to claim that the forum alone provided the shape and direction of the group's mission in any transparent or direct way, even though many of the interviewees emphasized the forum as a pivotal, defining moment for the group. In practice, defining the mission and building a suite of programs has been a highly fractious experience, and there were many moments where the group’s direction shifted. The group’s founders originally came together over a love of farming and not necessarily a desire to help others in need, but they soon found their project pulled strongly in the latter direction. The community forum certainly played a part in this shift, but the event almost seemed designed to produce that effect: all of the forum’s presenters were from other community farms in the region, and the afternoon brainstorming session generated ideas that were drawn straight from the same food justice playbook (Allen 1999) that these more established organizations drew on. Likewise, the people who attended the forum were not the most diverse group, comprised mostly of the white, middle-class
activists and professionals who tend to dominate the U.S. alternative food movements (AFMs), not the ‘underserved’ that they decided the farm should benefit (Guthman 2011).

Later, as the group formalized into a non-profit, the board and staff leadership sought out ‘needs assessments’ from established social service agencies in order to define target groups for their programming. The board and staff also developed a set of ‘ends policies’ to elaborate on the mission, again without seeking further input from the community. The staff leadership then developed a suite of programs, placing special emphasis on innovation and fundability and quickly abandoning ideas that seemed too idealistic to be practicable. At every step along the way, proposals were the subject of often vigorous disagreement, frequently contested throughout *ad hoc* meetings, board meetings, the work-day, and a variety of formal and informal personal communications.

What is interesting about this process of distilling, articulating, and re-interpreting a group mission is the curious problem of social justice. I call social justice a problem for the organization because it has functioned as a sort of ‘shadow’ mission—frequently invoked, endlessly and bitterly debated, hovering always in the background, yet demurely omitted from their official mission statement. Through recurring disagreements, participants have pitted claims of social justice against assumptions about what’s possible in this place, at this moment.

For better or worse, these conflicts occupy the greater part of this thesis. I describe them in greater detail in later chapters, but for now I must emphasize that this focus on conflict is not due to mere morbid curiosity or a penchant for melodrama. Rather, this focus stems from an honest desire to understand the moments of antagonism that so dominated participants’ narratives of their experience. Conflicts at Growing
Justice have clearly been painful for individuals and often disabling for the organization, occupying much of people’s time, energy, emotions, and thoughts. In conversation, most group members struggled to understand the disagreements and fallout of the past and imagine a way forward—that is, assuming they had not already left the group or written them off. These concerns are the starting point for this inquiry. I am curious about the political content of these conflicts because they have clearly had strong effects on the life of this political collectivity—a group who originally said they wanted to “criticize [the status quo] through innovation” (forum booklet). This group tapped into strong community desires in their early years, and it is striking that they have lost so much of that early public engagement and steered further and further in a direction of professionalized service provision. It is this shift, along with the increasingly fragile state of their collective, that leads me to consider community food projects as political spaces.

II. Thesis objectives

With this problem in mind, I ask the following empirical questions:

1. What do participants say about Growing Justice, and what claims do they make about justice in this place? What conflicts, debates, and crises have arisen around these claims?

2. What conceptual and experiential sources do these claims draw upon, and how are they worked out in practice? What political work do conflicts perform in the organization and in the wider community?

3. What do these negotiations at Growing Justice suggest about non-profit organizations as vehicles for politics?

In order to answer these questions I adopt a qualitative methodology, aiming to access people's understandings of their experiences, as well as their efforts to learn from and change the conditions of their lives. Personal narratives necessarily occupy a central place in this inquiry, and in my analysis I compare multiple, complementary accounts
from long-form interviews and a focus group. I also draw on an extended period of participant observation and close readings of various archival documents to provide a detailed portrait of life in the group. By taking a close look at the discourses at work here, I find significant, recurring reflections of the politics of the voluntary sector at large. Building from the local-scale challenges that Growing Justice has faced, I show that conflicts in the organization signal problems of democracy, of fostering open spaces for engagement around political concerns. Given how these localized problems reflect common critiques levied at non-profits more generally, and given how this space is structured by discourses drawn from well beyond the horizon of this community group, reading these local experiences for their political content helps illuminate the roles—actual and potential—that non-profit organizations play in political life across multiple scales.

This project contributes to the literature on food justice organizations by focusing not on the specifics of programming but on the character of a group's collectivity. Food justice is a framework that remains a potential point of convergence for multiple strands of political and social activity (Gottlieb & Fisher 1996; Brent et al. 2015). In their survey of efforts to change the food system, Holt-Gimenez and Shattuck (2011) see food justice as an ambiguous politics, one easily articulated to either a liberal-reformist or radical-revolutionary agenda. In this project, I find elements of radical potential in an organization that nevertheless has consistently adopted more reformist programming. But because of the outright failures of reformist approaches to produce egalitarian outcomes (Poppendieck 1998), such programming is poorly suited to addressing the urgent crises and acute injustices of our present society and food system. Indeed, claims for food
justice—and community food projects like Growing Justice that aim to address such claims—grew out of dissatisfaction with the ‘bandaid’ approaches to food assistance which have taken the place of federal welfare. By investigating the divergent politics at play in one organization, this study helps us understand why and how food justice organizations—for all their theoretical promise—are so susceptible to de-politicizing forces. In the process, because I locate so many of this group’s challenges in the tendencies inherited from the bureaucratic non-profit form itself, this thesis also contributes to a growing body of scholarship (much of it by activists) that is curious about organizational forms (Lakey et al. 1995; McAndrews et al. 2011) and their political effects (Dixon 2014; INCITE! 2009; Cornell 2011).

I approach this set of questions as a farmer and an activist myself; and indeed, the very questions I ask arose from conversations I had with the leadership of Growing Justice in 2014. At a time when mass mobilizations against racialized state violence swelled under the banner of #BlackLivesMatter, this group was struggling with questions about what racial justice meant in their context. The group has traveled many miles since that point, and though I still believe racial justice should be a top priority for them (and for everyone), subsequent events in the organization suggested that their disagreements were about more than an analysis of racism. The thesis I write in reflection on their experiences is my effort at producing movement-relevant theory (Bevington & Dixon 2005), activist scholarship that speaks directly to the urgent concerns of activist practice while also aspiring to more than empirical analysis. So here I wage my project in a way that brings forward questions which usually only hover in the background—especially the most fundamental question of activist practice, what is justice? And what does justice
demand of us? Because I aim for this work to be relevant to movements, to serve as a resource for further mobilization (Derickson & Routledge 2015), I offer this project back to the community of practice in other forms, as well, which I hope can be helpful for overcoming some of the practical and conceptual challenges described here. I present a brief list of proposed research products in the appendix. Because I hope to speak to activist practice beyond just this organization, this list includes resources that might be distributed more widely, as well.

One last note on the way I have conducted this project and written this thesis: I make no claims to neutrality. Readers will notice quickly that I am critical of non-profit organizations and that at times this critique seems to extend to the organization of Growing Justice itself. This is a difficult position to take and one that I want to clarify. My solidarity with the group is unqualified and sincere, and I have great sympathy with all of the participants in this project. However, all sorts of problems can result from actors' identifying too strongly with particular forms of organization (cf. Polletta & Jasper 2001), and it is my position that we must not cherish forms of practice which do not serve our political goals. Thus I have tried to direct my critiques not towards individuals but towards the structures that shape the roles we play in our relations with others.

III. Outline of the thesis

In chapter two I present my theoretical framework. I situate food justice praxis at the intersection of popular mobilizations and institutionalized reform efforts, describing how this form of activism came to be what it is. I recount some of the challenges food justice has faced in emerging as a politics of coalition, and I suggest that such challenges are characteristic of any justice-oriented political mobilization in the United States today.
Through reference to democratic theory, I describe the primary context in which justice claims are made and administered—the context of service provision—and the problems that such a model of justice presents. Briefly stated, these problems center on bureaucratic power (Brown 1995), which I argue is the form of state power mobilized through administrative agencies both within the formal boundaries of government and in the ambiguous terrain of the voluntary sector. Liberal theories of justice privilege the state as the subject of justice, but scholarship across a range of disciplines has demonstrated the failures of the state in this regard. Deliberative and radical theories of democracy provide an alternative basis for institutionalizing democratic forms of justice (Barnett 2012). Against a model of justice which emphasizes the moment of administration, democratic justice sustains the tension between administration and claims-making. Properly democratic institutions must remain forever open-ended, spaces which are always available for contestation (Mouffe 2000; Laclau & Mouffe 1985). I conclude this chapter by alluding to activist experiments with participatory democratic forms, which help banish the idea that, as far as non-profits go, 'there is no alternative.'

Chapter three describes my empirical methods in greater detail. Here I expand upon my research objectives, locating this work in the practice of scholar-activism. I describe a qualitative methodology and analytical framework which, through narrative and discourse analysis, draw out how talk and ideas mobilize power in this organization. I describe in detail the process of recruitment and data collection, conducted primarily through interviews but supplemented with observation and archival research. I then provide an account of my analytical process, reading the empirical data as texts and finding themes that connect back to my research questions. Here I characterize the
narratives of conflict which so dominated participants’ accounts and which provide a starting point for my later analysis. I conclude with a few remarks on my interpretive framework, situating this research in the literature on food activism and on democratic politics.

Chapters four and five present the analysis of my empirical data. The first of these chapters expands upon conflicts at Growing Justice by highlighting participants’ interpretations of those conflicts, distilling these into several major types. These interpretations mobilize claims regarding what the conflicts were about, what caused them, and what the proper course of action was after the fact. Some interviewees speak to a longing for harmony and unanimity; some want their collaborators to be better group members, or aspire to be better group members themselves; others hope for a better group culture, one structured by a sense of mutuality—where participants both express themselves and attend directly to each other’s concerns. Each of these interpretations reflects debates around principles of democratic communication, and the ‘mutuality’ interpretation has strong sympathy with the deliberative democratic model. While conflict and difference may be inevitable in any group—and, as Mouffe (2000) suggests, unanimity is no sign of progress—a lack of mutuality seems a plausible explanation for why group conflicts have been so painful and costly. Where mutuality fails, however, we see suggestions that something about the organizational space itself may be preventing such an ethos, raising questions about how the organization is structured as a space for political engagement.

Chapter five picks up this thread by shifting from conflicts to the ideas that have shaped and contested how the organization is structured. The first set of ideas I explore
coalesce around the themes of leadership and cooperation, illustrating how some participants believe strongly in a hierarchical form of leadership, even as other participants point out its drawbacks. These drawbacks are familiar from the literature on democracy and activist practice and suggest that hierarchical leadership is itself a problem for a radical egalitarian praxis. The second set of ideas I explore are related to a curious dichotomy which staff described, between expertise—the knowledge of how to administer an organization—and passion—the politicized desire which provided the original motivation for the organization. In short, claims to expertise seemed calculated to relegate those participants without expertise (those who had only passion) to less privileged roles with less input in collective decisions. Such claims demonstrate clearly the fragmented accountabilities of professionalized non-profits, who have difficulty balancing their basis in community desires for justice with a host of competing imperatives. This impossible balancing act is likewise a problem for democracy, with implications for what kind of social and political change the typical non-profit can reasonably aspire to—suggesting that the form of the non-profit itself also needs to be changed in order to enable more democratic outcomes.

Chapter six brings this thesis to a close with a few summary remarks and reflections. I offer my views of the strengths and limitations of this study, outlining how my conclusions may be useful for scholars and practitioners and where further research is required. Of particular importance here is the demographic constitution of Growing Justice—since this group is a majority-white organization, the way that they have wrestled with the problem of racism and the way that oppression works in and through their organization should not be generalized to minority-led projects or any projects with
an explicitly politicized programme. Indeed, I am careful to avoid re-centering whiteness as an essential quality of non-profits, much less of food justice organizations. Rather, by specifying the particular racialized, classed, gendered gratifications that bureaucratic power offers—in lieu of actual progressive or egalitarian outcomes—I hope to complicate and deepen the engagement that other scholars have waged with ‘whiteness’ in food movements. In so doing I de-center whiteness as a racial category and focus instead on whiteness as an epistemology, an ontology, and an institutionalized locus of power, all of which are historically specific and ripe for transformation (Alcoff 2015). As I argue, this is the substance of the association between whiteness and bureaucratic power in non-profit organizations. Reframing food justice spaces as contexts for mobilizing radical democracy offers one possible route for dismantling oppression and building more egalitarian forms of power.
CHAPTER 2

THEORY

“This moment of tension, of openness, which gives the social its essentially incomplete and precarious character, is what every project for radical democracy should set out to institutionalize. The institutional diversity and complexity which characterizes a democratic society should be conceived of in a very different manner from the diversification of functions proper to a complex bureaucratic system.”

Ernesto Laclau & Chantal Mouffe (1985, 174)

With the rise of identity politics and the politicization of social difference, the decade of the 1980s presented a crisis for long-standing, class-based ideas of how to build a popular, collective political project for social change. In their book Hegemony and Socialist Strategy, Laclau and Mouffe (1985) resist the pessimism of that era, when new ways of understanding ‘difference’ seemed to sink any hope for unified coalitions. Key to their vision for a revitalized radical politics was the open acknowledgement of difference, the multiplicity of positions and identities with potentially sympathetic concerns, together with the recognition that those identities must articulate in some way to achieve their common goals. In their view, complete political unity even within one movement is mere fantasy, one which always relies on the disproportionate power of one bloc to project unanimity through suppression of difference. But embracing difference generates uncertainty in any political mobilization. Laclau and Mouffe do not see this fact as an obstacle so much as a fundamental characteristic of a new, inchoate form of popular power—what they called “radical democracy.” The great appeal—and challenge—of such democracy is that it runs in direct opposition to all the more familiar, staid forms of
modern state power, which both demand certainty and produce it through violent means. Though decades have passed since the time of their publication, the problematic they describe remains every bit as salient today: social movements still confront the problem of building a unified popular front to claim power, while the crises of actually-existing democracy only deepen further.

Like many related movements, the project for food justice also faces this dilemma of building effective political coalitions across difference. The effort to re-orient food system work toward social justice suggests a site of possible convergence between multiple strands of activism: grassroots organizing by marginalized communities promoting mutual aid, self-provision, and a sometimes radical politics, and more middle-class and institutional efforts tied to alternative food movements (AFMs), the state, and philanthropy (Gottlieb & Fisher 1996; Brent et al. 2015). On the other hand, the actual efforts to bring these groups together have been a frequent source of disappointment and frustration, especially for less privileged groups (Guthman 2011). The challenge here is that difference persists in food justice spaces even when everyone involved is more-or-less committed to equality—there is a gap, then, between actors simply wanting something called ‘justice’ and actually waging a political practice that produces just outcomes. I suggest that food justice as an orientation for activism is still promising, but the movement’s many missed connections demand that actors take a more strategic approach to coalition-building, one that takes seriously the challenge of articulating a coherent framework of social justice through existing institutions. In this chapter, I make the case that typical bureaucratic non-profit organizations mobilize values and norms rooted in past and present forms of domination, oppression, and alienation, in ways that
run far deeper than the level of individual, conscious behavior. Such organizations thus present a problem for social justice, even when justice is made an explicit organizational goal. A movement for food justice that seeks to embody a coalition of diverse communities demands a political praxis which can address and reconfigure the power relations that organizations so far have tended to simply reproduce. I suggest that this praxis requires radical, participatory democracy, a framework that approaches the future as open-ended and political spaces as always being made and re-made (Mouffe 2000; Massey 2005).

In this chapter, I bring together a range of literature to make my case. In the first section, I provide a retrospective account of food justice practice, describing its origins, its manifestations, its promises and its shortcomings so far. I suggest that the challenges faced by food justice practitioners are not unique to food activism but are common to any collective political practice negotiating boundaries of social difference. In the following section I describe the normative underpinnings of democratic theory, rooted in an account of social justice. Central to my account here is the relationship between claims of justice and forms of politics—in short, justice demands on-going political engagement, not just the administration of settled claims. This relationship renders justice problematic for familiar organizational forms, which privilege a logic of administration and have difficulty accommodating claims for justice. In the final section, I describe a framework for realizing democratic justice in organizations, by elaborating challenges specific to formal organizations in mobilizing democracy, normative principles for guiding democratic practice, and activist experiments with democratizing organizations.
I. Empirical context: Articulating food justice

Community food projects (CFPs) such as my case study sit at the confluence of multiple institutions and movements, the most visible being that of the US alternative food movements (AFMs). This movement has in turn drawn on the environmental movement, with its ecological critique of industrial pesticide and fertilizer use, and the back-to-the-land movement, with its aspirations to recover a 'community' that has been eroded in modern urban life (Guthman 2004; Danbom 1991). The AFMs originally gained prominence in the 1980s due to their promotion of a set of principles that favored modes of agricultural production which were low-input, smaller-scale, and more environmentally-friendly (later codified into the National Organic Program). The movement grew in size and stature by fostering connections between rural producers and like-minded urban consumers. However, 'organics' drifted from its social message even while it grew as an industry and as an alternative cultural orientation (Goodman et al. 2012). On the side of production, sustainable agriculture became professionalized and lost its critique of the exploitation of farm workers, paving the way for organic agriculture to be standardized as a set of production practices under the aegis of the USDA. The consumer movement, in turn, increasingly confined its repertoire of collective action to ethical consumption, or 'voting with your dollar' (Goodman et al. 2012; Alkon 2013). Both inside and outside of the movement, critics concerned with social justice called attention to the limited and often unfortunate outcomes of these tendencies within the AFM. Of these critiques, the most salient accused activists of promoting a two-tiered system of food production, where a minority of privileged consumers in niche markets could enjoy the benefits of high-quality foods while those less fortunate were shut out (Allen 1999). Over the decade of the 1990s, movement actors
proved sensitive to such criticism and increasingly committed to work towards socially equitable outcomes of their movement projects (Gottlieb & Joshi 2010).

Simultaneous changes in civil society also lent urgency to the problem of food access and nutrition, providing the circumstances in which CFPs have come to seem both desirable and necessary. Despite opportunities for social mobility in the mid-twentieth century, many people in the United States still suffered from hunger and malnutrition (Kotz 1969). Journalism on the issue caused a political scandal, leading to a Senate inquiry and, eventually, expanded federal food assistance. However, early in his presidency, Ronald Reagan announced significant budget cuts to entitlement programs, including the food stamps which had come to provide major nutritional support for low-income communities (Poppendieck 1998). As a solution to the acknowledged hardship that these cuts would induce, the administration called forth an unprecedented rise in volunteerism; and with the assistance of government and philanthropic foundations, food banks organized activists and volunteers into the vast networks that form the present-day emergency food system. By the 1990s, however, it was becoming clear that hunger was a perpetual emergency: food insecurity was not a temporary need but was in fact on the rise, made worse by on-going cuts to entitlement programs and stagnant wages for the middle and lower classes. Thus anti-hunger activists and administrators of food banks began to seek more ‘comprehensive’ solutions to hunger as a social problem, within their admittedly limited mandate.

The concept of ‘community food security’ was born out of these twin strands of food activism: the quest by AFMs to expand the reach of sustainable agriculture and its benefits, and the growing recognition by anti-hunger activists that tenuous access to food
was a collective problem and not just an individual, momentary need (Gottlieb & Fisher 1996; Allen 1999; Mares & Alkon 2011). This combined approach, exemplified by the Community Food Security Coalition (CFSC), received the blessing and support of the US Congress by way of the 1996 farm bill, authorizing the first round of competitive grants for ‘community food projects’ (Tuckermanty et al. 2007). These grants funded groups aiming to “meet the needs of low-income people; increase the self-reliance of communities in providing for their own food needs; and promote comprehensive responses to local food, farm, and nutrition issues” (Gottlieb & Joshi 2010, 197). The organizations who received these first awards coalesced around a repertoire of activities that has seen little change in the decades since, including establishing community gardens, expanding local produce availability in school lunches, fostering small-scale entrepreneurialism, providing work training and nutritional education, selling produce at subsidized prices, and growing produce for food banks (Allen 1999; White 2011; Pudup 2008; Brandt-Meyer & Butler 1999; Allen & Guthman 2006). CFPs have generally waged their projects among marginalized communities (racial minorities, urban youth, present and former prisoners, disabled persons, homeless persons, and immigrants) and integrated easily into the network of institutions that already serve these populations.

3 Of course, the same 104th Congress that established funding for community food projects also passed the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act—otherwise known as “welfare reform”—which eviscerated existing entitlement programs and created new challenges for food access by low-income households (Piven & Cloward 1997). By 2011, 16.4% of individuals (over 50 million people) had tenuous or inconsistent access to food, but this burden was unevenly distributed: households headed by a single mother, those most affected by the changes to welfare programs, suffered food insecurity at an alarming rate of 30.4% in 2015 (Coleman-Jensen et al. 2016). The revanchist policies which produced hunger and constituted the raison d’être of community food projects not only showed no signs of abating, but actually relied on innovations in the voluntary sector to relieve the nation’s political conscience. It is thus important to remember that CFPs as a political phenomenon are not just the result of activists’ well-meaning desire for social change, but also play a useful role in the conservative effort to enact disciplinary social policy.
Because community food security groups aim first and foremost to serve marginalized communities, they share certain goals with grassroots activists from communities of color, many of whom have long traditions of community provisioning for survival (Abron 1998). These activists of color are thus the third major group who have shaped community food security, but by no means has it been simple to enlist their participation. From the beginning some founders of the CFSC hoped for a convergence between the more policy-oriented work of food activists—who were primarily white and middle-class—and the grassroots work of environmental justice groups—who were primarily from marginalized communities and already deeply invested in the fight for racial justice (Gottlieb & Fisher 1996). Many people from the latter group also found the CFSC platform promising, but the actual experience of the coalition turned much of their hope to disappointment (Bradley & Herrera 1996). Even though CFPs developed out of a recognition that food insecurity is fundamentally a collective problem, proponents often directed programming toward the individual nutritional choices or life conditions that lead to negative outcomes (obesity, for example, or unemployment; Cadieux & Slocum 2015; Pudup 2008). The privileged actors from AFMs who have often led such projects also typically view the state and institutional elites as potential collaborators in achieving systemic change, while movement actors from marginalized communities have frequently taken a suspicious stance relative to the state and its affiliated institutions (Mares & Alkon 2011). Even as claims for “food justice” have become ever more commonplace and CFPs have taken root across the country, the hoped-for alliance among these different groups has remained only partial, contradictory, and far from guaranteed (Holt-Gimenez & Shattuck 2011).
After all, the agrarian political imaginary that communities of color draw on is distinct from the whitened imaginary that has historically dominated in the AFMs and discourses about U.S. agriculture more generally. Among African American activists, groups such as the Nation of Islam view access to land not as a lifestyle choice but as the necessary, highly politicized basis for community survival under the violent conditions of white supremacy (McCutcheon 2013). Land for the NOI is also not just crop land but territory, the beginning of a separate sovereign state. The survival programs of the Black Panther Party—which famously both embarrassed the federal government and inspired its school breakfast program—were likewise based in the very real need for black schoolchildren to have more consistent access to food, a need understood within a revolutionary politics against a negligent and violent white supremacist state (Abron 1998). Despite the necessarily local basis for enacting these community programs, both of these examples wage a global politics of blackness (Heynen 2009b), as when the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network acknowledges they are fighting their struggles “against the backdrop of the twin evils...of capitalism...and white supremacy” (Yakini 2013). Such grand political aspirations dwarf the typical localism of CFPs.

So while there are significant (though under-recognized) examples of politicized food system projects waged by minority groups, food justice actors have had a harder time developing organizations that build successful coalitions across lines of racial difference. The tensions running through food justice work have thus been cause for much reflection and debate by movement participants. Scholars and activists alike have noted how the AFMs’ increasing orientation toward the marginalized ‘other’ has paradoxically favored elite actors and frustrated more equitable outcomes (Guthman
In CFPs as in movement organizations more generally, middle-class, white actors routinely benefit from unacknowledged privilege—unself-consciously performing their whiteness (Slocum 2007), constructing exclusivist spaces in practice while verbally committing to inclusion and diversity (Alkon 2012), and reproducing a whitened social imaginary (Guthman 2008c; Alkon 2013), only to express confusion when they fail to enlist minority groups or when project outcomes fall short (Guthman 2011; Ramirez 2015). The staff and leadership of CFPs are often white and middle-class, raising concerns about community representation (Mares & Alkon 2011), and white-led projects benefit from a disproportionate share of funding and institutional support (Reynolds 2015). Critics contend that community food programming has reinforced ‘differential citizenship’ both within and beyond movements, preserving the problem of elitism that CFPs were intended to address (McClintock 2014; Allen 1999). These are serious critiques that highlight the difficulties activists have faced in building a working coalition of movements, difficulties that range from interpersonal micro-aggressions to structural issues that cut across the voluntary sector.

Some movement leaders have expressed concern that the strength of these critiques risks undermining the good work that more conscientious organizations are doing (Bradley & Herrera 2016), and this is of course a valid concern. However, I suggest that we read these accounts not as strictly condemnatory, but instead as poignant illustrations of the ambiguities inherent to politics. A major part of the story of ‘food justice’ is the process of actors developing claims about justice and trying to build transformative institutions to address those claims. To some extent, actors make claims by drawing on available discursive repertoires in order to align themselves with or
against vested interests in the food system, but the positions that actors adopt are also subject to change with experience (Holt-Gimenez & Shattuck 2011). As Malik Yakini (2013) said of his organization, they have “grown to understand that the work that we're doing is really much broader than food security”—that is, the knowledge and experience they gained from their first decade as a public organization enabled them to better understand the claims they want to make. Consider how the foregoing critiques of CFPs describe repeated mistakes, challenges, and disappointments that have become common to the experience of food activism, serving as key moments for self-reflection by movement participants (DuPuis & Goodman 2005). To be specific, these experiences make possible more nuanced understandings of the institutional contexts, cultures, and imperatives shaping the movement; the differential power and privilege of actors; their competing priorities and visions for action; and, as I argue in this work, the various skills, concepts, and language that facilitate actors’ negotiating these challenges in practice. At each of these levels, the disconnects between actors have threatened to sink the fragile coalition that is the movement for food justice, and yet that coalition is still much desired, whether rendered as inclusion (Ramirez 2015; Guthman 2011), convergence (Gottlieb & Fisher 1996; Brent et al 2015), or alliance (Kepkiewicz et al 2015). One problem for scholarship is how to supplement the empirical work of critique—which has shown the fissures in this collective politics—with a theoretical account that might help actors articulate a collective politics capable of social transformation.

In order to build that theoretical account, I suggest that we turn to the central claim on which the movement builds its politics: social justice. Implicitly or explicitly, all community food projects are founded on a principle of enacting social justice in the food
system. But what is justice? Is it a problem of governance, is it something that can be administered through service provision, or is it a special property of grassroots mobilization? And what is the potential for enacting justice through community food security-type work? As Holt-Gimenez and Shattuck (2011) suggest, the radical or progressive political potential of food justice groups is contingent on their developing an “ideological compass” (133) to ground their work in the food system. In this regard, critical theories of democracy offer an important framework for articulating what justice is or might be, as a basis for a collective, coalitional political practice. As I describe below, democratic theory is especially useful for illuminating the dilemmas faced by food justice actors who have so often sought to scale up their activism through bureaucratic, hierarchical non-profit organizations.

II. Theoretical context: Social justice and democracy

Theories of democracy provide a normative basis for a democratic politics, accounting for how a popular will is constituted and made effective in government. Habermas (1962 [1989]) provided the foundations for a framework of deliberative democracy by expanding on a problematic first described by Immanuel Kant (1784 [1970]). Where Kant theorized the conditions for the “public” exercise of reason, Habermas proposed a “bourgeois public sphere,” which was “the sphere of private people come together as a public...[claiming] the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves, to engage them in a debate over the general rules governing relations in the...sphere of commodity exchange and social labor” (Habermas 1962[1989], 27). Private citizens demanded that the state legitimate itself publicly by proving responsive to the will of the people, and that will was worked out and expressed
in the public sphere. More recent critiques have shown some of the blind spots in this account (for example, Habermas’s inability to see how the bourgeois public sphere suppressed its competitors, such as the black public sphere or the public sphere of women; Fraser 1997), but this rendering nevertheless suggests constitutive points for critical theories of democracy: first, that the public sphere is the site where official policies can articulate to the popular will; and second, that this articulation offers legitimacy to those who govern in the name of the people. Current theories of deliberative democracy are still founded on this principle, that the kernel of legitimacy in modern democracy is a just articulation between the governing body and the public it serves. In this view, when people make public claims about practices or policies that are wrong and should be changed, “they are usually making a claim about social justice” (Young 1990, 9).

Thus, according to these theories, justice is a central animating logic in public life; but in order to understand the curious power of justice in non-governmental organizations, it is necessary to liberate the concept of publicity from the historical confines of the nineteenth century. In describing that era in European history, Habermas assumed a sharp divide between civil society and the state, where the former is the political space where popular will is developed and articulated, and the latter is where that will is translated into legitimate, decisive action. This description offers a compelling, normative account of how popular sovereignty is enacted, but it never reflected reality (Fraser 1997). In actual fact, state and civil society are closely intertwined, and civil society operates in ways very similar to the state. As Gramsci (1971) explains, in the modern liberal democracy state power suffuses the institutions of
civil society, which play a central role in securing the consent of the governed. In addition, civil society organizations have long fulfilled various state imperatives, providing a variety of public goods such as welfare. This intermingling may have seemed to be of secondary importance when Habermas was writing during the mid-twentieth-century peak of the Keynesian welfare-warfare state, but the state crises of the 1970s prompted a large-scale reorganization of government. In this context, state services shifted into what Jennifer Wolch (1990) calls the “shadow state,” an array of non-governmental organizations and quasi-public institutions that took up state mandates for service provision. This shift raises pointed questions about the legitimacy of a state that passes on these tasks, since concerns abound over how effectively the voluntary sector delivers services, how transparent they are in their practices, and how accountable they are to the public. However, more relevant to my argument is the fact that this state-civil society integration marks a historical juncture where NGOs are just as much subject to political claims as the state. The “New Social Movements” of the 1980s—including women’s movements, queer movements, the environmental movement, and racial justice movements—have politicized ever more spheres of social life and brought politicized demands to all institutions (Laclau & Mouffe 1985). In this context, even organizations inspired by social movements (such as food justice groups) face implicit or explicit demands to publicly legitimate their organizations by articulating and acting on a framework of social justice.

1. Service provision and justice claims

It is this ambiguity around the nature of civil society organizations that raises fundamental questions about how a collective political project can work toward social
justice, because on the one hand social movement actors are the subject of justice claims, making demands of the state. However, insofar as they adopt or accept a role of service provision—especially through a privileged relationship with the state—they are also the object of justice claims. Organizations typically internalize this tension in ways that illustrate the dilemma of defining justice in modern democracy, since these two orientations—making claims but also striving to administer them—appear to operate on opposing logics. Here I describe these two logics, administrative and democratic, in order to propose a framework for evaluating organizations as vehicles for politics.

Consider first how a administrative logic favors a model of service provision, and is thus troubled by claims for social justice. Professionalized service provision typically relies on a redistributive model of justice, whereby justice is figured as an equal distribution of all social goods in a society (Young 1990). However, social goods are not all material; and in falling prey to the conceit of possessive individualism, this framework misunderstands that goods such as power cannot be possessed and thus cannot distributed. Thus an emphasis on distribution detracts attention from the structures and institutions that shape distribution, and instead focuses efforts on items that can be easily distributed—such as non-perishable foodstuffs, in the case of food banks. Even if movement service providers adopt more expansive programming, still the the structural conditions of the voluntary sector impose tight constraints.

The orientation towards providing services furthermore begs the question of what services are needed in order produce just outcomes. For a formal organization arising from a social movement context, there are numerous incentives to identify and satisfy needs. Some incentives may be from the movement itself (e.g., mutual aid), while others
issue from non-movement funders or the state. Either way, any effort to assess and
address needs steps squarely into the arena of needs definition, which has been a key site
for contestation at least since the rise of the welfare state (Fraser 1989). Discourses of
needs move through various moments—from first accepting a need as properly public, to
interpreting a need and how it might be satisfied, to struggles over provision for that need
—each of which is highly politicized and open to contest. Part of the appeal for social
movement actors is the chance to claim the authority to oversee the administration of
needs that they have identified, since this arrangement might possibly offer a degree of
autonomy from the state as well as the chance to grow and professionalize their
movement. But the moment of professionalization is not straightforward, since the
administration of needs—even by movement actors—typically entails the constitution of
a new class of experts and administrators (ibid), who develop their own interests, foster
divisions and distinctions between themselves and other actors, and thus tend to become
isolated and exclusionary. For liberal theorists of justice, such power-laden stratification
is not a problem per se: the idea that needs can be reliably identified and administered
from above corresponds to a Rawlsian, static model of justice (Barnett 2011), based on
the principle that a given public characterized with certain needs both demands and
renders legitimate a public body that meets those needs appropriately. In this framework,
justice is the condition of society when a public’s needs articulate properly with public
institutions, but this model of justice has consistently failed when adapted to real-world
contexts.

Furthermore, bureaucratic service provision effectively depoliticizes claims by
turning citizens with politicized desires into mere consumers of services (Young 1990; cf.
Habermas 1962[1989]) and in so doing undermines the public who would otherwise lend legitimacy to the institution. These are ontological challenges that bedevil any movement organization, but they speak directly to the on-going critiques of elitism directed at food movement organizations, especially the technocratic orientation of ‘food security’ (Holt-Gimenez & Shattuck 2011). Thus beyond a simple model of service provision and administration, the imperative for a justice-seeking organization to legitimate itself publicly requires a more dialogical approach to justice, an approach that is able to counter the exclusionary and elitist pressures cited above.

In order to describe such an approach to democratic justice, I draw on two bodies of theory: more idealist theories of deliberative democracy and more critical Post-Marxist theories of radical democracy. Deliberative democracy provides both normative principles and attention the to problems of inclusion, institution-building, and other factors essential to fostering participatory parity in decision-making processes (Barnett 2012). According to this framework, institutions may provide services but their political value is measured according to how well they develop and actualize the political capacity of participants. This work addresses the question of how a differentiated, pluralist polity can meaningfully shape decisions that affect the terms of their shared existence (Young 1990). While earlier work by Habermas focuses on the discursive conditions of translating claims into binding decisions (Barnett 2012; Young 1990), more recent work acknowledges that political communication far exceeds the narrow bounds of argumentation—much less ‘rational’ argumentation—and includes forms which are typically marginalized in institutional settings (Young 2000). Recognizing the ineradicable pluralism of modern democracy, theorists such as Fraser and Young have
abandoned Habermas’s commitment to developing consensus, embracing contestation as an important moment in democratic politics. Fraser (2009) sees special value in the oppositional politics of social movements, whose disruptive claims offer an important mechanism for deepening public debate. Conflictual claims thus upset narrow framings of justice, pushing the boundaries of who is considered to be the subject of justice in a given political space. This model of justice is *dialogic*, then, not because it is based in talk but because there is no single, privileged subject of justice claims.

With this new-found interest in contestation and struggle deliberative democracy has drawn nearer to *radical* democracy. Post-Marxist approaches to democracy heavily emphasize the contestatory dimension of politics (Ranciere 1999), but Chantal Mouffe (2000) acknowledges that contestation sits in perpetual but *productive* tension with the moment of administration—the ‘hegemonic moment’ in her account (see also Laclau & Mouffe 1985). The legitimacy of *democratic* institutions is based in their capacity to generate binding decisions without foreclosing on-going popular struggles over the terms of common existence. Negotiating this balance is key to translating democracy from contestatory politics—the purview of social movements as we have known them—to a site of power.

While these two bodies of theory show certain affinities, it is worth noting where they diverge: where deliberative democracy focuses on institutional structures and discursive conditions—even with a vastly expanded conception of discourse and communication—Mouffe’s radical democracy focuses on the moment of power, mobilized through democratic institutions. Both approaches prove useful in this case study, for where theories of deliberative democracy help to draw out the shortcomings
and contradictions of liberal institutions, radical democracy helps to situate those liberal institutions as historically specific enactments of power. I address these historical configurations and the problems they present in the next section; but for all their problems, these institutions are nevertheless subject to reconfiguration. Furthermore, as this case study will illustrate, norms of justice and legitimacy remain surprisingly compelling even when rearticulated within an analysis of the oppressions of racial capitalism, settler colonialism, and hetero-patriarchy—even as a more radical accounting of power demonstrates how institutions silence marginalized voices, troubling hopes for mutuality in communication. Thus while there is tension between these two approaches to theorizing democracy,4 legitimacy may be a very useful wedge for displacing bureaucratic power from its entrenched position in organizations.

In what follows, I argue that such a displacement of bureaucracy is an urgent task for democracy. Advancing from contestation to claiming power is not straightforward for social movements, and actors must be wary of internalizing state forms of power. The state imposes its own imperatives on movement organizations—depoliticizing claims (Young 1990) and incorporating claimants as new (but not equal) constituencies (Wolch 1990)—and thus fractures and shifts the erstwhile direct democratic accountabilities of the group. Recognizing the power relations at play in this meeting raises questions about how to build specifically democratic organizations which are suited to enacting social justice and dismantling oppression. These questions are particularly salient for food

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4 Especially around deliberative democracy’s Eurocentrism and its resulting limited engagement with power and difference (Roy 2017). Of course, the Marxist tradition has its own failings in acknowledging categories of domination and oppression which are not specifically economic, but there is now a long and robust Marxist and post-Marxist tradition of grappling with the diverse workings of power.
justice groups, given that community food projects and food policy councils have become sites where the state is eagerly seeking to incorporate (some) social movement energies.

**III. Towards a democratic praxis**

It is axiomatic that realizing democracy in practice is an elusive goal. In this section I bring together diverse bodies of scholarship and activist practice, in order to reflect the multiple moments of translating theory into a collective project. I begin by outlining the material and conceptual obstacles that stand in the way of implementing radical democratic principles in formal organizations. In short, these obstacles center on one many-layered problem—power. I draw here on the insights of scholars in various disciplines—from critical feminism, to critical race theory, to Marxist and post-Marxist theories of capital and state power—because no one account is sufficient to illustrate the complexity of the problem. After all, developing a democratic practice requires not only addressing *existing sites and forms of power* but also claiming *new forms of power* which abjure the oppressions and dominations of the old. I follow by setting out principles of democratic practice, standards which practice must achieve in order to qualify as democratic. I draw these principles from the same two strains of political philosophy cited above, deliberative and radical approaches to democracy. In the final section I turn to the literature written on and by democratic social movements (with a limited focus on those in North America) in order to characterize some of the alternative organizational ontologies they have been developing over the last century or more. Constraints of space mean that each section is too brief to do justice to the topic at hand, but I hope that by
sketching one possible route between theoretical works and practical forms this account can draw connections that others will find useful.  

1. Challenges

The specific challenges for non-profits enacting democracy at either the local or societal scale are well-documented. One of the best known accounts is that of the writing collective INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence (2009), and all of the challenges I describe here are presented in greater depth in their volume. Railing against what they call the “non-profit industrial complex,” the critiques they present are various: first, the donors, foundations, and organs of the state that provide funding for non-profit organizations are typically politically conservative, or at least beholden to conservative interests. Because of the amount of competition among grant-seeking organizations, funders also enjoy a disproportionate influence over the activities of organizations, even when they lack influence over an organization’s mission (McClintock 2014). Competition for limited funding furthermore pits organizations against each other when they could be allied in common struggle. A second set of challenges accrue to the problem of professionalism: the norms that structure roles and govern activities within non-profits are primarily based on the model of the corporation and have difficulty accommodating organizational goals of social change. Furthermore, there is strong incentive for non-profit staff to advance their personal careers over the good of the organization, shifting priorities and roles (and demands for compensation) toward bolstering their prestige.

Readers will note a disconnect in terminology used: whereas I draw on theoretical approaches which are “deliberative” or “radical,” activist approaches to democracy are generally referred to as “participatory.” Accounting for this gap is beyond the scope of this thesis, but suffice to say that where theoretical terms are more codified and attached to specific theorists’ work, activists and practitioners are much more fluid in how they refer to their practice. I use “participatory” here because I feel it reflects the most salient and unifying aspect of the groups I describe while also signaling a distinction between theoretical and practical discussions of democracy.
Hierarchical models of leadership and an entrepreneurial approach to organization-building also risk developing a cult of personality around a founder or executive director—typically referred to as “founder’s syndrome” (Block 2004). Norms of professionalism also tend to benefit people from privileged backgrounds, especially those who are educated, white, or middle-class. On a more systemic level, the voluntary sector as a whole is balkanized into many distinct spheres of service provision, discouraging or frustrating efforts to address the complexity of social ills more holistically. As noted above, the general emphasis on service provision favors attention to goods that are easily provided as services, rather than more intangible goods such as power or respect (Young 1990), and movement organizations’ integration within institutional networks tends to demobilize any associated grassroots campaigns (Piven & Cloward 1977).

Here I do not extend critiques significantly beyond earlier works—their critiques unfortunately remain valid and barely addressed by the sector. Instead, I emphasize and extend INCITE!’s arguments about why these deficiencies exist and persist, in order to articulate a meta-challenge that organizations face in enacting progressive or radical social change. These critiques are rooted not just in the specific historical form of the 501(c)(3) non-profit organization but in particular forms of power which are also expressed through agencies of the state, corporations, and other civil society organizations and associations, and thus are likely to persist as problems even as institutions change. Since this thesis makes the case for democratizing organizations in order to develop forms of power more compatible with democracy, I want to situate these critiques in an analysis of modern state power itself.
As I mentioned briefly above, I draw on a Gramscian (1971) concept of state power, where the state is a form of power not equivalent to but transcendent beyond the formal bodies of government. NGOs may be external to the state in commonsense understandings, but here I situate such organizations within the chain of administration that projects state power. Before, during, and after the Keynesian era of ‘big government,’ private and semi-public organizations have played significant roles in provision of public services, from utilities to welfare to warfare. The recent increase in devolution of state imperatives onto voluntary sector organizations—Wolch’s (1990) “shadow state”—is partly a result of the neo-conservative political project of fiscal austerity, but it also functions to incorporate new constituencies into administrative projects. Thus although this shift may consist in a shrinking of government—which is of course how conservative politicians prefer to frame the issue—it is most certainly not a shrinking of the state, and insofar as the public-to-private shift enables access to new constituents via innovation beyond the Keynesian boundaries of the public (for example, to homeless persons), it is actually an extension of state power into new domains.

It is not immediately obvious how state power is problematic for democratic justice because—to carry over Wendy Brown’s (1995) argument about the state’s masculinism—the state and its various forms of oppression operate through their ubiquitousness, not through any systematic, coherent strategies. Furthermore, NGOs are not completely integrated into the state project, but the social-administrative dimension of non-profits means that they mobilize one particular form of power: bureaucracy, one of the four dimensions of late modern state power that Brown identifies. Bureaucracy is the site where the line between state and civil society is most blurred. Through its cult of
expertise and professional norms, bureaucracy proliferates distinctions, not just between patrons and clients but also along a ranked hierarchy within agencies (Lefort 2010; Fraser 1989). It also forms an exclusive, internally-oriented world that seeks (without its members necessarily being aware of it) to preserve the material basis for its on-going privilege as a state intermediary. It is at this level that bureaucracy, like the state more generally, “does not simply handle clients or employ staff”—or issue grants—“but produces state subjects...dependent, disciplined, and gendered,” having internalized the logics that set the terms for their social reproduction (Brown 1995, 195). Bureaucracy is also auto-proliferating: within its internal logic, increased and extended administrative power is the solution to every problem, and bureaucracy as connected to the state can often mobilize the power necessary to achieve that extension. Insofar as social movement organizations integrate into this logic of rule, bureaucracy acts as a disciplinary force for popular struggle (Barkan & Pulido 2017), limiting both the intelligibility of claims and the range of actions available for addressing them.

Showing the disciplinary effects of bureaucratic power begins to explain some of the unintended outcomes from movement organizations (such as those of food justice). But as Lefort (2010) and Brown (1995) both emphasize, bureaucracy does not arise in history merely as a neutral container or vehicle for power. Rather, it arises out of specific conditions, and the specific historical content of administrative power dispels any remaining mystery around unintended outcomes—for the bureaucratic power exercised in the late modern state is rooted in the hegemony of white supremacy, settler colonialism, capitalism, and male dominance. No single dimension explains the workings of state power and its effects, which demand instead “the mapping of an intricate grid of
overlapping and conflicting strategies, technologies, and discourses of power” (Brown 1995, 177). The limited scope of this thesis prevents a full accounting of how such power works in and through organizations, but a few summary remarks illustrate the challenges bureaucracy poses for democratic power.

Consider how the voluntary sector came to occupy its current form, with all of its particular activities, norms, and dispositions. From early in the modern era, public welfare was conducted as a form of social-economic discipline, defusing claims on the political order in times of crisis and otherwise ensuring that the indigent had little choice under capitalism but to join the labor force (Piven & Cloward 1972). Although charity underwent many changes in the nineteenth century, its forms consistently responded more to elite anxieties about social disorder than to the needs of beneficiaries (Rothman 2002). Reformers such as Amos Warner (1894; Leiby 1963) pushed for the increased rationalization, modernization, and professionalization of philanthropy, a paternalistic programme that doubted whether marginalized people could know or articulate a set of demands that actually expressed what was in their best interest. During the subsequent growth of a professionalized bureaucracy of welfare provision, state policies played an active role in normalizing the dependencies exhibited by white, male heads-of-household (e.g., the need to retire in old age, or the right to care if injured in the workplace) while pathologizing the biological, social, and economic needs of all others (Fraser & Gordon 1997). The differential privilege afforded to the former category was fully consistent with the history of the United States as a “dictatorship of white men” (Omi & Winant, quoted in Gilmore 2002), effectively vesting bureaucracy with the task of attending to the interests of this one narrow demographic. The paltry assistance offered to people of color

6 This programme of scientification he gave the cumbersome name “philanthropology.”
and women—when assistance was offered at all—was justified by an on-going denial that the wealth of the modern world was accumulated not just through the appropriation of women’s and children’s labor (Fraser & Gordon 1997) but also through colonial seizure, slavery, and genocide (Bonds & Inwood 2016). The administrative vision that ranked, assessed, and prioritized the needs of welfare clients judged them with the same developmentalist gaze that nurtured the colonial project, whereby knowledges, behaviors, and ways of being were valued only to the extent that they resembled those of the European colonizer (Goldberg 2002). And of course the welfare bureaucracy played but one part in an aggressive public-private partnership to displace and divide communities of color (via urban renewal, housing discrimination, highway construction, and so on) who protested their marginalization or dared to live with dignity (Lipsitz 2006). Today a historical amnesia encourages people of all races to believe we live in a “post-racial” era, but the trappings of white supremacy, settler colonialism, and patriarchy still persist in organizations—even after most individuals no longer consciously subscribe to these forms of domination and oppression.

I do not recount this history of identity-based oppression in order to suggest that there is no place for men of European descent in democracy, but rather to show that the oppressive and dominating dimensions of whiteness, maleness, etc., are not essential but merely historical (Alcoff 2015). For now, there remains a clear correlation between certain categories of identity and positions of privilege and dominance in organizations, but that correlation is historically contingent and already undergoing change. However, less well-recognized is the fact that the underlying values, procedures, and modes of vision that have been historically constructed as appropriate to social administration are
also deeply coded with forms of past violence—that what we have come to call ‘whiteness’ is not just a configuration of material privilege but an epistemology that works to crowd out all others (Bonds & Inwood 2016). For social movements and their organizations, the problem of the present moment is the on-going construction of ignorance around the way historical violence persists as the engine of power in bureaucracy. Ignorance about organizational forms and ontologies has the effect of constructing invisible but massive obstacles to the re-politicization of justice claims, obstacles which prevent the advance of those claims to the point of claiming power and transforming the social order.  

What is it that favors this continued ignorance? Lipsitz (2006) argues that those who benefit from whiteness are disinclined to acknowledge that fact for fear of losing its benefits. But consider the critical literature on food justice: shouldn’t the unintended outcomes and missed promise of food programs be enough to drive organizational actors to be more reflexive, in the interest of improving outcomes? In the many cases where non-profit business-as-usual trudges on despite serious setbacks, organizations face a multi-layered problem: first, recognizing and taking seriously an unfortunate outcome; second, recognizing how the outcome can be a failure not just of practice but of an entire ideological framework; and last, knowing how to respond to ideological failings. In an essay on the colonial consciousness, Chela Sandoval (2000) explains how ideology functions as a lens on social reality and obscures vision. Only the acute observer notices

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7 This fact alone should cause organizational actors to reflect seriously on their roles in enabling or obstructing social change, but the present moment lends a special urgency to this task: for while liberal, progressive, and radical parties remain mired in argument, the 2016 US presidential election brought much more trenchant, violently revanchist, neo-nationalist forces further into the political mainstream. As I write this paper, staid interests who continue to deny the workings of gendered, classed, racialized power help to normalize the white-identity narratives of this ascendant group. Even non-political organizations should take note, since these parties are increasingly able to influence the terms on which civil society can (or cannot) administer any social good.
“the ways in which ideology corresponds to the general needs and interests of the
dominant society” and can “demonstrate that what appears as ‘natural’ is in fact ideology-
as-construction” (ibid, 103). In the case of organizations, ideology offers gratifications
which exceed or distort the failures it precipitates. By “ignoring the efficacy” of the
bureaucratic toolkit, organizations “simply [run] the risk of sustaining, under the happy
banner of...optimism,...the play of repetition” (Lefort 2010, 136)—that is, of repeated
failure according to standards of social justice. Norms of professionalism and
administration privilege a set of values tied to historical domination as those which are
‘right,’ ‘clever,’ ‘sensible,’ and ‘necessary.’ These values are then pitted against any
alternative, more democratic possibilities, which by contrast seem ‘deviant’ or ‘doomed
to fail.’ The challenge implied here is that radical democracy—because it exceeds the
bounds of what we as state subjects have known to be possible—will necessarily be
counterintuitive for those who have most internalized the dominant value system, for
those most habituated to unconsciously perpetuating oppressions, for those who are most
invested in its continuation.

This paradox presents a complex problem for organizational practice, and I do not
suggest that organizational leadership should simply make decisions they think are wrong
in order to achieve justice. Rather, I suggest that radical democratic theory provides an
alternative basis for evaluating decisions and decision-making processes, expanding the
range of what is considered possible or desirable. I describe some of these principles in
what follows.
2. Normative principles of democratic practice

The democratic frameworks cited above posit several fundamental, interconnected principles for democratic practice. Deliberative democracy, due to its pragmatist orientation, is especially prescriptive. Bohman (2007) asserts that democracy is necessarily reflexive: that is, democracy’s continued legitimacy consists in subjecting any governing rules and institutions to the deliberation of all members. Young (2000) affords special priority to the issue of inclusion. In her account, “the normative legitimacy of a democratic decision depends on the degree to which those affected by it have been included in the decision-making processes and have had the opportunity to influence the outcomes” (ibid, 5-6). Young also distinguishes between different forms of inclusion: merely formal inclusion mirrors the nominally universal suffrage within modern liberal states, while a stronger form of inclusion demands attention to a wide range of conditions for participation—such as when territorially-defined jurisdictions fail to include distant parties who are nevertheless intimately affected by decisions. Fraser (1997) emphasizes the principle of participatory parity, for deliberation without attention to the actual conditions of participation preserves de facto domination by powerful interests. In this case study, I pay special attention to the principle of mutuality in order to find traces of a dialogic model of justice. Democratic communication requires a process of attending to each other, of alternately expressing one’s views and making oneself open to the opinions of others (Young 2000). While deliberation strives for collective problem-solving, legitimacy does not derive from resolving divergent claims into unanimously-supported action. Instead, the willingness of parties to work together across multiple positions defies any binary opposition of competition or unanimity between claims. In this view, 

Note the affinity here with Laclau and Mouffe’s (1985, 172) account: “Between the logic of complete identity and that of pure difference, the experience of democracy should consist of the recognition of
disagreement is a necessary and productive feature of political deliberations, and an orientation of mutuality transforms disagreement from a challenge into a resource.

By elaborating such principles, work on deliberative democracy provides a blueprint of how democracy might achieve legitimacy—and normative force—in a world characterized by inequalities and differences of various kinds. In certain key ways, this engagement with difference is a departure from the foundational work of Habermas and Rawls, which emphasized consensus as the end of deliberation (Barnett 2012). In the 1980s their theoretical account ran aground on the contentious identity politics of New Social Movements (Young 1990), which seemed to present a problem of ineradicable, unresolvable difference, the putative mark of the postmodern age (Laclau & Mouffe 1985). The more recent work on deliberative democracy cited above benefits from its engagement with post-structuralist theories of radical democracy (Fraser 2009; Barnett 2012), which have sought to understand the ways that political projects have always negotiated difference, in order to imagine how difference might be negotiated for specifically democratic purposes. Although theorists like Young and Fraser have engaged with many of the insights from this literature—in their own style admittedly, and with different emphasis—it is nevertheless worthwhile to note one further principle which radical democracy emphasizes, that of open-endedness.

The basis for this last principle is Chantal Mouffe’s (2000) more radical view of pluralism, in which difference cannot be overcome by process or ethics. In her view, any theoretical account that offers a harmonious rendering of ‘mutuality’ threatens to obscure the operations of power in the moment of politics. The moment of a democratic decision—beyond deliberation—is fundamentally a moment of hegemonic formation, of the multiplicity of social logics along with the necessity of their articulation.”
exercise of the power of some over less powerful others. This understanding of power does not foil any hope of democracy, she insists: instead, the task at hand is to develop forms of power that are compatible with democracy. To this end, Mouffe offers a model of ‘agonistic pluralism.’ When conflict is antagonistic, she says, parties engage each other as enemies. When conflict is agonistic, it is not so simple: parties engage each other as ‘friends’ insofar as they share a symbolic space, but they engage each other as ‘adversaries’ insofar as they compete to reconfigure that shared space. The task for harnessing the productive power of difference is to transform antagonism into agonism, so that no party can enjoy more than a temporary and provisional victory, so that the shared space remains open as a space for disagreement and contest.

Mouffe’s agonistic model shifts the emphasis from the conditions of discourse to the ontologies of democracy, how individual democratic subjects are constituted within a demos. The effort of building and maintaining democracy “requires providing channels through which collective passions will be given ways to express themselves over issues which...will not construct the opponent as an enemy but as an adversary” (Mouffe 2000, 103). In the absence of such channels, competing parties are likely to seek total victory over their opponents, with necessarily undemocratic results. Mouffe further suggests that a pluralistic ethos does not precede democratic individuals; rather, “democratic individuals can only be made possible by multiplying the institutions, the discourses, the forms of life that foster identification with democratic values” (ibid, 96). The challenge for actually-existing—but ever-changing—institutions is how to develop roles, capacities, and orientations that embody democratic ideals.
The theoretical goal of such efforts is to overcome the effects of oppressive ideologies on decision-making, and the principles outlined here try to suggest a route through this dilemma. According to democratic theory, the gap between various positions becomes a source of strength—though not of harmony—and what is universally ‘right’ or ‘necessary’ is not settled either before or after deliberation. Deliberative or radical, all of the theorists cited here emphasize the process of democratization over any putative, final state of democracy. Rather, the "moment of tension, of openness...is what every project for radical democracy should set out to institutionalize" (Laclau & Mouffe 1985, 174). In the section that follows, I point toward activist efforts to build such open-ended institutions, experimental engagements that suggest points of departure for an alternative organizational praxis.

3. Alternatives, departures

One of the primary obstacles for organizations interested in participatory democracy is that the prevalence of hierarchical organizational forms crowds out knowledge of possible alternatives. It is therefore necessary to emphasize that the foregoing principles and critiques do not stand merely as abstract theorizing but have been actively taken up by generations of activists. Less formal models of oppositional political collectivities have perhaps always existed (cf. Thompson 1971), but the organizations I consider here are not necessarily less formal or less structured. Rather, these groups have sought to imagine forms of collectivity which expand the bounds of formal organizations as we have known them in civil society under capitalism. These groups have specifically sought to bend organizational forms in the direction of participatory democracy (Polletta 2002; Dixon 2014). Prominent examples hail from
every decade of the last sixty years: from Civil Rights and the New Left in the 1960s (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee; Students for a Democratic Society), to communitarian groups of the 1970s (Movement for a New Society), to anti-nuclear groups in the 1980s (Clamshell Alliance), to the diverse array of global justice, anti-racist, indigenous, and prison abolitionist groups of the 1990s and 2000s (including of course Occupy Wall Street). These groups have relied heavily on group experimentation and reflection, frequently developing activist scholarship and movement-based learning materials along the way. Their almost universal aim in this effort has been to reimagine forms of collectivity in order to more effectively undermine white supremacy, settler colonialism, hetero-patriarchy, and capitalism (Dixon 2014). These organizations have differed from typical civil society groups in several key ways—in forms of leadership, in models of decision-making, and in organizational goals.

**Leadership.** Activists have long suggested that participatory democracy demands alternative forms of leadership, a claim based in the sort of analysis of domination outlined above. One study group that Dixon (2014) cites, in their efforts to separate leadership from domination, articulate a different set of leadership qualities: “deep listening, actively nurturing a culture of participation...and being cognizant of how power dynamics impact participation and emotional well-being” (185). Many of the groups Dixon cites draw on the ideas of Ella Baker, civil rights leader and founder of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Baker promoted a model of “group-centered leadership,” a model to counter the charismatic style of figures like Dr. Martin Luther King (cf. Coover et al. 1977). As she described,

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9 It is worth noting here that the members of INCITE! developed their critiques of non-profits as participants in many of these movements.
Instead of the leader as a person who was supposed to be a magic man, you could develop individuals who were bound together by a concept that benefited the larger number of individuals and provided opportunity for them to grow into being responsible for carrying out a program. (quoted in Dixon 2014, 185-6)

Rather than presenting leadership as a position of privilege and special power, this model describes the special obligations of leaders to their group. This model avoids the unrealistic expectations that burden the solitary leader, instead placing its hopes in developing a diverse, well-attuned group that can respond to changing circumstances (Barrington-Bush 2013). Likewise, where hierarchical leadership seeks to guard and protect its privileges, activists have instead focused on how to create openings for involvement rather than obstacles. In this view, the challenge presented by including membership in decisions is not that they threaten the organization’s professionalism or purity of vision, but rather that their capacities may need to be encouraged and developed further so that they can contribute in meaningful ways.

Decision-making processes. Many groups have experimented with a model of consensus, rather than majority-vote or hierarchical models, but found that true consensus was either impossible or impractical (Polletta 2002). Despite a principled adherence to getting unanimous group assent to every decision—usually in order to ensure that dominant members were held in check—the demands of gathering a full membership meeting for every decision is often viewed as burdensome and inefficient. Over time groups have typically developed their own forms of modified consensus as an answer to this problem, delegating authority to sub-groups or individuals as appropriate (Dixon 2014; Cornell 2011). These ad hoc decision-makers are entrusted with varying degrees of autonomy, and their accountability to the larger group is structured by the nature of the task at hand.
Establishing goals. One last major difference with hierarchical organizations is that participatory democratic groups tend to espouse a different set of priorities and goals. Like many other groups, these organizations still readily engage in various forms of service provision, but service provision is carefully balanced with a *movement-building* orientation. That is, rather than structure the organization’s goals around the growth and efficacy of their services, these groups tend to evaluate their performance based on their contribution to the capacity of all people to effectively make change in society. In cases such as the Heads Up! Collective of San Francisco, this orientation manifests as efforts to materially support allied groups to organize themselves—for example, by providing child care during a meeting of migrant organizers (Dixon 2014). For these groups, organizations are not ends in themselves so much as *vehicles* for social movement organizing—a standard that should appeal to anyone hoping to enable change beyond the local reach of organizational programming.

IV. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have reframed the practical problems faced by food justice organizations as political problems. I began by outlining the promises and pitfalls of food justice activism, a coalitional politics that has so far been a potential more than an actuality. Drawing on democratic theory, I described the basis for justice in political life and what forms of justice are possible or desirable. I have shown that common organizational forms which mobilize bureaucratic power sit in tension with any democratic definition of justice which aims to dismantle oppression. Acknowledging the difficulties that familiar organizational forms present, I have presented first a set of theoretical principles for guiding organizational innovation and second a brief account of
activist experiments with participatory democratic forms. Of course, organizations of this kind comprise a tiny share of political organizing even today, and it is unlikely that most non-profit organizations could quickly and easily reformulate their existing operations as participatory democratic ventures. Nevertheless, when taken with the principles that theory suggests, the activist experiments cited here suggest that alternatives are possible—and given how these groups have so far been confined to fairly limited spheres of activity, there is great potential for further experimentation in other venues, especially in the realm of food justice. Such organizations hold out the possibility of fulfilling the demands of democracy, that our collective political forms remain open as spaces for disagreement and contest. Given the consistent failures of liberal, charitable approaches to inequality—in the food system (Poppendieck 1998) as elsewhere—there is urgent need to actualize more radical alternatives such as social movements make possible (Heynen 2009a). Radical democracy, because of its open-endedness, demands political forms that are able to engage with social movements and build new forms of collectivity to resist state power.

In this thesis, such macro-scale problems provide the backdrop for investigating how one community food project is or is not kept open as a space for contestation. In this local context, I ask how the political dimensions of the space enable or obstruct developing justice claims into collective action. By looking at the challenges of politics in this place, I ask how this case illuminates the challenges of democratizing non-profits more generally, of making organizations more responsive vehicles for a collective, democratic politics. In the next chapter I describe my methodology for answering such questions, drawing primarily on a number of long-form interviews with participants.
Many of their comments reflect back to theories of democracy described above, but often indirectly. Indeed, one of the most salient themes in discussions was race—what it is, how it works, how it’s relevant here—pointing to the problems that social difference presents for democratic praxis. By reading the political content of these narratives, I draw out the challenges that radical food justice work faces today.
CHAPTER 3

METHODS

“One of the emails I addressed ‘[Dear] white board and white staff’ because...I knew that they probably don’t generally, always, see their own whiteness even though they’ve tried. That it’s important to name it [whiteness] wherever it is, which is [everywhere].”

Gracie, former volunteer

The comment above alludes to a recurring theme in one volunteer’s conversations with the Growing Justice leadership about racial justice. In these conversations, several white participants frequently questioned whether anti-racist work was relevant for their organization, in a town where over 90% of the residents identify as white. Gracie was at pains to explain that ‘race’ does not just happen where there are large communities of the racial other, so anti-racist work is still relevant in communities that do not seem racially diverse. Of course, the idea that race even could be locally irrelevant speaks to the way that whiteness usually passes unremarked, not as a race so much as a neutral category, a non-race, the norm (Gilmore 2002; Alcoff 2015; hooks 1997). How can it be that racism still operates in a social justice organization, staffed by white progressives, in a town that many residents think is not very diverse? If race is at work in a place where it goes unnoticed, how could a social justice organization address it? And what other political struggles might also be hidden from view but nevertheless demanding attention?

The task that Gracie describes above—de-naturalizing the familiar, naming the invisible—is a basic precondition for liberatory political praxis under the hegemonic conditions of modern society, where dominant ideology ensures its reproduction by posing as the ‘natural’ order (Sandoval 2000). This is exactly the problematic I take up in
this thesis, as well: through a case study of one community food project, I investigate how politics works through everyday communication and contestation, demonstrated through participants’ narratives, reflections, and ideas. But finding politics here is not straightforward: for even though New Social Movements have long since politicized the ‘everyday’ (Laclau & Mouffe 1985; Young 1990), most people do not experience typical interactions as political unless they have been taught to do so. Indeed, many of the conflicts at Growing Justice appear to be strictly interpersonal. Yet these interpersonal disagreements have political effects insofar as they have been costly for the organization, and a closer look at such conflicts reveals themes which tie into major problems for the practice of democracy. Here, I describe a methodological and analytical framework which draws out how talk and ideas mobilize power in this organization. By providing tools for apprehending and naming the workings of power in such spaces, this study aims to enable a more liberatory praxis of food justice.

In this chapter, I present the empirical methods I use to access this political work. I begin by outlining my research objectives and their relation to my research questions. I follow by presenting my research methodology, pairing mixed qualitative methods with narrative and discourse analysis, and situating this research project as a work of scholar-activism—studying oppressive forms of power with the aim of transforming them. I then describe the process of data collection, from recruitment through the various methods of interviews, participant observation, and archival research, followed by an account of the process of data analysis. Next I present brief summaries of the major conflicts which participants described, in order to provide background for the analysis in the next chapter. I then conclude with a few summary remarks on the relation between the data and the
existing academic literature, sketching an interpretive framework that allows us to see the
significance of these data for our understandings of political life both at Growing Justice
and more generally.

I. Research objectives

The starting point for this inquiry is the increasing visibility of community food
projects as sites of food activism, as represented both in the media and within movement
networks. As noted above, these organizations owe much to earlier models both of food
assistance and of political organizing, and they enjoy a high level of support among
certain social networks, both materially (in the form of donations, institutional funding,
and volunteer labor) and discursively (in the libidinal investments that people and
institutions make in them as agents of change). In broad strokes scholars have situated
food justice along a spectrum of common frameworks of policy and activism (Holt-
Gimenez & Shattuck 2011), but such renderings cannot account for the diversity of
practices and outcomes across the field of actually existing organizations. Prominent
minority-led groups have made claims of seeking food justice in order to foreground a
politcized framework for food system activism, but such claims have been rearticulated
in so many different contexts that their politics (taken as a whole) remain ambiguous at
best. The food justice framework has become form without clearly-defined content, since
the term 'food justice' can imply either an expansion of food system work or a narrowing
of social justice work—and thus the meaning of such an orientation will necessarily be an
object of negotiation by the real people who attempt to operationalize it. Such
negotiations are the subject of this thesis. While it is important to distill and theorize the
various broad frameworks of food activism, it is also necessary to investigate political
practice empirically in order to understand the ways that agents imbue an open-ended framework with actual political content. Case studies such as this one help to fill in this gap by offering access to local processes of group meaning-making, which are everywhere unique and enacted in place (Massey 2005).

With this problem in mind, my broader concern in this work is to understand what political work community food projects perform and how they negotiate a collective political practice. This inquiry takes the form of a case study of one community food project, Growing Justice, where I ask the following empirical questions:

1. What do participants say about Growing Justice, and what claims do they make about justice in this place? What conflicts, debates, and crises have arisen around these claims?

2. What conceptual and experiential sources do these claims draw upon, and how are they worked out in practice? What political work do conflicts perform in the organization and in the wider community?

3. What do these negotiations at Growing Justice suggest about the role of non-profit organizations in political life?

These questions aim to deepen our understanding of the politics of these organizations, but also to facilitate and engage the self-understandings of participants in and around community food projects. Common narratives of social change tend to render struggles in simplistic terms, with a coherent mission, defined goals, and a generally flat cast of characters; whereas the actual experience of political work is messy and anything but coherent. One participant in this study thought it might be a particular quality of activism in Middlefield, that even “awesome” projects seemed to contain elements that were highly questionable. Yet such ambiguity is a common feature of political practice, as are the tensions that arise because of it: “if you're really doing coalition work,” Bernice Johnson Reagon notes, “[m]ost of the time you feel threatened to the core and if you
don't, you're not really doing no coalescing” (quoted in Sandoval 2000, 160). From this perspective, not only is much grassroots political work uncomfortable, but that discomfort and ambiguity can be a sign that things are as they should be. Such difficulties arise partly from a pluralistic ethos, from the on-going labor required to stitch together social difference into collective practice (Laclau & Mouffe 1985). By trying to engage participants around their experiences of political work, this project aims to speak to those who are made uncomfortable by the process of arguing, of being challenged, of disagreement. Various participants have experienced Growing Justice as alienating in different ways, especially those participants who have challenged the dominant liberal framework for achieving social justice via conventional organizational practices. This project aims to speak to those made uncomfortable by challenges to dominant ways of managing organizations.

Such a dialogue can support efforts at innovation around the practices and relational ethics of social justice organizations. Growing Justice has long presented itself as a grassroots organization, as a 'community farm,' but, as will be shown below, they have had difficulty balancing a hierarchical leadership model with expectations of community accountability. These challenges are not unique to the organization, since non-profits generally draw on corporate-bureaucratic organizational models in ways that can seem incompatible with the grassroots politics imagined by many food justice activists (INCITE! 2009). However much desire there may be to develop new models that are less managerial or hierarchical, the fact remains that most such efforts are relatively esoteric and experimental (Dixon 2014). Because these alternatives require further development before they can be easily deployed across different contexts, the more
familiar form of non-profits still enjoys common-sense status among many activist groups.

By examining more closely how activism works both within and through one community food project, this case study might help expand the political possibilities of such groups and cultivate more open spaces for mutual political development. As Derickson & Routledge (2015) point out, scholar-activists are well positioned to study the barriers that hinder a more sustainable activist practice. In this thesis I attend to how particular ways of handling conflicts favor particular outcomes. As the data reveal, there have been obvious costs to organizational conflicts at Growing Justice. If such challenges are a natural consequence of coalition work, as Johnson's comments might suggest (see also Nagar 2014), then one approach might be to develop processes for conflict management. After all, not all conflicts or outcomes are equal: it is one thing to experience heartache and discomfort as part of a political effort that one remains deeply committed to and which offers some occasional satisfactions; it is another thing entirely to be deeply engaged, to persevere through challenges, and finally to end in despair, anger, or regret that any of the effort was worthwhile. The latter case was reported several times in the interviews and has had clear impacts on participants' abilities to sustain their work. One question which I address here is whether more attention to conflict resolution is sufficient to enable different outcomes; for, if an organization cannot address the substance of conflicts, efforts to resolve conflict will remain superficial. Thus, beyond the question of how to better relate during conflicts, this thesis also addresses the need to develop forms of collective power that defy the narrow and rigid constraints of non-profits as we have known them. Like Audra Simpson, then, I ask with my collaborators
“who we are, and who we shall be for the future” (2007, 68)—and what knowledges and capacities we must develop to enable that vision.10

II. Methodology

Growing Justice as a research site presents an interesting case of the practice of food politics, insofar as its programming has often been innovative, its funding streams surprisingly successful, and community engagement robust; but what emerges from the data presented below, and what is more interesting from a scholarly perspective, are the perennial conflicts, contentions, turnover, emotional investments, and disappointments, as well as the multiple readings of the organization's successes and setbacks. All of these themes center on questions of process, of how the group actively constitutes itself as an organization in a particular place. As such the problems presented here reflect elements of social life that are best accessed through qualitative methods, which excel at constructing rich accounts of the complexities of life in society (Winchester and Rofe 2010). In the sections that follow I lay out my methodology for developing such an account of this case study, using techniques of narrative and discourse analysis to make sense of the ethnographic data and adopting a critical realist stance to understand these data as social phenomena. I conclude with a few remarks on my relationship to the study's participants and the implications for this research.

1. Epistemological frame

The empirical data from this inquiry are mostly textual, in the form of ethnographic interviews and official documents, backed up by participant observation.

10 I take seriously Derickson and Routledge’s (2015) call for scholar-activists to address the obstacles that activists face in effecting social change. In order to leverage this research project for improving outcomes of activism, I intend to continue my dialogue with research participants and with food justice activists more generally. Appendix G proposes alternative research products which I may offer back to the community of practice.
Because of the multiple levels on which these texts operate, I balance complementary analytical approaches as needed. The extensive interviews which form the bulk of the data suggest a framework of narrative analysis, reading and organizing the multiple personal narratives to build an account of how people have experienced collective processes over time (Wiles et al. 2005). By focusing on the structure and coherence of personal stories, narrative analysis provides a framework for understanding how people have engaged with Growing Justice as an organization and with each other, attending to participants' efforts to learn, change, and act strategically based on their experiences and desires. Narratives are deeply coded by temporality and thus foreground interpretations of how the political space of the community farm has unfolded over time, told through participants' efforts to understand and respond to change. A narrative approach furthermore attends to the subjects of interviews, to the people who speak and act as political agents, who present their experiences not neutrally but with intention and with strategy. In studying Growing Justice, then, narrative analysis offers a framework for accessing how political agency and desire are threaded through on-going deliberations.

Discourse analysis helps to fill in gaps in this narrative approach, by engaging with Growing Justice not as a group of individuals but as a collectivity—and specifically as a non-profit organization set in a broader institutional field. As an organization, the farm is structured as a symbolic speech community, a localized field which is constantly interpreted and reinterpreted by both participants and outsiders, all attempting to establish what it means to be in the organization, what the organization is and does, and so on (Phillips and Brown 1993). Discourse analysis helps us to understand how official texts are imbued with particular meanings (or perhaps become an object of discursive struggle)
in an effort to achieve organizational goals. In the case of Growing Justice, public relations materials such as booklets, emails, flyers, and a website try to establish and maintain particular relationships to a surrounding community and thus shed light on the desires and aspirations that structure internal debates over programming, identity, funding, and so on.

Taken together, this dual narrative-discursive approach helps us to understand participants’ efforts to influence group interpretive frameworks and shape the conditions of communication and action (Phillips et al. 2004). This latter point hints at the political processes at work in this community food project and also points to the particular understanding of ‘the political’ that I invoke here. The data below reveal how diverse actors have discovered and developed their disagreements through the effort to work together on common terms. These actors have tried to develop their claims so as to achieve their political visions using the organization as a vehicle. As will be seen, the collective processes of sense-making that follow these disagreements have been highly contentious for the organization and for individuals, and these are the communicative processes which I suggest are deeply political. This proposition draws heavily on the phenomenological understanding of political action outlined by Barnett (2012), which “focuses in on the processes and activities by which shared worlds of association and co-existence are constituted” (679). Such a rendering of political activity assumes a stage, a public space for mutual engagement, which in this case is a nonprofit organization. By adopting a narrative-discursive framework, I aim to understand how this particular space has been made available (or selectively unavailable) for political communication, the better to theorize and further develop the political possibilities of similar groups.
I also conduct this study in the spirit of critical realism, which as a research philosophy rejects both essentialism and relativism, assuming that social reality has an existence independent of its cognitive representations but also ascribing causality to actors' intentions (Yeung 1997). Critical realist scholarship seeks to move from mere description of a phenomenon to a description of that phenomenon's conditions of possibility. This approach serves to ground ethnographic and narrative data, refining subjective accounts through a process of constant reflection and immanent critique in order to develop theory about social life. Given the public role of scholarship, it is absolutely necessary for researchers to make situated claims about the world (Wyly 2009), claims which can be made available for use in broader political projects. In this study, as for Gilmore (2002, 17), “the object” of research “is to figure out what...makes oppressive and liberatory structures work, and what makes them fall apart,” with the goal of fostering the conditions for reshaping and reinventing those structures.

2. Situating the research in political space

My relationship with Growing Justice has shaped this project from the start, so I would like to offer a few brief comments on how this project formed and later developed. The farm itself is one of a number of similar organizations I've known and been active with in rural New England, and when I first proposed this research project I already knew some of the participants and had a certain idea of the group's activities. My familiarity with the group (and a few open-ended conversations with my contacts there) suggested the initial framing of the research questions. During the period of fieldwork many participants were generous with their time and reflections, enabling lines of questioning which might not have been possible for a complete stranger. It's clear that the study has
benefited from the frankness of the respondents, which I think is a sign of their own curiosity and thoughtfulness about their experiences in the group, a sign of their hope that their experience could help others through similar travails, and, finally, a sign that at least some of them had faith in me for facilitating this discussion. For all of their indulgences and trust, I am grateful. However, in studying an organization so riven by disagreement it has proven challenging to resist the urge to reconcile multiple viewpoints and diverse experiences of events. Especially in this thesis it feels more appropriate (and more productive) to try to tease out what can be learned from the conflicts and how they have played out, rather than choosing sides in any particular argument. The salience of disagreement and interpersonal tensions in the interview data has come to structure this work at its core—this much is obvious—but I most certainly do not claim to have the final word on any of the conflicts represented here. I have sought instead to frame this work in a way that it might serve as a resource for these activists and others well beyond the organization. But research does not take place in a vacuum, and even this approach entails staking a position and providing my own interpretations of narratives here. For that reason, I ask that readers approach this thesis as an opportunity for reflection on how to wage a collective politics and not as a judgment on individual parties. I relate these learning moments in close dialogue with theory precisely because the problems they present defy a logic of blame or individual judgment, as all interviewees draw on discourses and ideas that reach far beyond this case.

Adopting this wider view foregrounds how we do not inhabit political spaces strictly as individuals. Rather, through categories of identity articulated in and by history, our actions and our selves are waged in dialogue with broader social formations. It is
important to note, then, that I hail from the same demographic group—white, middle-class, college-educated, politically progressive—which has dominated the US alternative food movement (Guthman 2008c) and which remains most visible among the participants in this case study. This point of departure inevitably shapes my account and the arguments I make. I thus undertake this project, with my research participants as collaborators, as a “self-study” (Sandoval 2000, 126) of a particular historical consciousness shaped by its roles in settler colonialism, capitalism, and heteropatriarchy. Critiques of the ‘whiteness’ of alternative food movements provide a starting point for such studies, demonstrating that race works in and through food organizations in ways that have strong negative effects on outcomes (Slocum 2011; Guthman 2011; see also previous chapter). But beyond showing the failures of ‘inclusion’ (Ramirez 2015), a further goal of this thesis is to contribute to unraveling the “effects of racism and colonialism on the perpetrators themselves” and show how some communities’ “innocent usage” (Sandoval 2000, 127) of ideologies rooted in the colonial encounter can serve to naturalize alienation. Norms of professionalism, activism, charity, and cultural belonging all serve to structure and organize the political space of community food projects, drawing heavily on colonial ideologies in the process. These organizations internalize and impose discursive categories of history and identity which typically erase or essentialize difference. This discursive work shapes Growing Justice as a political project, and it is this work which I aim to interrogate through the methods outlined below.

However, the form of analysis that I employ here is not just a method for writing academic research, but also a “‘democratic’ technology” in the spirit of Sandoval’s (2000, 133) Methodology of the Oppressed. Discourse analysis (like semiology, for Sandoval)
becomes a technique of political resistance when actors adopt it as a method to read the hidden workings of ideology in everyday experience. Dominant ideologies work by hiding, by encoding their meanings as natural. “This ‘enjoyable’ system of power dulls human senses with its normalities, its ‘shoulds,’ its scripts” (ibid, 143). Ideology offers gratifications to its adherents when their interpretations of experience are congruent with ideology’s familiar narratives. The challenge for waging resistance, then, is to sharpen the senses, to cultivate techniques which allow different interpretations of worldly experience and enable different outcomes. The challenge is to recognize and then to refuse the gratifications of dominant ideologies. In this thesis, I read for the ideological gratifications inscribed in familiar forms of organization—a community farm, a non-profit—which stand in the way of a more democratic praxis. It is my hope that such an analysis can help us to move away from familiar narratives of political practice towards open-ended forms of collectivity that are compatible with radical democracy.

III. Data collection

1. Recruiting participants

The recruiting process for this project was gradual, since the idea for the research coalesced out of conversations I had with several contacts I had already established at Growing Justice. After those initial contacts, the period of recruitment began when I received IRB approval from the University of Georgia (Study #00003167) in April 2016. I reached the organization through my pre-established contacts, and I was referred to the staff leadership and board. Once the organization's leadership lent their support to the project, they assigned me to one staff member and one board member who served as

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11 The approved consent form for this study is included as Appendix A. Recruiting scripts are included as Appendix B.
liaisons to the rest of the group. At times when I was not able to establish contact directly or informally with a potential interviewee, these liaisons either introduced me in person or offered participants' contact information. Using a snowball sampling method, I recruited interviewees according to the following criteria: first, I sought group participants who served in positions of leadership or were otherwise active in the formation and development of the organization; second, I sought out those people who figured prominently in those interviewees' narratives, as well as those people who interviewees recommended would have significant or interesting insights into the organization; finally, I recruited people I met during periods of participant observation, which included many people with whom I was not previously familiar among both the staff and board.

This process was of course not exhaustive, and there were many group members (past and present) whom I did not have a chance to consult. Recruitment was limited by several factors, especially by people's willingness or availability to participate—most of those who declined were too busy for an interview, although a small number lacked interest for whatever (usually unstated) reason. My own time frame for the fieldwork—the month of June 2016—also limited the number of interviews possible. That said, I began with a goal of twenty interviews and completed eighteen plus one focus group, and those interviews have proven to be productive source material for this project. Any additional interviews would have taxed my capacity for analysis in the relatively short time frame allowed for completing a masters thesis. It is also worth noting that the recruiting process, despite relying heavily on the recommendations and contacts of current participants, nevertheless succeeded in reaching many people with strong
dissenting opinions about the organization. It is striking, in fact—and an illustration of how deeply some members have invested in Growing Justice—that even past participants who have fallen out with the group over disagreements were still eager to be represented in the study.

I have falsified all names and locations in this study in order to protect the confidentiality of my participants as much as possible, and I have falsified some personal details of individuals, as well. The Growing Justice board requested this confidentiality as a condition for supporting the study, in order to protect the reputation of the organization both in the community and among funding agencies, and also to protect individuals in case any sensitive information were shared during interviews. In writing this thesis, I err on the side of caution in withholding personal details of participants, or narrative details that may be damaging to individuals or the group if shared publicly. It is for this reason that I am as brief as possible in describing conflict narratives, presenting only as much information as necessary in order to provide a general sense of the group’s history together and illustrate what is at stake in those conflicts.

Research participants fell into several groups distinct groups, and it is worth characterizing those participants who feature most in the chapters that follow:

*The board of directors.* During the time of fieldwork the board president was Diane, who retired several years previously from a professional career and has been an avid gardener all her life. The previous board president, Fred, was a retired ecologist and also an avid gardener. Both Diane and Fred resigned before their tenure was up, for different reasons. Robert works for a community-based non-profit service provider and is the only African American in the organization. Sally is one of the younger board members, and she works full-time in an agriculture-related non-profit. Corin left the board after one term; she directs another small non-profit
nearby and has served on other boards. She also contributed significantly to discussions about race and racial justice at Growing Justice.

**Staff leadership.** Ron began his involvement with Growing Justice as a volunteer but became the first executive director when the organization was formalized. He is now in his second retirement, having come to Growing Justice after retiring from another (non-agriculture-related) non-profit he helped to found. Allison is the current executive director, originally hired by Ron to be his apprentice and eventually his replacement. Her past experience lies in business and non-profit management. Kathleen is the junior member of the management team, recently hired to help with program management. She previously managed a small organic farm.

**Staff.** Will is the outreach coordinator and serves as the most visible liaison between Growing Justice and other community groups. Tara was the farm manager for almost two years, although she was dismissed shortly after my fieldwork ended. Previously she had been an apprentice at the farm, and her tenure was the longest of any farm manager in the organization’s history. Ted was the previous farm manager and also a former apprentice. Kait was the education coordinator for two years. The farm crew—Jackie, Les, Casey, and Ash—were all in their mid-20s, and they were responsible for the majority of the farm’s daily tasks. They had been working at the organization for between one to three months by the time I interviewed them.

**Volunteers.** Gracie was one of the younger volunteers and had worked with Growing Justice off and on for several years from their founding. She identifies as multi-racial and was the organization’s most vocal proponent for addressing issues around racial oppression and justice. By the time I interviewed her she had not spoken to anyone in the organization for at least a year. Darren is a farmer and a landscaper by trade, and although he has mostly served only in a volunteer capacity, his practical experience has benefited the farm significantly.

These participants are of course only a fraction of the many people who have been involved at Growing Justice. Appendix D presents the full list of research participants, whose names are falsified throughout this work.
It is also worth making a few summary observations of group demographics. First, although I did not usually ask directly what social class people identified with, a large majority of the group showed the markers of middle-class status—relative affluence, college education, and so on. Second, almost half of the research participants identify as LGBT or gender non-conforming. Third, only one participant from among the group grew up in the local area that the non-profit serves, and many of them hail from distant regions of the country (a fact which would distinguish them from many less-affluent residents). In addition, the age range of participants is spread evenly from seasonal workers in their 20s to leaders and volunteers in their 70s. Lastly, all but three of the participants identify as white; these three people of color include a woman of mixed race, an African American man, and a Native American woman. All of these facts might seem to suggest that Growing Justice is 'mostly white and middle-class,' a characterization that carries particular weight given the literature on whiteness and food activism (Slocum 2006, 2011; Alkon 2012; Guthman 2008c). However, the stories told in the interviews make clear that those participants who do not fit the white, middle-class mold have played central roles in group process—and sometimes not by choice. So while it is important to acknowledge and consider who comprise the majority in the group, it is also important not to neglect the significant contributions of people in the minority at Growing Justice. I revisit the implications of this distinction in the chapters that follow.

2. Interviews and focus group

My primary and most extensive method of data collection was interviews, which offer advantages in understanding how an organization operates by privileging the direct experiences of participants and encouraging them to present and reflect on their
understandings of those experiences (Dunn 2010). The interviews at Growing Justice furthermore benefited from a diversity of perspectives, drawing on the different time periods when participants have been more or less active with the group as well as the different ways that they have engaged with the organization and its programs. I conducted eighteen interviews in total, ranging from fifteen minutes to two hours; of these, all but one interview was recorded electronically for later transcription. Seven interviews took place in participants' homes, four at Growing Justice, four in participants' offices or workplaces other than Growing Justice, and three over the telephone. In all cases the interviews were conducted in places that ensured privacy.

The format of the interviews was flexible.12 The earliest interviews were with the first leaders of the group, and in these conversations I encouraged my interviewees to share their story of the organization from its beginnings to the present. These narratives helped to guide my later interviews with other participants by setting out a chronology of major events and decisions as well as a list of major and minor participants who might serve as interview subjects. The second round of interviews was more structured as I sought to garner responses to the anecdotes and themes that arose in the earlier conversations. Most often these discussions revolved around the challenges of running a non-profit, questions of leadership and group process, the ambiguities of 'diversity work' in a community organization, and especially the recurring challenges of waging a collective project. In general interviewees were happy to share their views on the history of Growing Justice, including many interesting anecdotes. A very few interviewees were shy or reluctant to talk about certain fraught moments in the group's past; while many

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12 Although these interviews were loosely structured, I present a sample interview protocol in Appendix C.
seemed eager to verbally process past experiences that still felt unresolved and loaded with emotional freight. These conversations often turned to major or minor conflicts, and accounts of those conflicts often intersected or diverged in interesting ways. It became clear during these interviews that participants held many strong feelings about the organization and about each other, both positive and negative, but these feelings were unevenly distributed.

The interviews were supplemented by one focus group with the seasonal farm crew. A group format seemed like the best fit for these participants, given their familiarity with each other, their shared position in the organization's hierarchy, and their relatively recent arrival on the farm. The group discussion was lively, as participants responded readily to each other and expanded on each other's comments. My initial questions aimed at comparing their experiences at Growing Justice with their experiences of other farms and non-profits, although the conversation frequently drifted in the direction of the challenges of the current season. This is perhaps not surprising given that we met right at the beginning of July, a very busy time for farm workers in the region. Nevertheless, the particular challenges they cited prompted a discussion of organizational process which proved fruitful.

It is worth noting here one major absence among the interview participants, that of the farm's beneficiaries or clients. Despite my persistent efforts to recruit a focus group from among the approximately one hundred fifty families who participate in the farm's food assistance programs—even with the help of organizational staff and affiliates—no such focus group coalesced. This fact can be partially explained by the limitations of the social networks I was drawing on, given that most of the active participants at Growing
Justice tend to be more affluent and educated and had few interactions with clients outside of transactional moments. Also, as a social worker pointed out in an interview (Jacob), it is “a full-time job” to take advantage of different forms of poverty relief, possibly leaving little time or energy for such non-essential activities as participating in research. That said, this absence may also be a sign of how different groups in the community relate to or engage with the organization, especially since one of the organization’s greatest expenditures of labor is in recruiting and retaining beneficiaries. Some interviewees expressed concern, for example, that Growing Justice was ‘for the people’ but not ‘of the people,’ a mostly middle-class project providing charity rather than facilitating community empowerment.

3. Participant observation

I conducted participant observation in various contexts in and around Growing Justice, including daily farm operations, leadership meetings, produce share distribution, farmers market, community events, and spaces of food assistance provision (see Appendix E for a detailed list of observation sites). Interactions in these informal situations offered significant data to complement and contextualize themes that arose in formal interviews and the focus group (Kearns 2010). This relationship between observation and the interviews was highly iterative, as informal conversations during observation periods frequently drifted to events of significance or to different personalities involved with the farm, thus presenting material for exploration in later interviews. In these contexts I attended to how participants relate to each other, to clients, and to the mission of the organization, as well as how they understand their own roles in the organization’s work and how they inhabit the space of Growing Justice—in other
words, the “everyday meanings” of the organization (Lichterman 2002, 138). My daily process of reflecting and writing field notes offered an important moment for developing and integrating ideas and questions about what I was seeing and hearing, and these notes were extensive (approx. 27,000 words).

4. Archival research

The time frame for my fieldwork was brief, and limited archival research helped expand the historical depth of this inquiry beyond the single month of on-site data collection. My first major archival source was the community farm’s board meeting notes, which covered monthly meetings from 2011 to the present with only a few gaps. I read these notes before conducting any interviews, thus familiarizing myself with the organization’s history in broad strokes. Common themes that arose were the regular turnover of board members, recurring questions of the skills appropriate to board membership, and controversies over decision-making processes and roles. These brief accounts raised many issues for later exploration in interviews: questions around who has been involved, who has stayed involved, and who has left for what reasons; around the processes of shaping the organization’s structure and identity and which participants are included in those processes; and around identifying community needs, organizational needs, and the appropriate ways to try to meet those needs.

A second major archival source was public relations documents from Growing Justice; of these, one particular document eclipsed all the others, a booklet produced by the original group about a community forum they convened in 2010. The topic of the forum was the possibility of developing the town farm (the former poor farm) into a public space. The forum was well attended and marked a major transition in the group’s
level of community engagement, as the event motivated their transition from a casual
group of like-minded citizens into a formally structured organization with a public
mission. The booklet's significance is multiple: first, the community forum was a major
point of reference for various interviewees, both in understanding how the organization
came to be what it is and in imagining how they should be in the future; second, a
common theme in the interviews was the relationship between community needs and the
legitimacy of the organization, and this forum was the most commonly cited example of
how to articulate collective needs and desires; third, the document itself offers an
interesting snapshot of how the group thought about this community-needs/organization
articulation before they encountered much disagreement or conflict, at a time when they
were clearly optimistic about achieving the 'mandate' from the forum; last, the booklet
offers a number of clues as to which elements of the community were best represented at
this moment of formulating a mission—the group identified by one interviewee as
“white, New England, co-op people” (Gracie, describing a category of residents most
likely to shop at the co-operative natural food store in town). For all of these reasons, this
particular booklet proved useful for understanding the beginnings of political process at
Growing Justice, as well as reconstructing some of the gaps and absences in the group's
early vision (Dwyer & Davies 2010).

A minor source of archival data was historical documents in the town's collection,
especially the multi-volume official town history. This work contains numerous but only
brief references to the town's poor farm and its changing structure over time. It is worth
noting that this history adopted a markedly developmentalist tone, casting the town's
'leading citizens' as the protagonists in a tale of progress and civilization. Thin references
to the poor farm served primarily to indicate that, first, the institution followed a chronology of expansion and eventual closure that was typical for the region as a whole (see Wagner 2005, 2008); second, there was little public interest in representing or preserving accounts of life at the poor farm—or accounts of lives lived in poverty at all; and third, to what little extent the poor farm was mentioned, it was intended to be remembered as a charitable but now obsolete institution of public health. The value of this history then is partly what it tells and partly what it fails to say. Though it is beyond the scope of this thesis to reconstruct the experience of institutionalized poverty relief in the town, this historical lacuna resurfaces as an interesting thread in the story of Growing Justice. Early documents from the organization (including the booklet mentioned above) operate on an understanding of the old poor farm as a strictly benevolent institution, a case of staid New Englanders 'taking care of their own.' Conversations with participants during the period of fieldwork, however, revealed a change of perspective on that history.

**IV. Data analysis**

After collecting data and transcribing interviews, I analyzed all documents, field notes, and transcripts as textual sources, using thematic coding to organize the raw data. I developed these themes into their final form (see Appendix F) only gradually, beginning during the period of fieldwork by attending to participants' accounts of what has been most interesting, salient, or problematic in their experience and comparing these themes to the relevant academic literature. This process continued during interview transcription, after which I re-read all data in light of my research questions. The final set of themes coalesced to highlight major lines of discussion in the data and points which provided evidence relevant to my questions.
I applied my set of codes (Appendix F) in order to organize the most salient data for further analysis. The process of coding foregrounds points of continuity or discontinuity across the whole universe of available data and among all respondents. In applying these codes, I excerpted significant sections of text and collected them in documents organized by theme. For example, numerous interviews included descriptions of the early group’s motivation for founding Growing Justice, generally agreed to be a love of farming or gardening; because of the frequency of such comments and because these motivations were a later subject of discussion among the group, I applied a code of “desires and motivations” to all discussions on this topic. That theme served as complement to the one called “needs assessment and satisfaction,” which gathered estimations of collective need, another common topic of debate. Across all themes, excerpts ranged from a single sentence to full paragraphs and consisted of several more or less distinct types: some sections were narrative accounts that touched on a given theme; some were reflections which foregrounded the speaker’s or others’ ways of understanding an experience; others were references to ideas most notable for the common-sense understandings they encoded.

In this first round of coding, two themes stood out as the most salient: “deliberation and conflict” and “non-profit organizations” (see below). Each of these themes recurred several times more than the next most prevalent theme. In the end, the comments and reflections that matched these themes suggested the basis for chapter four (deliberation/conflict) and for chapter five (non-profit organizations) of this thesis. After reading and organizing the excerpts from round one of coding, I then conducted a second round by applying a new set of codes suggested by common points of discussion—for
example, “leadership,” “cooperation,” “success.” This second round of coding helped to distill the ways that participants thought about their experiences in the group, revealing various interpretations of conflict (the basis of chapter four) and divergent ideas about how collective action should be structured in order to be effective (the basis of chapter five).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code/Theme</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Deliberation and conflict</td>
<td>Episodes of disagreement, negotiation, or conflict; ways of thinking about or responding to such episodes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-profit organizations</td>
<td>Structure, possibilities, demands, or limitations of non-profits; ways of working in or managing non-profits; comparisons between non-profits and other forms of collectivity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 1. Selected codes and themes from first round of content analysis. (See Appendix F for complete description of codes.)*

V. Narratives of conflict

Conflict and interpersonal tensions were one of the most common themes in the interviews. In these narratives, it is hard to distinguish where one conflict ends and another begins: as one participant suggested, some long-standing disagreements seemed rooted in a particular time period or set of interactions, whereas other disagreements seemed to be rehearsed repeatedly by different parties. This tense climate presents difficulties for representation, but it was often through these narratives that participants tried to make sense of their experience of Growing Justice and prescribe the right path forward. These interpretations are the basis for my analysis in chapter four. In order to provide some background information for those later discussions, I offer just a few detailed snapshots of selected conflicts in order to present a broad view of the organizational climate.

*Conflicts around organizational operations.* One set of conflicts revolved around frustration with leadership and the decisions that were made. For board members
especially, these concerns were related to the organization’s finances, frequently hinging on major capital expenditures, fund-raising needs and strategies, and financial risk-taking. Various participants also cited their discomfort with the central role of the executive director, whose influence over decisions seemed much greater than anyone else’s. Some participants also took issue with the “visionary” style of management, citing a lack of focus, lack of accountability, and emphasis on innovation over commitment to existing programs.

Farm and office. Staff members working on the farm—as opposed to the office—seemed to experience the most regular turnover, and this was frequently attributed to a long-standing clash between the farm staff and administrative staff. Farm staff repeatedly voiced concerns that managers’ expectations were too high relative to the resources made available for farm operations. These complaints encompassed not only capital available for production but also compensation: all farm employees reported that the difference in pay between office and farm personnel made them feel less valued. Some farm employees said they were made uncomfortable by the disconnect between farm work and office work: the former was physically difficult and often lasted beyond the formal end of the work day, while the latter seemed to proceed at a comfortable pace and end on-time or early (or at least so it seemed to farm employees). Office staff did not speak directly to these complaints, instead voicing concerns that there was too much division between farm and office personnel. Their primary solution was to bring farm staff into the office to attend to some administrative tasks, which as a strategy was not well received by those on the farm.

Racial diversity, inclusion, and justice. The issue of race was a recurring source of disagreement and conflict. I recount these stories in greater detail in the next chapter, since narratives about this conflict revealed some of the organization’s most challenging moments. For now it is worth mentioning the substance of these disagreements, which was whether or not racial discrimination or oppression was happening at Growing Justice or among their clients in Middlefield. One board member of color left over this issue, almost immediately after joining the board. At least two volunteers who tried to facilitate discussions of race left out of frustration or anger. Many participants have also felt frustration at different times, even if the precipitating event was not sufficient to drive them away. Two successive
committees have been formed to address the issue of race: the first one fizzled out after disagreements; as of June 2016, the second one persists but reportedly had not been able to meet for months.

**Volunteer relations.** One volunteer, Darren, described a consistent lack of appreciation for volunteer labor, despite how heavily the farm relied on volunteers for its success. Darren was the only volunteer to mention this tension, but it seems significant for a couple reasons: first, he was one of only two non-board-member volunteers interviewed, the other of whom also had significant gripes with the organization; and second, he had been consistently generous with his time and energy over the course of years and was one of the most active volunteers at the organization. His interpretation was that this lack of courtesy was a symptom of a lack of resources (staff time and finances).

### VI. Analytical Framework

In this inquiry I propose an analytical framework which bridges themes from the interviews to present academic debates around activism in US alternative food networks. As is clear in the table above, two themes recurred frequently and garnered much discussion in the interviews. The first of these centers on the debates and conflicts associated with the challenge of waging a collective project, even toward a (supposedly) common goal of ‘social justice.’ The second theme concerns how the specific form of a non-profit organization shapes that collective project, in ways that range from enabling, to ambivalent, to constraining. Because the spaces of non-profits are usually racially coded with norms of ‘whiteness’ (INCITE! 2009), this latter theme runs parallel to recent critiques of alternative food networks as too frequently mobilizing a narrowly white, middle-class, settler-colonial framework through activism and entrepreneurship (Slocum 2011; Guthman 2011; Ramírez 2015; Deetz 2016). This literature highlights major obstacles for food activist groups seeking social transformation, even for groups who are
attuned to issues of diversity and inclusion (Reynolds 2015). Yet while these critiques have illustrated the limitations of many activist groups as currently constituted, they have not yet engaged deeply with questions of how groups might overcome such limitations. Such an inquiry requires understanding the roots of current practices and the fact of present disparities—where critique excels—but also values theorizing and imagining directions for political engagement. These were exactly the sorts of questions foregrounded in my experience of fieldwork at Growing Justice: many of the critiques leveled against white-dominated food organizations apply to Growing Justice, as well, but the interviews tell a story of at least some actors wrestling with those critiques within the organization. How then can we approach the possibility of change within the group—the problem of how those critiques are made, how they are heard, by whom, and with what results?

Although this problem has not been addressed at length in the scholarship on food and agriculture, it is familiar territory for scholars of democracy. In chapter four, I read the data from Growing Justice in the light of theories of deliberative democracy, a body of work which pays special attention to the conditions for political communication (Barnett 2012; Young 2000). This work is relevant here partly because many conflicts resulted from failures of communication; however, the recent ‘contestatory’ turn in deliberative democratic theory also explicitly values conflict and contestation as necessary forms of communication in democracy. In this account, conflict can actually be productive if parties adopt a sense of mutuality in their engagements with each other: that is, if parties not only argue their own case but also make themselves available for persuasion, such engagement takes the form of collective problem solving (Young 2000).
Conflicts at Growing Justice, by contrast, bore heavy costs for the group in terms of resources, emotional fallout, and disengagement. Deliberative democracy thus helps to evaluate the quality of communication in the group, inevitably raising the question—why were these conflicts not productive? Some participants’ comments even show a strong affinity with Young’s mutualistic account of communication and persuasion, but a strong sense of mutuality nevertheless failed to coalesce among this group, who originally had been so neighborly and highly collaborative. Participants’ various interpretations of conflicts primarily place responsibility on individuals or on group culture, both arguments that I find unsatisfactory in this case.

In chapter five, I take a cue from Chantal Mouffe’s (2000) claim, that democratic individuals do not precede democratic institutions, discourses, and forms of life. This approach shifts the focus from individuals’ behavior and psychology toward the factors that shape this organization as a political space—factors which interviewees addressed at length through their comments about non-profit organizations and community relations. Some participants (primarily the staff leadership) made numerous comments which demonstrated rigidly hierarchical views of leadership, professionalism, and expertise. These opinions are entirely consistent with the administrative logic I describe in chapter two, a logic which mobilizes bureaucratic power and runs counter to democratic principles. In distinct opposition to these comments, I find the reflections and aspirations of other group members to display strongly democratic longings, where their goals are more oriented towards legitimacy and justice than towards a technocratic form of productivity. Drawing out such divisions in the group helps to frame the fragmented accountabilities of the group, the various imperatives—for productivity on the one hand
and justice/legitimacy on the other—which differentially shape the organization’s activities. Because of the way common-sense understandings of the non-profit form speak more to bureaucratic imperatives than to democratic, this case study supports an argument for re-evaluating (but not dismissing) the political potential of such organizations. This framework illustrates the need to cultivate a political praxis which is suited to dismantling oppressive structures and developing more democratic forms of collective power. As comments by interviewees frequently imply, such a praxis must develop alternative, more democratic forms of expertise and productivity.

VII. Conclusion

This case study investigates one community food project as a site of political contestation, by asking what claims participants make about justice in this place and what conflicts have arisen around those claims; what sources these claims draw on and what political work the ensuing conflicts perform; and how these contentious negotiations extend our understanding of non-profit organizations as political spaces. These questions respond directly to problems raised by activists regarding the forms of collective action (INCITE! 2009; Dixon 2014) and thus hold promise for informing the ways we think about and wage political struggles (Derickson & Routledge 2015). This inquiry responds also to the recent proliferation of community food projects as a popular form of activism and to scholarly efforts to understand them as such (Gottlieb & Joshi 2010; McClintock 2014; Holt-Gimenez & Shattuck 2011). The significance of this study derives from the dialogue it poses between these often divergent intellectual programmes, and also from the great investments the research participants have made in reflecting on and attempting to understand their own experiences. Though every case is unique and experiences here
may not be representative of those in other spaces, Growing Justice nevertheless offers a view into how organizations are not unitary actors, however they may present themselves. This thesis looks beyond facades to see what typically submerged, internal disagreements can reveal about the politics of organizations and their members, and I present my findings in the next two chapters.
CHAPTER 4

FINDING POLITICS IN DISAGREEMENT

“I love that there’s that commitment to the town and to the region...all that stuff I feel so proud about and so good about. I think that the other stuff [i.e., the conflicts] are just the mechanics...If I didn’t feel positive about the other side [i.e., the good work we’re doing], why would I even want to work with it, you know? All that stuff is what makes it worthwhile to try to work it out.”

Diane, board president

Like many other interviewees, Diane spent much of our conversation narrating disagreements and disappointments from Growing Justice’s past and present. Of course, she also waxed sentimental about different programs and relationships which she thought were successful or held promise for the future, but it seemed that the conflicts were the experiences she was still trying to figure out, to learn from for the future. Then, after a long interview describing some disagreements that felt intractable, Diane took a bit of perspective—all of the conflicts, the disagreements, the endless negotiations to try to still have an organization together, that’s “just the mechanics.” The successes and the future promise of the organization made all of that effort “worthwhile.”

Like Diane, I am uncomfortable presenting the following long account of tensions at Growing Justice. Dwelling on these episodes can give a false impression that conflict is all that has happened there, which is not the case. However, the way that interviewees spoke about conflicts, the way they concentrated and lingered on them, suggested several important points: first, these episodes have consumed and continue to consume a lot of

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13 Board president through December 2016. For additional reference for all participant names, see Appendix D: Table of Participants.
“bandwidth” at the organization (Will, outreach coordinator); second, the disagreements and disappointments were on participants’ minds more so than their successes were; and third, people were focusing on the conflicts because they wanted to understand them and hopefully resolve them. I offer the analysis that follows as my contribution to that effort, arguing that these conflicts all return to the problem of negotiating the organization as a shared political space.

In this chapter I describe that process of negotiation—what Diane called “the mechanics”—in order to understand how group relations favored particular outcomes. In the first section, I describe episodes from the most frequently cited conflict, that around ‘inclusion’ and ‘diversity.’ I follow with an account of costs associated with group conflicts more generally. The next section collects the group’s interpretations of those conflicts—why they happened and how they could be avoided or resolved. In this regard, some participants emphasized that the “organizational culture” was divisive or prone to disagreement, while many participants saw conflicts as the result of deficits in people’s interpersonal skills. This latter group was often unsure how or where such skills might be learned, and I present here a selection of the group’s extensive reflections on the learning process. I close by showing how some comments on group culture hint at the need for a sense of mutuality in organizations, an orientation which might help overcome whatever personal shortcomings individuals bring to group process. These last reflections lead into the next chapter, where I discuss non-profits as political spaces which shape the rationalities and possibilities of discourse.
I. Conflicts around Growing Justice

In the last chapter, I provided brief summaries of the conflicts which interviewees cited most often. However, one conflict in particular sprawled across years and drew in the majority of the group at different times. Different people referred to this conflict in different ways: some called it ‘inclusion’ and ‘diversity’; others called it ‘racism’ or ‘structural racism’; others saw it as a general problem of ‘social justice,’ connecting racism to other forms of oppression. It is worth expanding on narratives of this conflict for several reasons: it was and is a major touchstone of the group experience; it continues to consume significant amounts of time and energy for the group; it has been endlessly frustrating for many parties; and it has led to the alienation or outright dismissal of several participants. This conflict has also revealed major political faultlines in the group, providing an important basis for my later reading of the organization as a space of political engagement.

1. Inclusion, oppression, and justice

Racial difference and social inclusion were first identified as group problems in 2013, when a native-identified woman, Samantha, was invited onto the board. The former board president (Fred) described her arrival as follows:

She came with a lot of experience in non-profit management...according to her. And I felt a connection to her emotionally...but she didn't integrate into the board in a very...she didn't integrate quickly. She seemed to have her own agenda to some degree and her own way of processing things. And I remember sitting at a board meeting, and it was a seemingly very small incident that happened....There were two women sitting on either side of her and this woman wanted a paper and the other woman had it so rather than pass the paper by Samantha, the woman just passed it around her, and that was enough to set Samantha off. She felt ignored and not valued and it took the rest of us so much by surprise and she basically left the board over that incident. And it was clear to me that that was the precipitating event, but that there was other stuff that was going on.

Diane (a fellow board member and future board president) recalled that Samantha felt “singled out” and “dumped on,” not just because of this one occurrence but because she
saw signs of unchecked white privilege in a number of her interactions with others. She left after only a very brief tenure on the board, suggesting as she left that the group needed to devote more effort to becoming racially inclusive. Another board member, Sally, said that “there was not a lot of closure or clarity” following Samantha’s sudden departure: “there was a lot of confusion on the board about how and why that occurred, and it wasn't really being dealt with.” Thus began the organization’s on-going effort to address issues of ‘inclusion.’

As the board considered how they might move forward, some members agreed to seek help from Gracie, a former volunteer who had considerable interest in anti-racist activism but who had already ended her involvement due to some frustrations with the leadership. Gracie was invited to a joint board/staff meeting convened to address concerns, where “lots of people came….People went around the circle and people ended up talking about their own experiences of being alienated….and everyone felt really moved and connected as people” (Gracie). She suggested forming a “justice and inclusion” committee, which met for a number of months before Gracie herself became too frustrated to participate. She described how “[another board member] came to a meeting, said really fucked up annoying stuff in the meeting, [and] I got really upset. I was like, I cannot be in a working group meeting about racism...when I have to argue with people about racism in the meeting.” The group stopped meeting after Gracie’s (second) departure. It was only a number of months later when another committee was convened, this time under the shortened name “inclusion committee” and with different leadership. Yet even during this period Gracie remained in loose contact with many of the staff and board and was included in many emails. At the end of 2015 there was one last

14 Gracie read aloud from some of these emails in her interview.
major confrontation between Gracie and members of the organization, when she protested against the grading standards applied to an African American intern from the county jail. In this brief exchange Gracie included numerous teaching aids for anti-racist work before being summarily forbidden from emailing the staff by the new executive director. Kait, who was the education coordinator during this period, recalled that Gracie...brought some real radical conversations to the table, and everybody at the organization...had a super-negative reaction to it....I think both sides of the conversation could have been a little bit more elegant, or better conducted...but they were the conversations we all said we should have and weren't having, and then someone was like, 'hey, I'm calling you out' and people shut her down.

After a heated email exchange with Allison, then executive director, Gracie broke all ties with the group and has barely spoken with any of them since.

Unfortunately, this series of events was not the end of conflicts around issues of diversity and inclusion at Growing Justice. The second iteration of Growing Justice’s inclusion committee eventually continued its work after Gracie’s departure, convening a board and staff retreat to present a workshop on diversity. The farm manager, Tara, recounted one activity they included in the event:

There was this exercise where there were all these pebbles in the middle of the circle and [the volunteer organizer] read all of these items off of a list that denoted privilege and then all of these items off of a list that denoted oppression....And for every item of privilege, you picked up a stone and put it in your privilege pile. And then there was the oppression list....And so...everybody watches as you pick up your oppression pile pebbles, and at the end we all look around and we're like, Wow, lets see who's in our community here at Growing Justice. So everybody...had some privilege piles, had a few pebbles of oppression, whatever people have experienced, and then there's Robert and me, with like these giant oppression piles and they're like, Oh, wow...how does this make you feel, and then everybody gets to talk about how like, Tara, I had no idea...and it felt like such a terrible, vulnerable place to be in....I felt forced to participate in this really

15 The organization’s inmate internship program takes prisoners from the county jail’s transitional home and offers them academic credit at a local community college in exchange for their labor. Payment is only in the form of credit and there is no monetary compensation; thus at the end of the internship, the inmates’ supervisor at the farm assigns a grade to their work, based on a series of journals they are assigned to write. As of 2016, Tara (the farm manager) said that no inmates had accepted an intern position and only one had applied. She welcomed this change because she saw the program as unfair and highly problematic. She believed that potential interns had lost interest because recent policy changes at the jail allowed them to seek paid work, not just academic credit.
oppressive, hideous thing....And they're like, we need more people with piles like Tara and Robert's and it's like, are you kidding me?

Robert (the only board member of color and a member of the inclusion committee) understandably did not mention this event in our interview. His fellow board member, Sally, mentioned that she thought Robert felt similarly vulnerable in that moment: “I think he just got upset feeling like, how hard things had been for him in his life and that...people still wouldn't really understand him, that he still wouldn't be accepted, even though the inclusion committee members were there. I think with this broader group, people he didn't really know, you could tell he just had a rough moment there.” Clearly part of the problem with the exercise was the uneven burden placed on participants, the expectation that representing one’s life story through piles of pebbles would be relatively comfortable for everyone involved—an expectation which proved untrue. But for both Tara and Robert an additional difficulty was that their life experience was being used as a teaching aid for a crowd that they were not familiar with or, in some cases, had outright conflicts with. Sally expressed mixed feelings about the exercise in retrospect: “We really wanted to translate [inclusion] in that way and make it more concrete, and I think it was really effective...albeit at the expense of those people like Robert and Tara who had larger piles.” Tara expressed that this was a low-point for her in an already fraught relationship with the organization.

This long saga has been difficult for many participants and a source of many hard feelings, but as later comments show (see Interpretations of Conflict below) some group members have responded with significant efforts at self-education and reflection. That said, there is considerable disagreement in the group over whether the scale of this response is appropriate to the severity of the problem. Since these are issues that will be
addressed in later sections, I leave this narrative for now, turning instead to the effects that conflicts had on the organization and its members.

II. Costs of conflict

The disagreements, tensions, and confrontations narrated in interviews had a strong effect not just on the atmosphere at the organization but also on its operations. In interviews participants recounted a number of ways that these conflicts were felt at Growing Justice, ways that were mostly—but not strictly—negative. I explore the possible benefits of conflict later, but in this section I gather participants’ assessments of how conflict has been a burden for the group.

The most obvious cost of on-going conflict was staff turnover and the loss of volunteers. On one occasion, the executive director assumed he had approval to seek to purchase a building and the board disagreed. “The board was irate,” reported Fred, who was board president at that time: “I think we lost two board members over that incident.” Reflecting on the challenges they faced in 2016, Robert mentioned that the workload for the all-volunteer board seemed especially heavy because “the board is whittled down, just simply because of attrition.” In other words, board members have left faster than they can be replaced. Fred reported that he left the board partly because he felt “overwhelmed” by personnel issues. And as Tara said of the farm’s past managers, “[The first manager] had burned out, Ted [the second manager] burned out, I can't believe I'm not burning out, I'm burning out, but I also have a mortgage….Yeah, we don't have people who come back.” As of this writing, Tara herself has recently been let go from her position as farm manager.
 Volunteers also reported reducing or ending their involvement due to various issues at the organization. After years of active participation, long-time volunteer Darren said, “I've stepped back so that I'm less involved and I know less and less about the daily goings on at the farm, and that's OK. I'm kind of ready for that.” In one anecdote from the group’s early years, Diane reported how the staff neglected to involve the committee of active volunteers that had been developing education programming up to that point, so that the volunteer committee soon ceased to exist: “All this community involvement was lost and all this community energy was lost. And very recently, Allison [the executive director] has been talking about, You know, remember that group of people who used to meet? And really realizing that the thrust that was beginning to happen, gone. Gone. Which is a sad thing for me.” Corin was another early board member who left the group and who had been outspoken about issues of diversity and inclusion; she said that the difficulty around those topics was not the only reason for her departure, but it was one of the reasons:

    Well, it had been a big commitment….I feel like 3 years is a significant commitment. But [leaving] did have a lot to do with my feelings about not being able to share a similar framework around race, class, and privilege….I don't want to say oh, these people weren't as involved as me and so I'm out of there, it wasn't like that...It just would have felt different if...I felt that there was an energy going in that direction. That didn't feel like I had to constantly bring it up.

Kait felt that the general refusal to prioritize anti-racist work was a major motivation for several departures: “Corin left, Gracie left, I left. Maybe all for different reasons and also for some of the same reasons….The three of us, more than the other voices I heard at the organization, were asking for more training and more dialogue, and more accountability.” Notably, the volunteer who helped organize the inclusion retreat (recounted above) later cut ties with the organization citing similar frustrations.
The organization’s disagreements have also borne great emotional costs. Several participants mentioned that the period of my data collection was an all-time low-point for morale at Growing Justice, and everyone expressed some form of disappointment in their interview. However, it’s also clear that a recurring sense of disappointment has been a problem for the organization for a while. Darren said,

I kind of had some disillusionment about [the farm] because...it’s like grumpy farmers running the farm....I don't think it's a happy place....That's another discouraging thing for me, is to see that it's kind of a grind.

Fred noted that the tensions with Samantha were similarly unsettling for those involved: “[that episode] was a failure and the board felt the failure strongly. It was very sad and very upsetting to most of us on the board.” Ted (a former farm manager) reported that the group had real successes in some of their programming, but “I can only see them as successes a year later [after quitting]. And maybe everyone needs to quit so they can feel less down about the organization and get a little removal and feel like there’s some better stuff going on.” Gracie even felt “embarrassed to say that I volunteered with Growing Justice,” and she “just avoids completely” everyone from the group. She also reported feeling jaded about similar projects: “For me, anything a group of white people [do] that don't care about or understand racism is gonna be bullshit....I just don't think they should exist as an organization.” After her experience at Growing Justice, Kait felt “wary of activism [in Middlefield]” and unsure if she would ever work in a non-profit again. Such sentiments clearly show the toll that conflicts have taken on participants, but they also suggest an additional cost. After all, Middlefield is a small town with an even smaller community of activists, and if these disappointments are aired publicly it would be no surprise that Growing Justice would have difficulty recruiting volunteer labor.
Another cost of conflicts is the way they compete with organizational programming for resources. Will described the situation after one interpersonal conflict escalated as far as filing formal harassment charges: “This investigation [regarding the charges] and the reporting and the setting up of policies and procedures has consumed an immense amount of bandwidth.” Granted, part of this effort was establishing formal processes for managing personnel which ideally would have already been in place—in Will’s words, “it’s foundational work that needs to be done [anyway].” But the extra time people were spending on that effort meant that they had no time to develop a ‘buddy’ program for new low-income CSA members. Even one nascent personal connection between the board president and a new share member, “that would really be proof of concept for the farm share allies, was not possible now. And...it might be, you know, we've missed the opportunity. I'm a patient person and I won't forget the idea, but that miss hurt” (Will). Robert also noted that “the inclusion committee is on hold at the moment” due to the same investigation. He said, “I'm hoping that once we've addressed the organizational issues, and get that back on track, then the inclusion committee can resurface.” Will noted his disappointment on that count, too: “We're right on the verge of that, actually...that kind of deep wrestling with our identity and our mission [to address issues of inclusion]. We were right there, but now we're kind of in lock-down.” The continuing delays in that inclusion work also bear a cost, as Kait pointed out regarding the farm’s earlier attempt to recruit Latino share members. These new members weren’t familiar with the produce on offer, and as Kait said, “It’s just cultural accessibility...and that’s fine....You have a conversation, and that wasn't happening....It wasn't a priority at the organization and we lost the population that we were trying to serve there.” In that
case, after a short period of participation at the beginning of the season, all the new Latino members dropped out of the program, and Growing Justice has not tried to return to their neighborhood since.

All of these costs affect organizational capacity, especially since Growing Justice is a very small organization with only a few board and staff members. During the period of my fieldwork the organization was “on very shaky footing...financially” (Ron, former executive director), and the sharp escalation of one conflict (the harassment charges mentioned above) was on the one hand in competition with urgent efforts to secure funding, and on the other hand finally could not be ignored. This situation followed a year in which “we’ve been hit quite hard” (Ron), when two staff members were absent for long periods as they coped with tragedies in their personal lives. I do not suggest that the conflicts sketched here are the only burden on small non-profit organizations. Quite the contrary: it’s almost axiomatic that such groups face immense challenges to stay afloat. However, given the difficulty of sustaining an organization like Growing Justice in the present economic and political moment, it is appropriate to ask how such expensive conflicts as these might be either avoided, or if possible transformed from costs to assets. In other words, how can an organization try to solve the problem of conflict? How can these conflicts be made productive as democratic theory suggests they can be? An answer to these questions would also help to prevent costs that might not show up on the balance sheet of the organization—i.e., the political possibilities that are missed when participants disengage, when they grow “wary” of non-profits (Kait), when they get the idea that “anything a group of white people [do]...is gonna be bullshit” (Gracie). I return to this
issue later on. For now, in the section that follows, I present participants’ reflections on past conflicts, as they try to identify both their root causes and possibilities for change.

III. Interpretations of conflict

Respondents’ interpretations of the conflicts at Growing Justice varied according to the specific circumstances of each conflict. That said, participants frequently slipped from discussing the immediate causes of disagreement to reflecting on the general *climate* of disagreement. These reflections were themselves varied but fell largely into two categories: a smaller set of comments that referred to “organizational culture” and a larger, more varied set that described a “learning process.” I treat each of these ideas below.

1. Organizational culture

The interpretations which I group under “organizational culture” identified the root causes of conflict in habituated ways that participants related to each other, or in the ways that interpersonal relations were formally structured. Participants tended to adopt this explanation more for conflicts which seemed to them to be basically interpersonal or interactional (as opposed to the more *societal* problem of inclusion). As Ted said, “the atmosphere of Growing Justice with the overlapping responsibilities [and] spheres of influence can create a hotbed” for conflict. Diane considered the farm’s “culture...of lack of clarity and lack of definition” to be a major problem, springing primarily from “Ron’s leadership style.” Tara’s comments were the most pointed in identifying that ‘style’ as a problem:

I keep being told that it's Ron's visionary style, and that he knows how to get money and knows about development and programming so we should just trust that he's doing what's going to work. I think it's finally clear to everybody that it's not working, that style.
Some others were less inclined to place blame on Ron for this issue, but of the seven people who brought up Growing Justice’s programming line-up, all seven identified it as a problem that the organization was as “spread out” or “unfocused” as it was. Two people specifically mentioned a lack of job descriptions as a source of tension, and five people mentioned confusion around other staff members’ roles as a point of resentment. During the period of fieldwork, the board was initiating a process of strategic planning in order to bring focus to the organization’s programming, and this was a source of hope for numerous participants. Kathleen (a staff member) said, “We have a mission statement and we have these ends policies and we have these...collective agreements...based on these really simple statements, but not a strategic plan. So to me that's a huge driving force in having a collective vision, is having a way to get there.”

However, Kathleen also signaled a slightly different rendering of “organizational culture” by suggesting that strategic planning might help “figure out also the culture of the organization that seems to be a little fragmented...at the moment.” This use of “culture” was voiced primarily by senior staff, or by Tara who quoted them indirectly. In the most interesting case, Ron mentioned that in addition to the organization’s financial predicament they were also “on shaky footing culturally...staff-wise.” When asked to explain, he spoke at length about how non-profits need a spirit of dedication and cooperation from those involved:

For nonprofits to make it out of the first number of years, you have to have some people for whom that's the most important thing in their life right then. You gotta work long hours and you gotta work too much and you go crazy, and you're gonna bond and you're gonna take care of each other. When we started the [earlier non-profit organization] we went through that and we had four people that started it, and...we weren't all best friends but when we were at work we had each others' backs....I think we've done a lot of good things [at Growing Justice, but] I don't think we have that driving passion for doing something like this [i.e., making it succeed in the long-term].
While the first rendering of “culture” suggests that it’s something about the way the group organizes itself that fosters conflict, these latter comments seem to hint that it’s almost a matter of chemistry, of finding the right group that can commit to each other and work in harmony. These different interpretations have clear implications for developing a remedy for conflict. The former rendering of ‘culture’ suggests one approach to reducing conflict, proposing that changes to the organizational structure and process will reduce the conditions that foster conflict. The staff leadership’s comments on ‘culture’ suggest a different approach: that those personnel who do not fit the organizational mold should be expelled or they will prevent a culture of cooperation. Because of their position of authority, the staff leadership has been well positioned to act on this latter strategy, consistently dismissing staff personnel who do not agree with them or, in the case of volunteers and board members, driving them away.

The gap between these two strategies is the first sign of a problematic that I revisit throughout the next section and the next chapter, as well—namely, the task of developing and refining an ethos for collective action through organizations. This problematic is also the first sign of the effects of hierarchy on the organization’s manner of dealing with disagreement. For now, let me rephrase the questions implied by these comments on group culture: First, how should relations among participants be structured so as to favor collective success? Or in the leadership’s account, What is the right group for a collective project? Who should be included or excluded in order for the group to succeed? These are questions that recur throughout the rest of this thesis, and the following sections highlight how some participants are exploring these questions for themselves.
2. **Skill gaps: training and “internal work”**

A second way that people explained the occurrence of conflict at Growing Justice was by reference to individual and collective shortcomings, skills in group process that were lacking in the participants. This explanation was most often applied to conflicts and disagreements around the issue of diversity. Regarding the perceived failure attempting to include Samantha in the board, Fred said, “I think we did the best that we white ones could do to involve someone from a native background, but we didn't know what she was struggling with. We didn't even know the questions to ask, and she didn't know how to tell us.” Allison reflected, “Generally speaking it's a pretty young, inexperienced staff, I would say, except for Ron, and so I think a lot of what we've run into along the years is just natural growing pains.” A majority of respondents who discussed board membership also mentioned that the board seemed lacking in the skills needed to direct the organization, especially with the on-going “attrition” of board members.

In interviews, my typical response to assertions of “skill gaps” was to ask how the necessary skills could be acquired. At first, Fred was not sure skills in defusing conflict could be acquired: “I think innate personality is a huge piece of it. If a person has a sensitivity, that's going to be a good place to start from….I imagine that that's part of management training, [too,] but...I think the dominant, capitalist system management training is probably quite limited in terms of awareness of people's feelings and their hurts and their backgrounds.” Instead, he had more hope for finding such resources in “social work and the language of psychotherapy and personal growth.” By contrast, even though she saw the limitations of the corporate model, Allison said she envied her friend who was a regional manager for a national retailer, who could “escalate something to HR and all the professionals handle it, legally, exactly how it's supposed to be handled,” and
who would regularly spend weeks at management trainings. Like many others in the group, Kait felt that social justice trainings were necessary: “a lot of the people who work [at Growing Justice] don't have social justice training at all, or have little exposure to that… [Ron is] a visionary, he's amazing, he's accomplished so much, but I still think that his experience with social justice is [limited]…. [And] you can call yourself [a social justice organization], but if no one knows how to do it, then you are not going to accomplish anything.” Tara agreed that, “As an organization, we're not schooled in ideas around race and oppression and power-dynamics, sexism in the work place….There's a lot of really good intentions, but people don't know what the hell they're talking about.”

Many interviewees felt that the skills and knowledge necessary for social justice activism are best acquired through self-directed learning. As Gracie said in one of her emails16 to the group, “To me, step one is self-education, so that everyone involved has a shared vocabulary.” Six participants I interviewed took this call quite seriously at the time, finding the process of self-education challenging but rewarding. Gracie herself said she “learned through anti-racism trainings, through reading [works by] people of color, through intentional learning.” Will accepted full responsibility for his own education: “I don't expect anyone in the organization to be my educator on this stuff. That's my job, to educate myself.” But six people is only a fraction of the number involved at Growing Justice, so what about everyone else? More than education, Fred emphasized the need for a “spirit of inquiry” about oneself: “I think a lot of people don't have that, and they don't seek it out….They're not drawn to it….It means facing pain….You can get through whatever difficult situations there are, but you need to find the support, you need to find the resources.” In a similar vein, several people referred to the “internal work” demanded

16 Again, these were emails that Gracie read aloud during her interview.
by group process, especially around inclusion: “The individuals in our organization need to do their own internal work, and that’s...assessing the individual privileges and beliefs in the organization….I think sometimes when you try to do the external without having done the internal, you can make some mistakes” (Sally). Fred thought some people, through life experience, are more likely to develop an internal curiosity and can then model it for others: for example, “coming of age as a gay man in this society, there really is no choice, but you have to learn about your internal life [in order to] accept who you are.” This internal work is then the basis for healthy relations with others, in organizations and beyond. However, several of these same speakers saw an uneasy relation between that kind of inquiry and formal projects like Growing Justice. Even though he saw it as necessary for people to develop their personal resources in order to engage productively with others, Fred said “the workplace isn’t probably the place” to find those resources. Will was more specific:

I don’t think a non-profit [as a workplace] can help people with their emotional life very much. Except for providing the satisfaction of doing good work and creating a hedge around the kind of behaviors in the workplace that would be hurtful. I think a lot of the growth needs to happen outside of work, in reading, or small group process, or counseling, therapy, whatever.

This idea of a division between the skills demanded to be a good participant and the places and contexts where those skills can or should be developed suggests one possible approach to answering the questions posed above. To put it simply: For a group to succeed, they need to involve the right people, who have learned from their outside lives the personal and interpersonal skills necessary to be good group members. Groups without the right mix of people are not going to achieve their goals, will face possibly insurmountable difficulties, and are likely to fail. This question of having the right mix of people implies that conflicts can be prevented by recruiting skillful or knowledgeable
personnel or, as before, removing problematic personnel. Note, however, that both Fred’s and Will’s assertions hinge on questions of what is *appropriate* or *possible* in the space of non-profits or workplaces, questions which I address at length in the next chapter.

Judging by the way participants have described their history together, this ‘right mix of people’ approach represents a line of argument which has frequently surfaced in organizational debates, especially in arguments made by the staff leadership—who have repeatedly and consistently used their authority to fire personnel who disagreed with their vision for the organization. This is certainly not the only approach suggested in interview responses, so in order to identify alternatives I next describe another set of skills that have been in demand during group process.

3. Skill gaps: group process and communication

As mentioned previously, the organization attracted a succession of volunteers who attempted to make anti-racist work a priority for the group, and most of them felt disappointed that their arguments were not heard or acted upon in any decisive way. Yet Corin did not necessarily blame the group for not understanding her:

> I'm not very verbally articulate when it comes to—I don't know. I have a hard time explaining these concepts, these—It's hard for me to go through a training and have a certain framework and then bring it back and really explain it to others. I just felt like I didn't explain it very well.

Gracie highlighted the difficulty of having such conversations without a shared vocabulary, as when an early inclusion meeting turned into a lot of “speaking around in a really vague way,” a common sign of “when white people don’t know how to talk about racism.” For both Corin and Gracie, the problem of not knowing how to talk about race was a source of group tension. Gracie reflected on the period of her involvement with Growing Justice, saying “I was naive” about how poorly racism was understood, “and so
I got into these really pointed conflicts.” Corin said, “Because [race] is hard to talk about, it’s hard to explain, it brings up so many defenses in people and so much anxiety in people with privilege that you have to be so skilled” in order to have a productive conversation. Sally agreed that learning about racism was not enough to resolve such tensions: hopefully some people will take up the challenge of self-education, but from there “I think it’s just a matter of having the right composition of people who can sort of translate that [knowledge] to a broader group who maybe isn’t quite there yet or doesn’t necessarily see the value of doing this work.” Corin didn’t feel confident that she could do that translation work, and wondered aloud how it could be done: “I couldn’t make [anti-racism] be a priority of the organization, because...it's like you can't see it as a priority unless you see it as a priority!...It's like if you don't see it, you don't see it.” Again, these comments suggest some despair that the group did not already have people with particular skills or dispositions.

But the inclusion process also demanded more than just communication skills or an ability to define a problem. Corin said that “even if you know [that racism is a problem], it doesn't mean you know how to do”—that is, how to address the problem. Gracie was frustrated that the first inclusion meeting ended without any clear direction from the organizers:

> When it came time to next steps I was the only one, having already left the organization, who was like I think there should be an ongoing committee if you want anything to happen and change the organization. I suggested that, no one else suggested that.

For various participants the self-perception of not having communication skills and not knowing how to address issues in the group felt like too much. Fred left the board for that reason: “At my last board meeting I just said, I don't feel like I have the skills to deal with the personnel issues or the budgetary challenges, and I think I just need to leave it for
someone who has those skills. And I did feel overwhelmed by those two aspects of the operation.” Ted, the former farm manager, expressed that he would rather not have to deal with these issues every day of his work life, and that was a major reason he left his position on the staff.

The set of skills implied by these comments sits in direct tension with calls for ‘self-education’ and ‘internal work,’ since it is unlikely that anyone could develop communication skills or the subtle arts of group facilitation without engaging directly with others. So even if individual work is valuable or necessary for group process, there are additional skills for group process that must also be developed in a group context. And as Sally suggested, when some participants have the skill to “translate” for others who are less knowledgeable, group process can provide an important starting point for those individuals to then “do their work” on their own. This position points to a second approach to waging a collective project: For a group to succeed, group members need to develop effective means of communication, in order to negotiate the terms on which they wage their collectivity. Thus some interviewees’ interpretations of their group process have strong affinities with a framework of deliberative democracy, especially recent work that has come to embrace the productive value of contestation (Barnett 2012). From this perspective, both “agonistic” (conflictual) and “deliberative” moments are part of the collective process of making claims and then building institutions to address those claims—conflict is certainly not a failure of some pre-constituted culture of cooperation. Failure would instead be when disagreements end in disengagement of the parties, abandoning the effort to sustain collectivity. This approach again raises qualitative questions about conflicts within a group: How can conflicts be made productive for the collectivity, rather
than injurious or fatal? The comments I have cited so far do not provide much of an
answer to this problem, but the next section highlights some interviewees’ about how to
approach conflict differently.

Interviewees thus described several layers of skill and effort that contribute to an
organization’s success: individual or ‘internal’ work (directed at the self), self-education
(directed at society and one’s place in it), skills of communication (directed at one’s
collaborators), and organizational culture (the way people habitually interact). In the next
section I return to this last layer.

4. Group culture: towards mutuality

In the comments I cited earlier, interviewees who spoke of the organization’s
‘culture’ suggested it was strongly influenced by leadership, or possibly emergent from
group interactions. However, many interviewees who never mentioned ‘culture’
specifically still frequently brought up the conditions for building a healthy and effective
organization, especially one with a social justice mission. One member of the farm crew,
Ash, said, “If you have this mindset of being an organization that wants to do some
justice-oriented thing...you have to be able to have conversations about it and have to be
able to be critiqued.” Said this way, the burden of communication is not just on the
individuals who make claims, those who might or might not know how to speak in a way
that doesn’t elicit defensiveness. Rather, the group also needs a culture of listening, a
culture that enables “conversations” which are mutual, attentive, and open-ended.

Various interviewees agreed that mutuality is what’s needed in the group, and
three interviewees specifically said the primary obstacle to conversations was “fragility.”
Jackie wondered if such fragility was rooted in insecurity: “I feel like a part of the reason
why I don't have [a say in the organization] is that I'm dealing with a lot of fragility,...a lot of people feeling insecure about...their job? And the power that they have?...I feel like if I call [someone] out or say, Hey, this is what I want ...there's a [response] like, Don't rock the boat.” Ash agreed and thought that the unspoken message at staff meetings was that “we'll ignore some [offensive] things that people say because we don't want to deal with getting into those politics.” Group conversations around race also suffered from a particular brand of “white fragility.” Corin recounted her efforts to come to terms with that form of insecurity: “I was there! I was like, This is all about me being one of the good guys, right? And that's where my focus was for a lot of years on race work because...it was so painful to me what white people do and have done. And I was like, I want to be seen as good.” Gracie stated that this desire to be “validated” as a good white person gets in the way of understanding the more “systemic” (as opposed to personal) ways that racism works. Indeed, few participants seem to have overcome defensiveness enough to even hear Gracie’s arguments about racism. Reflecting on that discussion, Sally said Gracie’s arguments “came off as...aggressive and forceful in a way that certain members of the staff couldn't really digest, like they didn't really know how to dig into it.” The perception of aggressiveness—which Sally thought was probably just Gracie’s excitement to be having the conversation—inhibited listening.17

But how can a group structure conversations so that challenging arguments can be heard? After falling out with Gracie, Sally and others tried to redesign the inclusion

17 Various interviewees who had witnessed these exchanges thought that Gracie's “aggressive” manner prevented certain people from hearing her arguments. In one of her last emails to the group, Gracie even quoted Junot Diaz on this point: “We live in a society where default whiteness goes unremarked...but God forbid a person of color should raise her voice against this smug occult system of oppression, point out whiteness, its operations and consequences — well, in two seconds flat that person is the one accused of being obsessed with race.” Ironically, even a year and a half later, the executive director still thought that, for Gracie, “it was about color more than anything, race” (Allison).
committee as a place “to come together and have a...dialogue that felt safer.” A number of others agreed that “trust” was necessary for productive group process and that this was lacking in previous conversations. Robert said that in order to have cooperation, “you have to build trust, you have to build honesty and transparency.” However, Corin was concerned that conversations that merely felt “safe” for everyone might be unproductive:

> What about just letting people walk out the door not having been called on stuff? [A training facilitator] may be really ‘good’ at helping people talk about race...because they don't get people defensive, but [in that case] is that really of service?

Robert was aware of this dilemma: his personal strategy was “to shoot straight from the hip” (i.e., not mincing words), and he felt that group communication (at least among the board) was gradually moving in that direction, building a space where participants could be honest with each other.

For her part, Gracie did not see the “safety” of the space as a problem, but attributed her difficulties with the group to something else:

> I feel like [people at Growing Justice] are lacking a certain degree of humility to be able to say, I know that I'm completely wrong about the ideas I'm bringing in about racism. In these ways. And I'm willing to put them all down.

Gracie’s comments suggest that, while it may be important for group members to be skillful in how they challenge each other, it is also necessary for group members to be able to respond to challenges in good faith—i.e., with “humility” and a willingness to change course. Fred agreed but lamented that such skills “are right on the edge for our society”: “It’s all so easy to sit at a board meeting and feel that someone [else] is in the wrong, not that I did this or we did this….It's easy to just think, OK, we'll just move past this person, we'll ask them to leave and everything will be OK. And that's not really the solution because the next person will have their own set of issues.” In his view, people generally don’t know how “to take responsibility for their own material, [and to] not
project out onto other people.” Diane expressed similar views about the “emotional health” of participants:

The emotionally healthier people are, or emotionally more willing they are to keep growing...that's kind of a key factor, so that, even if people get angry with each other or disagree with each other or have different perspectives on something, that you can still get by that. You know, much like happens in a relationship, you still want the relationship to continue, you want to have a future together, so you're committed to doing your own personal work, so that you can bring a healthy perspective to the relationship and so that you can hear the other person. And I think the same thing for an organization.

These comments are eloquent, and they paint a compelling picture of a group of people that might “want to have a future together.” Taken together, these interviewees describe different characteristics of an organization with healthy communication: some emphasize that safety and trust are what’s needed, while others emphasize mutuality—a willingness both to convince and to be convinced by others. These reflections offer rich detail in how they characterize the individual skills or personal qualities that group work needs in order to succeed—honesty, humility, responsibility, emotional health—and they suggest yet another interpretation of how a group can succeed: A successful organization needs people who are willing to work together despite disagreements, who listen to each other with respect and trust, and who are flexible enough to compromise in order to stay together. Note, however, that friendship and neighborliness were apparently not enough to ensure this spirit of mutuality, for even though original group of Growing Justice began with a high degree of good will towards each other, that good will was steadily eroded through the ensuing disagreements. What is missing in this account, then, that might explain the absence of mutuality? What prevents people from being heard, especially when they talk about oppression?
Accounting for the individuals that participate is a crucial step in theorizing the group, but comments about people’s emotional health unfortunately provide little insight into an *organization* that seems unhealthy. Certainly, individuals can do their “internal work” if they’re so inclined, but how can an individual convince *others* to do their work in turn? How can an individual convince some other *to be convinced*? Any answer to these questions which relies solely on individualistic language (of psychotherapy, for example) will be incomplete, for such accounts assume either that the organization has ‘the right mix of people’ already or somehow everyone can become aware of their deficits and develop a willingness to address them. Assuming either of these options is possible at all, at the very least they were not the case at Growing Justice. Accounting for *how another will be convinced* is a different kind of problem, one that is distinctly political: that of establishing the terms for communication and *persuasion* in a shared space.¹⁸ This problem brings us back to one of the questions that structures this inquiry—the specifically political work of conflicts at Growing Justice. Since the political dimension of these various conflicts is far from obvious, I make my case for reading politics into the group’s disagreements in the section that follows.

5. Reading politics in disagreement

My interviewees at Growing Justice interpreted the group’s troubles in various overlapping ways, as I have outlined above; but I suggest there is at least one additional interpretation that demonstrates what these diverse confrontations have in common. I acknowledge that each conflict was specific and at some level interpersonal, but conflicts

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¹⁸ Here I draw on Iris Young’s (1990, 9) definition of politics: “Politics in this [expanded] sense concerns all aspects of institutional organization, public action, social practices and habits, and cultural meanings insofar as they are potentially subject to collective evaluation and decision-making.”
persisted even as the *parties* to conflicts changed\(^\text{19}\) implying that these moments of overt friction between participants were rooted in the ways relations were structured in the group. I suggest that many (if not all) of the conflicts described by my participants are moments of *contesting the terms that govern their collectivity*.

In order to make my case, let us revisit group complaints while considering how the organization is structured as a communicative space. As a first example, one consistent feature of the “inclusion” conflicts was denial by some white participants that racism was an issue worth considering in their organizational context. When these denials were backed by the implicit or explicit support of the organization’s leadership, the effect was two-fold: first, the alienation of those claimants who sought to demonstrate that racism was a problem here, and second, the *de facto* dominance of white ignorance in structuring group decisions. Likewise, the later inclusion exercise at the group retreat left at least two participants feeling emotionally bruised but with no clear recourse for addressing their injury. Without any practical means for challenging the oppressive form of the exercise, again the group acted out the dominance of a privileged positionality.

Staff complaints about unequal distribution of resources and salaries between the office and the farm obviously lodge an objection to the differential value the organization placed on various roles, but complaints about a lack of job descriptions also show a further political dimension: formal role definitions might offer a guarantee of what work a staff member would be expected to do and how their performance would be judged, and the process of formal definition might offer an opportunity for the staff member to

\(^{19}\) In Ted’s words: “My biggest take-way from being there for two years was that...for such a small organization there’s a lot of built up personal issues between...like all over, these two people, these two people. There’s two people here and three people here, it’s a mess in that regard and it’s strange because...even as people have come and gone...these tensions still exist, not with the same people, you’re just plugging another person into that old relationship.”
negotiate their role.\textsuperscript{20} In the absence of a formal process, delegation of duties and judgment of performance effectively rested in the hands of staff leadership, who held day-to-day decision-making authority and who were generally not trusted by farm staff. The lack of a formal process for addressing grievances likewise meant that the leadership could address complaints at their discretion and in ways that suited them, a situation that certainly aggravated tensions among staff. A further recurring issue was the disconnect between the staff leadership’s self-confidence in making risky decisions versus the concerns and anxieties that others (especially board members) felt. When strongly-voiced concerns went unheeded and the leadership acted unilaterally, those who disagreed generally left the organization out of protest, seemingly because there was no alternative means of redress. All of these conflicts point to a general pattern: one party wins while the other party loses out, and the loser feels they have no option but to leave. And in most of these cases, the emotional fallout of the departure is lingering and painful.

While some interviewees sought to recast these crises as learning opportunities, that effort was clearly a challenge for them. I frequently noted the emotional fatigue and pessimism that hovered around the group during my fieldwork, and it was clearly discouraging to repeatedly start over anew with fresh participants after each parting-of-ways—especially since few people seemed confident that the structure of the organization would allow different, more positive outcomes when the next conflict came around. Again, I suggest that these conflicts foreground a political problem, that of the terms of the group’s collectivity and, accordingly, its possible futures. The multiple interpretations of these conflicts posit different paths forward: those who just want

\textsuperscript{20} A problem very close to that which Jo Freeman (1970[2013]) famously describes as the “tyranny of structurelessness.”
harmony seek to remove contentious people; those who hope people will act more maturely want everyone to seek out therapy or be more self-reflective; those who want people to understand racism want everyone to do some readings and attend trainings. I render these positions simplistically only for the sake of brevity, to illustrate a point—namely that the friction between these interpretations shows the on-going struggle over authority, decisions, membership, and group process within the shared political space of the organization.

Seeing the political dimension of these group experiences allows us to think about Growing Justice as a potential space for democratic politics, drawing on the normative claims of democratic theory. First recall the value that deliberative democratic approaches place on mutuality. For Iris Young (2000), to the extent that members attend to each other and allow themselves to be influenced, group deliberation becomes a form of collective problem-solving. At Growing Justice, by contrast, the failure of mutuality threatened the very existence of the organization through the loss of committed members. Note also that a sense of mutuality might have dramatically changed the course of each of the conflicts cited above: the effort to convince leadership of the importance of addressing racism; designing exercises for teaching about oppression; the on-going disappointments about not feeling valued or listened to; the definition of group goals and the distribution of resources; processes for addressing grievances; and so on. In this way, the lingering grievances around Growing Justice mark many missed opportunities for democratic outcomes. Secondly, recall that Mouffe’s (2000) model of “agonistic pluralism” theorizes a basis for making conflicts and antagonisms productive for a democratic polity. The essential feature of this model of engagement is that no party ever enjoys a final victory
over another, that despite “adversarial” disagreements parties remain at least partially amicable insofar as they share space. Conflicts at Growing Justice, on the other hand, have undermined that shared space, proving not only unproductive but outright harmful. Indeed, given that one of the primary tactics for resolving conflict has been the summary expulsion or dismissal of members, many conflicts have ended with parties sharing no space at all. For those who remain in the group, the organization’s inability to address claims in ways that are productive does not bode well for future democratic outcomes.

IV. Conclusion

In this chapter I have presented conflicts at Growing Justice, beginning with their simple narrations and ending with the various interpretations participants offered. By considering these conflicts in light of political theory, I have suggested the political work of such disagreements in the organization. Thus far participants’ comments have centered primarily on the responsibility of individuals for good group dynamics, but in the next chapter I expand the frame to that of the organizational space. By drawing out how dominant norms at the organization structured group interactions and rationalities, I offer a sketch of how the bureaucratic form of non-profits shapes the outcomes of similar justice-oriented projects.

Later I will suggest that democratizing organizations internally will improve democratic outcomes externally, as well. The brief remarks above present the outlines of that argument. But first I want to linger on the problem that Growing Justice has produced outcomes that are distinctly undemocratic when judged by normative theories of deliberative and radical democracy. This problem raises the questions that I address in the next chapter: What about this institution has favored undemocratic processes and
outcomes? What aspects of this space have prevented mutuality from being the norm, and what has favored the expulsion of claimants over continued, agonistic engagement? It is clear that power to influence the structure of the collectivity is unevenly distributed, along lines of hierarchy that are both explicit (in leadership structure) and implicit (in the coddling of white fragility, for example). The organization’s inegalitarian structure thus supersedes any mutualistic orientation of participants. Furthermore, as Mouffe (2000) asserts, democratic individuals—the participants who might be mutualistic—do not exist \textit{a priori}; rather, “democratic individuals can only be made possible by multiplying the institutions, the discourses, the forms of life that foster identification with democratic values” (96). Thus while participants at Growing Justice so often located conflicts in individual behaviors, we must look to the structural factors which enable those undemocratic behaviors. In the next chapter I explore how interviewees characterized the conflicting demands and logics at work in their non-profit organization. In the process I draw out how democratic aspirations for social justice sit in tension with the dominant administrative rationality in this group, in ways that trouble hopes for justice either inside or outside the organization.
CHAPTER 5

SUCCESS BY WHAT STANDARD?

“I think networking is a big part of [success], figuring out how to tell your story and who you need to be telling your story to, and having a balance of revenue-generating activity, figuring out what your donor base is.”

Allison, executive director

The summer of my fieldwork was a difficult time for Growing Justice. One intra-staff conflict escalated into a small crisis and delays in grant funding were resulting in acute cash-flow problems, all at the same time that Allison was transitioning into her new position as executive director. The role that Allison saw for herself in bringing stability to the organization was rooted in ‘telling stories,’ the work of developing relationships with donors and with the public. As she suggested, though, this work can go in different directions. Who do you need to tell your organization’s story to, and how do you tell it? How one answers these questions has the potential to produce very different organizations. And if telling one’s story is primarily a matter of securing funding and support, what kinds of success or stability are even possible from that effort?

In the last chapter, I described different approaches to managing conflict and building an effective group: in one approach, participants felt that group composition was key—success and harmony in the organization required the right people coming in with the right skills and dispositions. Other participants emphasized the need for communication and interpersonal skills, so that the group could effectively negotiate with each other. Another group emphasized that, beyond skills, a group needs people who are
willing to work together across differences, to listen to each other and respond sincerely to each other’s concerns. Of all of these conceptions of group dynamics, the ‘mutuality’ interpretation most plausibly explained why conflict had been so costly rather than productive for the group, demonstrating that the organizational space was closed to disagreement and negotiation. In this chapter, I locate the lack of mutuality that beleaguered the group in various ideas that have shaped and structured power relations at the organization. Hierarchical, elitist ideas about non-profits and the roles and behaviors proper to such organizations consistently prevail over the democratic ideals that underwrite calls for mutuality in the first place. Indeed, the ‘story-telling’ that Allison cites above has been a key moment in that process, affording disproportionate influence to funding agencies and wealthy donors. Given how commonplace this elitist orientation is, this case study highlights the contradictions of non-profits as vehicles for social transformation.

To illustrate these points, I unpack two themes that came up frequently in interviews around the form of the organization: the first of these is leadership and various ideas about the character, privileges, and obligations of leaders; the second is expertise, signaling questions about what work the group should be doing and how that work should be structured. In each section I show how ideas held by certain participants fall close to familiar hierarchical norms of administration and service provision, while other ideas speak to a more political, democratic imaginary. In the process, I draw out how norms of non-profit governance run counter to a democratic politics, with implications for this organization’s ability to work towards social justice. I conclude with interviewees’ reflections on what sort of change Growing Justice has been able to achieve, followed
with my own conclusions about the suitability of non-profit organizations as vehicles for social change.

I. Leadership and cooperation

In reflecting on their experiences, participants at Growing Justice expressed differing opinions on the topics of leadership and cooperation. Some of these opinions were mentioned in the last chapter, especially in complaints about group culture and leadership style. In this section I begin with a fuller account of the established leadership style as described by various groups members, in order to draw out more clearly the concerns over how authority should be structured in the group. Here I also point out some of the practical and conceptual challenges of enacting that leadership style and the limited sense of cooperation that it expects. I conclude by reflecting back on interviewees’ longings for a different sort of leadership and cooperation and show how these longings connect to the literature on radical, participatory democracy.

The most common way that leadership came up in interviews was when the group’s early participants reflected on the first executive director’s role in moving the group forward. As Darren (an early volunteer) said,

After a number of months, I realized we were spinning our wheels. And I told people I couldn't see how we were going to move forward past a great idea and a really good vision. I couldn't see us taking off the ground until Ron got involved.

All four founding members I interviewed (not including Ron himself) independently voiced this same sentiment. The first board president, Fred, praised Ron for being so “can-do,” so “focused on accomplishing, which is what you need to accomplish [anything].” Two other early board members said Ron “really moved us forward” (Diane) by generously donating his time for many months; and it was Ron who proposed a town
forum, which everyone agreed helped to focus the group’s energy. Darren described the various dimensions of Ron’s leadership: he was capable, experienced, well-connected and amiable, and fearless in the face of risks. Furthermore, as several people noted, he had “charisma” that inspired others to believe his ideas were worth following. Ron himself stated that success in non-profits required “driving passion,” especially in the early years.

With Ron’s extended mentorship, his successor Allison has been cultivating a leadership style modeled after his. Most people who spoke of Ron’s leadership style described it as “visionary,” so it is unsurprising that Allison described how she admires clarity of vision. She reflected on a talk she had heard from the director of a well-known food bank:

he [the speaker] was so clear about [what his organization did and did not do] and I really admired, though it’s a much older organization than us, but he had a very clear definition of how he met his mission….And I envy that because I don’t think that Growing Justice is very clear on that yet.

However, a number of people also expressed concern that a visionary style was exclusive in practice. For example:

[Ron and Allison] were the leaders of the organization. And they were both always super willing to listen to whatever anyone had to say, and they would give it thought and try to incorporate it. But at the end of the day, if it didn’t keep form with their ideas of where the organization should be going, then it wasn’t going to happen. (Ted, former farm manager)

For Ted, it felt like most people in the organization did not have the “professional capital” to shape policy. So at the same time that a visionary leader has the power to make things happen, they also have the power to obstruct. One board member highlighted this issue in regards to inclusion: citing her experience with other organizations, she said inclusion efforts required “buy-in from the executive director, which I’m not sure Growing Justice exactly has” (Sally). Indeed, Ron emphasized that a successful non-profit required
maintaining “control” of “our” organization, which implies as much controlling what the organization does not do as controlling what it does.

However, visionary leadership is not a solitary endeavor: it takes place within an organization and thus requires bringing others on board. Maintaining control, as Ron proposed it, actually requires close cooperation among participants, “hav[ing] each others’ backs.” And while almost every interviewee said the group required increased cooperation to succeed, comments by the staff leadership implied a narrow rendering of cooperation, as harmony and unanimity with designated leaders. Allison lamented a stern email she had once sent to Gracie, not because she regretted calling an end to a discussion about racial inequity but because softer language “is a faster way to get what you want...in a way that keeps people’s morale up.” Kathleen, concerned about the organization’s “fragmented” culture, hoped that a round of strategic planning would be sufficient to unite people behind a single vision for the organization. These comments show that these leaders’ primary concern is harmony and agreement, not flexibility or responsiveness to others’ needs and wants.

All of these comments describe one model of hierarchical leadership, one which Growing Justice has clearly benefited from in certain ways. However, this model is built on particular assumptions about the successful non-profit: first, that the organization requires a high level of personal commitment and a well-developed set of administrative skills, concentrated especially at the level of the leadership. Second, the non-profit should be the manifestation of a coherent, focused, and unitary vision. Third, the coherence of this vision must be protected from competitors—implying an exclusive sense of ownership by some subset of the full group. Last, the emphasis on unanimity and
agreement with leadership admits only a very limited form of cooperation: subordinates cooperate with leaders’ wishes. Each of these ideas presents significant problems for an organization comprised of real, fallible people. To begin with, the model places a heavy burden and unrealistic expectations on a leader—that person must have a host of exceptional qualities and a special vision for the organization (Barrington-Bush 2013). Given how unlikely it is that any one person will be so endowed, the chances for such a non-profit’s success would seem terribly slim. Furthermore, given the complexity of social life, it is unreasonable to expect that any pre-constituted vision for a collective can be carried to fruition without modification; and given that the burden for maintaining and policing this vision is placed on a single person or a small group, the model assumes that this cadre will have all the skills, information, and conceptual frameworks necessary to guide the organization through novel circumstances. The belief that this vision must be guarded from competitors also leads to “territoriality” (Diane) and infighting, which has been a source of protracted conflict at Growing Justice. The insistence on unanimity also mistakenly casts any disagreements, objections, or resistance from subordinates as nonperformance of duties, regardless of the substance of those disagreements (Block 2004): as Tara described this problem, “Me being frustrated with the way the organization is run and how decisions are made is often interpreted as me being negative and uncooperative.” However, all of these concerns merely describe the practical weaknesses of hierarchical leadership.

As I noted in chapter two, the more fundamental problem with this type of leadership is its basis in patriarchal relations and associated patterns of domination and

21 Cf. Darren’s comments, that he’s “concerned that [the organization’s] going to falter without Ron” (who was set to retire in 2016).
oppression, taking as common-sense “the centralized, hierarchical ways that power is organized and administered in our society” (Dixon 2014, 177). While interviewees at Growing Justice shared numerous critiques of leadership in their organization, they struggled to value other forms of leadership already at work. In one example, the first board president described his relationship with Ron as “an interesting dance…. [We] played complementary roles in the organization, because he would push things forward and I would try to be aware of everyone and bringing people along who were maybe not as on board” (Fred). This division of labor contrasts typically masculinized traits such as assertiveness, analytical skill, and charisma, with the complementary, feminized labor of “caretaking, sustaining relationships, listening, resolving conflict, building community” (Dixon 2014, 177), and so on. The collaboration that Fred describes raises some doubt whether Ron’s leadership style would have seemed so successful without the less visible leadership that Fred exercised. It is also interesting that, among a group of people who were generally so attuned to exactly such feminized qualities and who often had sharp criticism for the visionary style, even still most people gave special credit to Ron for the organization’s quick growth. As Diane lamented, “the board at first was just a cheerleader [for Ron]… and really [we were] not doing our board work.” On the one hand, this last comment undervalues the role of being a “cheerleader,” which Diane went on to explain was actually a lot of work. However, this comment also alludes to the learning process that many participants have undertaken, especially those on the board, as they have tried to cultivate the knowledge and administrative skillset in order to effectively balance the disproportionate influence of their first executive director. That effort is what Diane
called “our board work,” a process of group leadership development which has only intensified since the period of my fieldwork.\footnote{Follow-up interview with Diane, February 2017.}

This “board work” points to another political dimension of group process at Growing Justice, for it is through their conflicts—over everything from unequal compensation to the nature of oppression—that many participants have struggled to learn about, articulate, and demand alternatives to the existing distribution of power in the group. These participants have also struggled to value those alternatives when they met with resistance and to establish them as new norms. In other words, the political content of group conflicts is that, through experience, participants are developing practical critiques of common forms of power and domination. So far, these critiques have not led participants toward participatory democracy \textit{per se}. Many people simply left or were dismissed. Other participants (especially board members) sought alternatives in a managerial approach to non-profit governance, believing that more developed administrative skills and a better sense of individual roles might enhance their ability to guide the actions of the staff leadership. However, some former board members expressed doubt whether management trainings could cultivate the skills that the group needed. Their tentative embrace of the managerial approach seemed tied to its ready availability, for example when one local consultant offered to donate her time in leading strategic planning sessions. Unfortunately even those efforts have been beleaguered by the steady attrition of board members, so it is unclear whether such trainings could have helped resolve conflicts. That lacuna notwithstanding, I suggest that participants’ comments demonstrate attitudes toward leadership which would be poorly served by familiar management techniques which favor hierarchical power relations.
In interviews, participants frequently spoke about the need for genuine cooperation. In the previous chapter, their many comments on communication skills, emotional health, and mutuality focused on personal qualities that interviewees thought were prerequisites for productive, collaborative relationships. However, these comments provide little guidance about how the collectivity could be formally structured so as to promote those conditions, and this quandary is one that the group has struggled with from the beginning. Describing their transition from informal community group to a formal organization, Diane said, “The truth is, as we’ve gone to the next steps, that it's messy.” In other words, they struggled to maintain a sense of neighborly equality and collaboration as their relations to each other were reorganized into a power-laden organizational structure. This difficulty is understandable, given that models of egalitarian organizations are not widely known or understood, but the ensuing conflicts demonstrate the democratic longings of the original group in ways that recall participatory democratic praxis. In one example, Diane described how in their early years a number of educators volunteered months of their time to develop a robust teaching garden. Unfortunately, the “territorial” and exclusive manner which the staff adopted effectively killed group momentum on that project, and the committee of volunteers were shut out. Several years later, when the staff’s own educational programming had run out of steam, it was too late to recover the earlier group’s work: “All this community involvement was lost and all this community energy was lost” (Diane). As she told it, the moral of this story echoes a central tenet of participatory democracy, the demand to create openings for involvement rather than obstacles (Dixon 2014). In another example, Diane frequently lamented that “accepting gifts” from Ron—meaning his generosity with his time and expertise—had
undermined the group’s control over their own community project. Her implication was that the debts the group incurred put them under special obligation to Ron, in ways that allowed him to set the terms of participation. This turn of events represents a perfect inversion of the “group-centered” model of leadership which civil rights leader Ella Baker promoted, whereby leaders have special obligations to the group and not vice versa, preventing leaders from using their position to shore up their own base of power (ibid).

These comments show that at least some participants have longed for a way of structuring their relations that is closer to participatory democracy, an approach that shifts the emphasis from the aptitudes and authority of one leader to the capacity of the whole group—especially their capacity to develop good communication into legitimate collective action. At their root, questions of leadership are questions about power within an organization. Participants’ comments suggest at least two models of power, then—one that is hierarchical, and one that is somewhat democratic but so far poorly defined. In the next section, I address what shapes and structures these two forms of power by asking what they are about, what work they do, what outcomes they want.

II. “Passion” and expertise

Interviewees at Growing Justice frequently mentioned how group process intersected with individual learning. In the last chapter, I presented various comments discussing the need to learn interpersonal and communication skills. Here I turn to a different set of comments, primarily by the staff leadership, which suggested a need to learn—or defer to—specifically administrative expertise. I suggest that these comments draw on ideas about non-profits that are at odds with other members’ expectations of the
group, specifically more democratic expectations about how the organization relates to the public it claims to serve and whose energies it draws from. These conflicting values highlight the fragmented accountabilities of professionalized non-profit organizations. I suggest that this mismatch of values has been a source of conflict at Growing Justice, with implications for how we understand non-profits as potential vehicles for social change.

1. Skill gaps and the needs of the organization

Just as staff administrators had pointed comments about leadership, they were also in strong agreement with each other about what skills were lacking in the organization. They frequently contrasted expertise—the supposed purview of the staff—with the “passion” that everyone else brought to the table. In recalling the original group that he joined back in 2010, Ron said “they clearly didn't have too much of a clue as to how to organize anything, [but] they were very passionate and they were very dedicated.” This gap between enthusiasm and know-how persisted into the present, for Allison had recently told the board, “I’m so happy that you guys are passionate about the mission and you love what we’re doing, but that's not the board we need anymore.” Instead, they needed “different people and different skills” (Allison). Kathleen was also worried that “our board is not qualified to be doing a lot of the things we need them to do at the moment,” and even though she valued people’s “passion,” she was “not sure what that [passion] does for Growing Justice and I certainly don't think that's the point of a board.” Instead, the organization needed experienced administrators: “We've got a $400,000 budget, and we need to make some more money, and we have some cash-flow issues and some staff personnel issues, and we don't have the HR support that we need” (Allison).
The board president was familiar with this problematic: “So when you have a community group, none of us were familiar with board work. How is it that you take people who just want this thing, and then how do you all learn the roles?” (Diane) The problem that the staff’s comments lay out is that people’s emotional investments do not satisfy certain administrative needs that they have identified in the organization. In context these comments were often aired as claims about the proper roles for different group members: one’s level of expertise presumably had a strong bearing on how much say one should have in decisions, so by claiming expertise against another’s mere “passion,” one could strengthen or defend a claim to authority—reflecting back to the hierarchical model of leadership described above. Yet other comments also suggested that merely passionate, inexperienced people were somewhat of a burden on the group’s effectiveness: speaking of non-profits generally, Ron said “it becomes very expensive because you're...hiring from the community and you're not necessarily getting the best, for want of a better word...experienced people.”

I address some of the many assumptions encoded into these comments in the discussion that follows, but what concerns me first is the nature of the expertise being described. According to Allison’s comments, the specific skills in demand are those of financial management, revenue generation and fundraising, and an institutionalized approach to resolving interpersonal conflicts. Such administrative skills are exactly those required to achieve what others in the organization called a “productivity agenda,” rooted in particular target outcomes: as Corin said, “the whole funding of the foundation world and [non-profits], it’s this machine that sort of is a business model in that it really values productivity.” On the one hand, productivity targets were seen to be tied to grant funding,
but as Kathleen suggested, those narrow goals are also rooted in the organizational culture of perpetually under-resourced non-profits: “We know we're never going to finish it all, so we do what we can. And it ends up being all of those simple, quantitative things that are easy to measure, that are easy to get done, easy to check off your list”—to the detriment of bigger-picture social change. Some people described this productivity agenda as a simple financial imperative. As Robert said, “Even though we’re non-profit status, we still technically have to run things like a business”; in other words, in order to stay afloat the organization needs to watch their ledgers and balance expenses with income. But as a couple interviewees suggested, this imperative went beyond finances, to the cultural factors shaping goal definition. Echoing the anti-racism trainings she had learned from, Corin called the productivity agenda a form of “internalized white supremacy,” demands that white people unconsciously make on themselves to act out their culturally-instilled sense of superiority and excellence. Kathleen agreed on the racial coding of productivity, but also emphasized the class dimension: demands for results, productivity, and efficiency are all “very associated with white, middle class culture…. [They’re] things that are celebrated as this is what we're going for and collectively appreciated and instilled as the ‘good’ qualities and the things you aspire to have in a team member.” I would add that the forms of accomplishment, productivity, and excellence emphasized here are also associated both with a patriarchal model of leadership and with the economistic logics of liberal capitalism and bureaucratic governance.

By emphasizing the need for expertise, then, some participants give voice to a demand for productivity according to specific standards of measurement that are not only demanded by dominant patterns of non-profit funding, but also fundamentally shaped by
state capitalism and by the racial, class, and gender identity of the group that has historically had easiest access to power and authority in institutions—white, property-owning men (Gilmore 2002). The hegemonic position that these standards occupy has been a primary source of conflict at Growing Justice, especially around issues of inclusion. Consider, for example, one administrator’s objection to a drawn-out email thread about racial justice: “We must be mindful of our community make-up and therefore be realistic as to what change we are capable of making and identifying what areas we can have the most impact in” (italics added). In her view, the slow work of raising group consciousness about racial injustice was undesirable because it would take away from other efforts that might have more measurable returns—say, in pounds of vegetables distributed, or number of families served. A goal of racial justice is less urgent or perhaps even incoherent when compared to a more widely accepted goal such as fighting food insecurity, which is easily articulated within the administrative logic of bureaucratic power. So while racial justice may be a goal that speaks to people’s “passions”—as shown by the anguish that followed this email exchange—passion alone will not make Growing Justice “a powerful organization” (Kathleen).

Presumably it is not just inclusion goals that clash with particular demands for productivity, but since inclusion was such a salient point in this organization’s debates, let us consider the problematic relationship between inclusion and measurable productivity. First, as Corin pointed out, meaningful inclusion work does not offer direct returns to income, not least because grant funding available specifically for raising group consciousness about social ills is slim to none. Instead, as Ron suggested, administrative logic more easily reads inclusion as a cost—as when community members hired for
reasons of inclusion turn out to be less than proficient in their assigned duties. This is because inclusion—as articulated here by Gracie, Corin, and others, within a framework of social justice—operates according to a different value system which seems incomprehensible within an administrative logic. Indeed, as Sally noted, Gracie’s interlocutors had trouble seeing “how becoming more inclusive and addressing privilege within the organization could help make the organization more successful.” Various other participants were aware of this disconnect and had difficulty reconciling inclusion goals with the organization’s administrative needs. Allison was particularly concerned:

[Inclusion’s] in our ends policies. We put that in a couple years ago with our board work because inclusion is a component of what we want to focus on. So how do we define success with that? […] I kept pushing the board, how can I know I’m successful if you haven’t defined what inclusion means for Growing Justice? Not Middlefield, Growing Justice.

This is of course a valid concern for an administrator tasked with achieving particular outcomes, since inclusion as a goal does need translation in order to be sensible and actionable in an administrative framework. However, any translations that hew to standard metrics are likely to read as flat and instrumentalist—the sort of “tokenizing” inclusion that sets goals of having board members or new hires from a minority demographic profile, without questioning how “inviting [different] people into our structures” doesn’t change the fact that “they’re our structures” (Diane).

The problem of inclusion at Growing Justice is thus two-fold: first, inclusion is difficult to accommodate within the productivist mode of non-profit administration that the staff leadership feels compelled to adopt; second, these administrators justify this productivist orientation by the returns it supposedly offers in funding, via measurable

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24 To be clear, in these comments Diane was acknowledging the same point I am making here: that a weak, liberal reading of inclusion is highly problematic insofar as it demands assimilation of the ‘other’ rather than structural change.
impact on target communities, aided by bureaucratic expertise. And as Growing Justice also experienced, access to networks of power which might present other funding sources likewise tend to demand an administrative apparatus that is beholden to the same demands—as when, in order to be eligible to manage the town’s farm land, Growing Justice was required to formally incorporate as a 501(c)(3). Activists have long complained that non-profits’ orientation to a “productivity agenda” has consistently forestalled their efforts to achieve progressive social change, leading some to describe a “non-profit industrial complex” with its own conservative, elitist goals at odds with those of social movements (INCITE! 2009). I suggest that this complex is the symbolic space where interviewees’ claims valuing expertise over passion make most sense. In this frame, the pressures to enact bureaucratic imperatives are the means by which the anti-democratic tendencies of the broader social formation are brought to bear on group activities. As Diane said, before becoming a non-profit they were only “a community group that just wants this thing” (emphasis added). The form of the non-profit, and the ideas about proper roles and required skillsets that came along with it, has at least partly served to discipline the political desire of those involved (Barkan & Pulido 2017), by relegating concerns of “passion” as secondary to concerns of administration.

Having drawn out the work that claims of “expertise” performed at this organization, I next turn to the content of “passion,” the political desires expressed among the group—desires which are more properly political because of the way that they directly challenge an anti-political, administrative framework. Here claims about inclusion offer a point of access to an alternative framework which is not based merely in
a quest for meeting funding benchmarks, but rather in the imperative to achieve

*legitimacy* and *justice*.

2. *Beyond passion: political desire, legitimacy, and justice*

   If these comments about expertise point to an administrative standard for success, many other comments point to a different set of values which define success as the *proper articulation of the organization to the community it serves.* This is the democratic/public spirit which excited so many participants and which staff leadership referred to as “passion.” Recalling the group’s formative period, Allison saw “the roots of Growing Justice in public process and the public forum….I continue to believe [that's] one of the reasons...for our early success.” This sentiment was nearly universally shared, even among some participants who did not join up until years after the forum took place in 2010. Kathleen, who only moved to the area in 2014, nevertheless recounted with pride that the idea for Growing Justice “was coming out of a community interest and not [just] a few people's idea of what a community interest might be.” Kait, who also came along well after the event, thought the forum was a reassuring sign that the group was “determining what happens at this organization based on what the community is telling us they want.” Darren said they had sought “input from everybody who cared to give it”; and Diane, voicing another common view, said how nice it was that the forum brought out such “a wide range of people.” All of these sentiments signal the group’s strong desire to shape an organization with a special relation to a public. After the forum, a follow-up booklet pronounced that “A ‘community’ or ‘town’ farm is a plot of agricultural land used in ways that reflect the values and needs of that community.” As the booklet hoped to show, the people of the town wanted just such a farm.
“Community” is certainly a key word at Growing Justice, figuring prominently in most of my interviews and all of their public relations materials, and its salience offers insight into how group members think of the organization. Against a more administrative logic, discussions of community show aspirations to build the farm as a public institution. As we would expect from democratic theory, the kernel of the organization’s publicness is legitimacy. Most often this issue surfaced in interviews via participants’ anxieties about losing legitimacy by drifting away from their community basis. As Allison said, “Not taking the time to involve the public is a really poor and short-sighted choice, and it’s one we’re probably a couple years late on….At least every five years we want to do something similar to what we did in 2010…and just check back in.” Crew member Jackie found it disturbing that the group seemed to be losing sight of its constituents, saying “one thing I find strange a lot is how…the struggles the community’s going through…we don’t really address or talk about or think about or discuss….It feels like the organization is removed from the community it’s trying to serve.” Some people thought that achieving such legitimacy would require significant effort, and might mean the organization had to change. Kathleen said, “To me what’s so important right now is finding a way to listen as well as possible to our community and figure out what exactly our programming should be. Like how can we be best providing whatever it is people need, beyond just access to food?”

Of course, as Kathleen implies, articulating to a public is not straightforward. In fact, as Fraser (1989) makes clear, the tasks of needs assessment and satisfaction are deeply political, highly contentious, and never complete. That difficulty may explain why the group “[has] been trying to provide no service but food” (Ron). But the group’s
legitimacy problem also helps to explain why the principle of inclusion has figured so strongly in the group’s deliberations, since, as Iris Young (2000) asserts, inclusion is the normative basis for legitimacy in modern democracy. So when group members feel that their success must be rooted in articulation to a public, they express a desire to hear more input and guidance from their community, which in turn requires figuring out how to hear the community better and more fully through a deliberately inclusive process. Such an orientation faces major dilemmas, not least the fact that there is no public (or community) that is pre-constituted—and the constitution of the public is just one moment in the discursive quagmire of needs definition and administration that Fraser describes.

What I have called ‘administrative logic’ poses its own solutions to these dilemmas, in order to produce concrete, measurable outcomes and avoid the politicized context of needs talk with all of its ambiguities and costs in time and labor. Fred expressed skepticism about two “social service agencies” who gave presentations to Growing Justice on their regional needs assessments: “I didn’t even ever really know who they were representing, but they had real clear ideas of what needs were out there in the community.” Despite these doubts, it proved more expedient for Growing Justice to accept the professionalized needs assessments that were offered, since the labor of gathering input from the community was in competition for the group’s limited resources. In retrospect, Fred wondered about how else they could have proceeded and worried that their approach was too elitist: “What does it mean for well-to-do white people to say here’s this? Here’s this, take it or leave it.” Sally likewise felt that the organization had arrived at a model that felt more like “charity” and needed to be more “of the people.” But what does it mean, that many of these same early participants also valued Ron’s
contribution of ‘moving the group forward’ past these important but time-consuming concerns about legitimacy? I suggest that the group’s ‘common-sense’ ideas about articulating to a community—even the idea that there is some readily available community waiting to be heard—are rooted in an earnest desire to form an organization that legitimately responds to social need in this place. Because of the complexity of this problem, it is unsurprising that the group found it difficult to move forward until someone was able to steer them toward a conceptual toolkit—what I’ve called administrative logic—that claims competence for interpreting and administering needs. In this way a political problem was transformed into an administrative task, even as traces of the political problem frequently resurfaced. These techniques of administration changed the nature of the collectivity, not only by distributing new roles with unequal powers but also by introducing new accountabilities. In the next section I gather participants’ comments about these alternative accountabilities and the difficulties they have brought.

3. Fragmented accountabilities

Whereas organizational norms of legitimacy enact relations of justice through accountability to a public, other accountabilities—specific to the form of the non-profit—have troubled group efforts to achieve justice. Foremost among these was the imperative to get funding. Kait gave the example of how her educational programs were derailed: “I kept doing the programs that were meeting the mission rather than financial needs, and then...my programs would get diverted because we’d have to seek out a grant or something and then we’d have to meet the parameters of that grant.” Administrators tried to steer Kait toward offering programs to “wealthy private schools” who could pay more
for the service, but she felt that was at odds with the mission of serving those in need. Allison described the issue differently: “Ron and I paid a lot of attention to what we need to do to make this a sustainable organization”—in other words, generating revenue. Their strategy for achieving financial stability alternated between seeking grants and large individual donations and trying to develop programs which might one day pay for themselves (the “social enterprise” aspect of the organization). The latter strategy was intended to be a route to self-determination and independence, but so far it has not panned out: to date the large majority of their funding has come from wealthy donors and state grants, much to the frustration of participants. Several interviewees expressed concern that the group’s funding sources were more conservative than the group itself. Regardless of their politics, however, it is clear from participants’ comments that funders had different priorities from the group, and these donors had disproportionate influence over the group’s activities—influence that was much more direct and immediate than that of the farm’s community constituents.

State imperatives for service provision also competed for influence in shaping the farm’s programming. Like many other farms in the region, Growing Justice participated in state-level nutrition assistance programs. One state official said organizations like Growing Justice were key to the success of these programs because of their ability to make up the state’s “shortfall in terms of relationships within the community” (Alan). In other words, community groups were better integrated with constituencies, and that integration was key to recruiting and maintaining participants. This dimension of public-private partnership is commonplace (Wolch 1990) and not necessarily negative—but it draws out one further way in which the organization is both accountable and useful to an
entity other than its public. There is no reason to assume that the state’s imperative to legitimate itself through welfare programs coincides with popular political desires.

It is clear that these multiple imperatives place Growing Justice in a difficult position and further problematize the effort to be a public, democratic institution. The result is that the organization’s accountabilities are fragmented and contradictory, dashing any hopes for a committed “publicness” and instead favoring public relations (Habermas 1962 [1989]). Because of its position, Growing Justice cannot simply act on community desires, even if such desires could be clearly articulated. Rather, the organization must filter and interpret those public desires, reconciling them however they can with the competing imperatives from funders and the state. As Allison plainly stated,

I think there’s a lot more opportunity for engaging the public in the conversation around Growing Justice, and it’s not that they’re decision makers, but their information can help us make decisions that are going to give the community what they need, which is going to lead to our success (emphasis added).

These comments are a frank acknowledgment that, as constituted, the organization and the public are entities with separate but interdependent interests; they also illustrate that, as executive director, Allison’s primary concern is the success of the organization—which again is not totally independent of community well-being, but still stands curiously apart in her choice of phrase. These comments were also spoken during a conversation in which she repeatedly emphasized the need to “tell your story” effectively to funders and to the community, so as to garner both funding and buy-in. This is the problem of public relations: acknowledging that the organization has multiple accountabilities which do not coincide, it is necessary to persuade each of these groups that their interests are being

25 For the sake of brevity I pass over the additional imperative for staff to prioritize their personal careers over the good of the organization or the community. This particular imperative was rarely mentioned by interviewees in this case although it features strongly in INCITE!’s (2009) critique of non-profit organizations.
served by Growing Justice, while somehow balancing those conflicting interests in a way that allows the organization to remain in business. From the perspective of an administrator, this is simply the necessary work of operating a non-profit organization in the present conditions of political life in the United States. From the perspective of social justice movements, however, these fragmented accountabilities pose a major obstacle for efforts to enact justice through non-profit organizations. The result, as noted above, is that the conventional non-profit form serves to discipline activists’ political desires.

The tension between democratic desires and administrative imperatives raises all sorts of questions about the political potential of non-profit organizations. Put succinctly, the labor of articulating an organization to a public’s political desires lends legitimacy to the organization, while techniques and logics of administration offer a toolkit for that work. However, the knowledges and discourses of administration are not neutral vehicles for political action—despite claims to the contrary—but rather enact thorough-going transformations on politics by shifting and narrowing those actions that are deemed possible, reasonable, and workable. The problem is that administrative techniques draw on bureaucratic power, an anti-political form of state power (Brown 1995) which so easily out-competes democracy in its various forms. The question that remains is—how do we build collective forms of administering claims for justice that are actually productive for a democratic politics? Rephrased for the context of non-profits, this is exactly the problem Chantal Mouffe (2000, 100) describes when she asks “how to constitute forms of power more compatible with democratic values.” The problem for democracy is not that organizations mobilize power, but that organizations as we know them are so compatible with undemocratic forms of power. Thus there is good reason to
be skeptical about non-profits’ suitability for achieving just and democratic outcomes—but skepticism is not the same as hopelessness. In the next section I return to participants’ comments to draw out their ideas about what sort of goods are achievable through their organization as constituted, before offering my own conclusions about the prospects for making change through non-profits.

III. Organizations making change, making changes in organizations

Up until now, I have painted a dismal picture of Growing Justice by focusing on their difficulties: first the challenge of getting along and working together, and now the challenge of enacting change in line with their political desires (in other words, justice). As I noted in the last chapter, I am uncomfortable with this rendering even though it serves my arguments here. After all, in almost every interview, participants recounted with some modesty the “little points of light” (Darren) in their history as a collective. I now turn to those satisfactions and small successes in order to understand what good Growing Justice has been able to achieve, despite their difficulties. I argue that it is necessary to carefully weigh organizational outcomes against the strategies and tactics used—in other words, the professionalized, hierarchical toolkit of non-profit management—in order to evaluate the suitability of those strategies.

Participants’ reflections on their successes were always qualified by acknowledging the group’s persistent challenges, but the positive outcomes that interviewees highlighted were nevertheless diverse. The former farm manager Ted succinctly described the tension between disappointment and satisfaction that he felt regarding programming goals:

Maybe the goals of the organizations aren't being met, as far as how many people we're reaching with food, how many kids we're reaching with the snack market thing. But
we're reaching a good number of kids with the snack market and they really like it and that's awesome. And we did one hundred and fifty CSA shares, almost all of which were low-income...and that's not insignificant. I think those are successes.

He went on to note that it was only in retrospect, after leaving the organization, that he was able to fully appreciate those successes as such. Others stressed the great potential for future successes: local social worker Jacob stressed that programming currently in development had great potential to meet the food needs of people in hard times. Will felt similarly: “We're doing very good work and we're staged for tremendous success….Our name recognition is very high and the esteem of people for the work that we're doing and what we've accomplished in this short period of time is very high so I think that we have a lot to be proud of and satisfied about, and I personally haven't given up.” One of the recurring themes of these comments was the need to have patience and more realistic expectations, that the group’s ambitious goals have been a source of disappointment. For example, Allison noted that more experienced administrators of other non-profits have reassured her that the goal of achieving financial stability within their first few years was nearly impossible. It is certainly understandable that a community group with little experience running a formal organization might need to learn from experience how to set reasonable benchmarks for their programming—although as noted above, what is ‘reasonable’ for a non-profit is not just a matter of practicality but also ideology, where administrative rationality has a disciplinary effect on political desire.

A similar theme that ran throughout the interviews was appreciating the small joys afforded by participating in the group. Volunteer Darren especially waxed sentimental about how much he enjoyed working alongside others, and he recalled fondly a weekly group of volunteers that would gather for pulling weeds and wide-ranging conversation. During the season when this group met regularly, it frequently attracted other participants.
when they noticed how nice of a time people were having. Of course, knowing how
joyful this work could be made it that much harder for Darren to see that the farm was
generally not “a happy place.” But after recounting all of the disappointment that he felt
for different reasons, Darren still felt that the best part of Growing Justice was the
friendship he had with a couple of his long-time collaborators.

These comments are compelling and illustrate the importance of the affective
dimension of collective projects, but they also draw out a source of dissonance in the way
the group is structured. For while it is an unassailable good that the organization has
fostered friendships and joyful conversations, one certainly does not need a formal
organization attracting hundreds of thousands of dollars in public and private donations in
order to achieve that end. Indeed, one gets the impression that it is the effort to make
Growing Justice a more “powerful” (productive, professional) organization (Kathleen)
that has crowded out the joys of building positive relationships in and around the group.
Likewise, when considering the concrete outcomes of the organization—e.g., number of
families served and pounds of produce grown—multiple participants admitted that
Growing Justice’s model was a terribly inefficient way to achieve those ends:
“[distributing food is] a great thing, but that could just as easily be accomplished by
creating wholesale relationships with other farms and [us merely] aggregating and
distributing, because there are plenty of fucking vegetables around here” (Ted).26

Furthermore, since its formal establishment in 2011 the organization seems to have
discouraged more community involvement more than it has inspired. After their years
with the group, both Kait and Gracie expressed disaffection with non-profits in general,

26 Note that what Ted describes is exactly the model of charitable hunger relief (food banks) that
community food projects were intended to improve upon.
and a certain amount of cynicism about Growing Justice has spread among networks in the town (Will’s claims notwithstanding). So thus far the organization has proven relatively ineffective on several important fronts—providing opportunities for community fellowship, growing produce for under-served groups, and building on the popular momentum that made the whole project possible in the first place.

This evaluation makes a strong case for changing the organization. However, changing this non-profit—or any non-profit—requires looking carefully at what they are and how they came to be, in order to more skillfully imagine possible alternatives. This process is already underway at Growing Justice. After the public forum one participant was taken by the “radical suggestion [of] returning the farm to its original incarnation and creating a Poor Farm” (printed in forum booklet). Years later participants have lost any romantic notion about “a time when towns enabled people to contribute to their own self-sufficiency” (ibid) and have come to understand that poor farms were dismal, semi-punitive institutions. I argue that what is called for here is an extension of this learning process, to place community food projects as one site in a shifting, dynamic landscape of struggles over welfare provision. As this inquiry seeks to demonstrate, this process must attend to how groups define success, in order to better evaluate organizational forms according to their suitability as vehicles for social change. This process must also strip the veneer of neutrality from norms of professionalism and non-profit governance, instead acknowledging the troubled route they have taken to achieve their current dominance within organizations. While seasoned administrators have valuable experience to lend to community projects, without effective mechanisms for moderating their influence it will be nearly impossible to balance their contributions with those of less
disciplined participants. This task is all the more difficult because administrative logic is widely appealing and enjoys the status of common sense in our society. The challenge is to refuse the gratifications of the dominant ideology—to see how certain familiar ideas about what is ‘right’ and ‘clever’ and ‘necessary’ speak to values inherited from “Western colonial ideologies” (Sandoval 2000, 128) which are incompatible with a democratic politics. Only then can we be deliberate about developing forms of collective politics which produce democratic outcomes.

To be clear, like my interviewees at Growing Justice I believe it is important to value the organization for what it is. However, this qualified appreciation for what they have achieved does not justify being content with the table scraps of the present political order. Rather, I suggest we appreciate Growing Justice—and non-profits generally—as a space for continued political engagement, where participants are seeking to overcome the challenges of waging a democratic project against modern forms of oppression and domination. In this view, non-profits are not vehicles for social change in any straightforward way: they do not merely administer programs which create equitable outcomes. Instead, such organizations are valuable as temporary, imperfect spaces for potentially revolutionary politics. By seeing such organizations for what they are, it is that much easier to resist becoming attached to their present, often anti-political forms and to imagine more democratic possibilities for the future.

**IV. Conclusion**

In this chapter I have sought to take a step back from the specific conflicts that took place at Growing Justice, in order to understand the organization as a space where politics happens. Participants’ comments about leadership and expertise served to
highlight the fundamental tensions between an administrative logic drawing on conventional, hierarchical management techniques and a democratic politics drawing on popular desire for change. This tension suggests fundamental dilemmas for community groups that want to effect change through non-profit organizations. Nevertheless, I have argued that a more deliberate effort to study and understand bureaucratic power and its workings in organizations is a first step towards developing alternative forms of power more compatible with democratic aims. Since participation in community non-profits offers the necessary context for confronting these contradictions and imagining alternatives, I suggest non-profits remain an important part of political practice.
CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

“Revolutionary liberty and justice...are difficult to imagine for citizen-subjects shaped by the social and psychic categories of a (nation/class/sex/gender/race) colonizing state, for this state generates in consciousness an innocuous and everyday craving for supremacy....[T]he colonizing mind becomes satisfied by what is, and senses supremacy as only a natural pose for being. How does one go about resisting this dominant rhetoric of supremacy and its forms of cultural imposition, thus making individual and social transformation possible?”

Chela Sandoval (2000, 128)

In the passage above, Chela Sandoval describes the difficulty of imagining liberation in a world still fettered by racial capitalism, settler colonialism, and heteropatriarchy. The problem is not just imagining liberation, of course, but also seeing opportunities for radical alternatives and claiming the power to do so. In this thesis I have presented a case study of an organization that from the outside—and even to some on the inside—seems hopelessly committed to a modestly reformist set of programs. And yet even here participants’ narratives show glimpses of other possibilities, something besides the proliferation of bureaucracy under the guise of a community organization. Thus the question has been, what prevented those alternatives from mounting a serious challenge in this organization? And what might enable alternatives to claim power here?

I have suggested that it is the structure of power in the organization—enacted through bureaucratic values and ideas—that prevented more democratic and egalitarian alternatives from taking root; and I have suggested that radical democracy provides a framework for building an alternative basis for power. In this chapter I review these findings and consider how this case study might speak to the broader contexts of food
justice and non-profit organizations. Returning again to the problematic Sandoval describes—the relationship between ideology, imagination, and political practice—I conclude with a set of reflections on what it might mean to build organizations suited to enacting more radical forms of food justice.

I. Major findings

In this case, participants’ interpretations of conflict show multiple ways of negotiating their shared institutional space, in ways that intersect with theoretical debates around democratic communication. Comments by the staff leadership showed a desire for harmony, suggesting that disagreement was at odds with the sort of cooperation needed for success. Many participants thought conflicts demonstrated the “internal work” that some members needed to do in order to foster better group dynamics. Some of these same participants thought that the responsibility for conflicts belonged partly to those who raised particular difficult issues in discussions, who could have been more subtle in their manner of speaking. Other interviewees blamed a group culture where honesty, humility, and mutuality were lacking, each of which could have provided a basis for resolving disagreements when they arose. Each of these views corresponds to arguments familiar from democratic theory: harmony and unanimity are seen to benefit those who already possess decision-making authority, in this case the staff leadership; theories of deliberative democracy emphasize the discursive conditions for political communication, somewhat supporting the position that better communication could have yielded more productive outcomes from conflicts; but more so such theories recommend an ethos of mutuality as the basis for good communication. However, the actual course of events show a failure of mutuality in this group, despite a robust, pre-existing sense of
neighborliness and cooperation. Chantal Mouffe (2000) offers a clue as to why these otherwise friendly, neighborly individuals failed to achieve mutuality in practice: as she asserts, democratic individuals—those who should be mutualistic—do not precede democratic institutions, but rather it is democratic institutions which foster the orientations and affinities which produce individuals loyal to democracy. This insight suggests that it is perhaps the structure of the institutional space itself which prevents mutuality and instead coddles the “fragility” of those in privileged positions.

As expected, participants’ comments showed conflicting institutional imaginaries at work in this space. Various comments about leadership characterized the existing leadership as hierarchical and “visionary.” Many participants gave credit to the founding executive director for his “can-do” style and charisma, attributing the group’s early momentum to his personal efforts, his skill, and his clarity of vision. However, many of these same participants saw major drawbacks to this leadership style, especially its exclusive and often territorial, obstructionist manner. This model of leadership is common among non-profit organizations, and while participants voiced familiar critiques, their efforts to counteract the negative tendencies of this leadership style drew mostly on familiar, bureaucratic forms of non-profit governance (e.g., strategic planning sessions; board member trainings). Nevertheless, various comments by interviewees demonstrated a longing for alternative ways of structuring leadership more sympathetic to the participatory democratic models I describe at the end of chapter two.

A further set of comments showed conflicting views about structures of decision-making. The staff leadership’s claims valuing expertise over “passion” sketched a hierarchy of authority tied closely to one’s level of administrative experience and savoir
FAIRE, even implying that many participants currently in the group were only minimally contributing and perhaps should move on to make room for others more skilled in governance. These claims specifically devalued something they called “passion,” which maps closely onto the more democratic—less administrative—urges that less experienced participants responded to. By finding the democratic content of passion, this thesis shows how a certain administrative logic sought to transform properly political problems (e.g., how to address and respond to community desires, how to create more egalitarian futures) into administrative tasks (e.g., public relations, delivery of services). A primary force behind this transformation is the fragmented accountabilities of the non-profit, the conflicting interests and demands of the public, funding agencies, and wealthy donors. This contradiction was seen to be inscribed in the model of the bureaucratic non-profit itself and disrupts the democratic accountabilities that form the basis of an erstwhile “community” organization.

Recognizing such contradictions and seeing how consistently they course through the long, troubled history of philanthropy and public charities helps to situate non-profit organizations as political entities. In particular, such a framing suggests an explanation for the gap between project outcomes—which are often modest at best—and the immense financial and libidinal investments which society places in these organizations as agents of change. Put succinctly, the gratifications of administrative logic do not operate in a democratic register. Such critiques do not totally undermine the value of non-profits vis-à-vis democratic politics, but rather highlight the need to hold organizational forms lightly. Such organizations are only as useful as they prove to be, and any appeal which exceeds their actual achievements shows the workings of ideology. On the one hand, this position
demands a careful assessment of project outcomes, the sort of assessment that non-profits almost never have the resources or will to conduct. On the other hand, the call to hold this organizational form lightly suggests that we should consider non-profits less for what they can *do*—because they’re not particularly good at *doing* what a democratic politics demands (*i.e.*, reconfiguring power relations)—and more for what they can *be*, which is spaces for potentially radical political engagement. Radical democracy calls for us to create institutions that are always open to contestation, keeping power relations always in question and preventing the final victory of any party (Mouffe 2000).

**II. Points of departure**

1. *Limitations*

   Of course, it is also important to highlight the limitations of this study, especially by emphasizing the specific character of this group. Growing Justice does not represent all food justice organizing, and it would be dangerous to imply as much. From the public forum on into the present, this organization has demonstrated a problematic, paternalistic orientation towards an ‘other’ (the so-called “underserved”) who have barely been involved in the organization other than to receive services (Guthman 2008c). Efforts to diversify the organization and include clients and beneficiaries in decision-making have been difficult to say the least. The active ‘subject’ of food justice at this organization already seems quite privileged, even though I do not suggest that everyone involved is equally privileged. It is unsurprising then that a bureaucratic approach to food justice has predominated in their organization and come through so strongly in this study. Organizations which do not fit this paternalistic profile thus might show a very different organizational imaginary.
That said, the term ‘privilege’ is too vague to adequately describe why this organization might be different from others. To be specific, this group closely fits the profile of those organizations which critical scholars have critiqued for their ‘whiteness’ (Slocum 2006, 2011; Ramirez 2015; Alkon 2012, 2013; Guthman 2011). It is probably safe to assume that discussions of racism would play out very differently in a minority-led organization, especially since such organizations tend to frame food justice explicitly within an analysis of structural racism. Because food justice is a point of convergence of different strands of activism, it is not just a ‘whitened’ affair but also an important site for organizing by people of color. The danger in implying that Growing Justice is some kind of universal case is that such an argument re-centers whiteness in a field of activism that rightly aspires to de-center the whiteness that has dominated alternative food movements. This danger is significant, considering that white-led organizations already enjoy a disproportionate share of available funding and white participants in minority-led projects earn disproportionate attention from the media (Reynolds 2015). Thus I emphasize that Growing Justice most certainly does not represent food justice groups that are led by people of color and may be atypical even among white-led organizations. The differences in such cases may extend well beyond the problem of understanding racism, since at least two well-known organizations from African American communities explicitly adopt forms of participatory democracy (Detroit Black Community Food Security Network (Yakini 2013), and Planting Justice of Oakland, CA).

For these reasons further research is required, especially research by/with communities of color engaged in food justice work. I draw attention in this thesis to the specificity of the historical association between ‘whiteness’ (and other forms of
domination and oppression) and bureaucratic power, and additional research with other organizations may help to chart ways that such oppressions are resisted. In chapter two, I mentioned several organizations from the African American community (DBCFSN; the Nation of Islam; historically, the Black Panther Party) which show how more politicized approaches to food and agriculture are better able to resist state power and avoid reproducing it. Such organizations mobilize a food justice imaginary that can push back against the technocratic approach which predominates in other community organizations, but questions abound. In cases like these, are non-profit organizations more effective vehicles for politics than in other cases, or do such groups prefer other forms of organization? When a more politicized group creates a non-profit, does it carry less institutional baggage? One would assume from the case of Growing Justice that a group with a better-defined ‘ideological compass’ could be more strategic in defining liberatory goals and principles, rather than merely aiming for the survival of their organization, but further study is needed on these questions. Such inquiries are badly needed in order to better understand how power—democratic or otherwise—works through organizations.

2. Contributions, interventions

Although Growing Justice is not representative of all food justice organizations, it nevertheless shows various features which are common among such groups. As Guthman (2008c; 2011) and others have pointed out, the paternalism on display in this organization’s programming is quite prevalent among food activist groups; and the whiteness this group shows is likewise a common feature of community food organizations (Slocum 2006, 2007, 2011; Slocum et al 2016). This organization also displays many of the problematic features common to non-profits in general: anti-
democratic forms of leadership and decision-making (Barrington-Bush 2013); cults of personality and ‘founder’s syndrome’ (Block 2004); emphasis on professionalism and expertise over community accountability (Guthman 2008b); disproportionate influence by conservative funders; and difficulty articulating goals of social justice (INCITE! 2009). Furthermore, given how bureaucratic and rigidly organized most non-profits are, Growing Justice is not alone in having difficulty remaining flexible and open to critique. This case study thus offers an important fine-grained analysis of political life in a familiar institutional form.

Returning to the problem of ‘whiteness,’ one strength of this study is the way it complicates easy typologies of food justice organizations. Although I maintain that there are often clear, substantive differences between white-led and minority-led projects—and these differences must be explored further—this study deepens scholars’ engagement with ‘whiteness’ in food movements by articulating specific forms of power which are historically tied to whiteness but are not essential features of it. In other words, the people who most often exercise bureaucratic power through these organizations are, in Fanon’s words, “only accidentally white” (quoted in Sandoval 2000, 129). The contingency of this relationship is demonstrated by those white participants at Growing Justice who, for all their foibles, nevertheless respond to democratic longings which have more radical political potential than the typical ‘whitened’ community food imaginary. This approach clarifies what critical scholarship on food movements can do for us: the goal of such scholarship is not to dismiss the work conducted by people of privileged backgrounds, but rather to develop a basis for political praxis that dismantles those forms of power which are structured by social difference (Gilmore 2002). Practitioners often feel that
critical scholarship is excessively pessimistic and offers no way out, no route for improvement. I do not prescribe specific solutions to the problems I cite in this thesis, but I argue that radical democracy—because of its affinity with critical analyses of race, gender, class, and other forms of difference—provides a framework for the necessary work of developing more egalitarian forms of power. By locating the problem not in whiteness per se but in the contingent relationship between whiteness and state power, this inquiry helps to imagine ways that people who happen to be white can contribute to building a more egalitarian future (Alcoff 2015). And by naming and problematizing state power, this study also foregrounds an opportunity for movement organizations: for if non-profits are key sites for the attempted expansion of state power (via the “shadow state”; Wolch 1990), they are also key sites for resisting state power. I suggest radical democracy is the necessary basis for that resistance.

This inquiry also proposes a fundamental reorientation for participants in organizations. As at Growing Justice, so often organizations approach perceived challenges assuming that they need to learn how to do their work better. In this case, board members sought out trainings in non-profit governance, professional needs assessments from other established service providers, or assistance from management consultants. Staff leadership likewise felt that having staff with more administrative experience would solve many of their organization’s difficulties. By fundamentally questioning whether non-profits are suited to the social justice goals which so many of them claim, this study shifts the problematic. It is not that organizations need to do their job better: rather, society needs to do democracy better. It is only by de-centering bureaucratic non-profit organizations as the subject of social change that we can imagine
a world where paternalism becomes incoherent, where charitable non-profits do not need to exist because people have the political power to make demands and have them satisfied. The experience at Growing Justice suggests a corollary to this claim: that it is not non-profits which are under-resourced, but democracy which is under-resourced. More democratically-minded programs were proposed but either never got off the drawing board or were abandoned due to the exigencies of funding. By contrast, even though the organization continues to experience regular financial crises, their programs of service provision continue to attract hundreds of thousands of dollars in grant funding and large donations each year.

This study also suggests a variety of smaller-scale interventions. Although I propose that organizations may be more significant as spaces for political engagement than as service providers, it is nevertheless important to be honest about project outcomes. It is by demanding a rigorous honesty in program assessment that we enable other participants to see how poorly non-profit organizations meet the expectations placed on them, thus lending support to the search for alternative organizational forms. In the case of Growing Justice, some participants pointed out how inefficiently the organization produced and distributed food. Given how many well-established and highly productive farms are in the region, perhaps there would be greater need for a catalyst than for a fixed or stable organization providing production and distribution themselves. That is, perhaps the same distribution goals could be more easily met by developing relationships with existing farms and channeling state or foundation funding to facilitate a novel form of distribution. Such a project could co-exist comfortably with the
cooperative community farm that the original Growing Justice group so badly wanted but still doesn’t have (because the farm is run solely by hired staff and crew).

One participant hoped that Growing Justice could serve as a cautionary tale for aspiring community groups. Indeed, as this group demonstrates seemingly straightforward, common-sense projects (such as a community farm) can become problematic when subsumed into the form of a professional non-profit organization. For this reason, there is need to foster more dialogue about a strategic approach to organizational forms among food justice groups, especially since conferences, workshops, and the literature too often focus solely on programming—what groups do—and neglect organizational concerns—what they are. Similar remarks can be made about the question of ‘inclusion’ or ‘diversity,’ which have become buzzwords in food activism.27 Unfortunately, the prominence of these terms does not guarantee that organizations will take them seriously. Flat, liberal renderings of inclusion are in danger of ignoring how institutions embody power. By drawing out the way that bureaucratic power is structured by difference, this inquiry helps to specify the challenges any thorough-going project for racial justice in organizations is up against.

III. Refusing gratifications

A secondary theme that runs throughout this thesis is the curious persistence of forms and practices despite their failure to deliver on promises. Community food projects were developed in large part to respond to the on-going inadequacy of the charitable emergency food system to provide for the food needs of the poor (Poppendieck 1998). Despite a general acknowledgement of the failure of food banks and a putative shift to

27 Consider the 2017 Community Food Systems Conference at Tufts University, which requires that all presenters address racial diversity and social justice in their workshops.
more “comprehensive” solutions (Gottlieb & Joshi 2010, 197), organizations such as Growing Justice are now receiving significant funding to conduct programs which are not very different from food banks—just offering fresh produce instead of non-perishables. I do not complain that families with low income are receiving vegetables at no cost—that result is fantastic. However, the aspiration of these pilot programs—and they are mostly pilot programs still, in a small handful of places—is that they can produce measurable societal benefits which will prove that such programs should be adopted at a national scale. Maybe that is true, but the current political climate (and the newly elected president’s revanchist budget) suggest that entitlement programs will not be expanded anytime soon. In addition, merely reformulating food bank programs does not necessarily “increase the self-reliance of communities in providing for their own food needs” (ibid).

In this case, as so often in the case of food politics, what’s needed is not a technical solution but a political solution, addressing the basis of power which distributes social goods under the present order of racial capitalism. Judged by the democratic standards I have presented in this work, the emergency food system and its descendants are not political so much as anti-political. Why would food justice organizations, for all of their political potential (Gottlieb & Fisher 1996), drift back to liberal, anti-political programs?

I have referred several times to the fact that many progressive food justice groups lack an “ideological compass” (Holt-Gimenez & Shattuck 2011, 133), a deficit which favors an ambiguous politics. In the case of Growing Justice, participants who leaned more toward a democratic politics had difficulty articulating how such principles might shape the organization. At key moments, participants who were less democratically-inclined provided a compelling framework for organization, ready-made and drawn from
experience, fundamentally shaping the trajectory of the group despite the fact that they were a small minority. Together with Holt-Gimenez and Shattuck, this thesis points to the need to elaborate and promote a basis for liberatory food justice, so that such a framework is ready to forcefully, convincingly deploy at decisive moments, mounting a serious challenge to anti-democratic elements. Such a framework requires speaking clearly about the troubled reality of actually existing organizations, tearing aside the shroud of the dominant ideology which hides these organizations’ failures.

As Chela Sandoval (2000, 128) asks, “How does one go about resisting this dominant rhetoric…?” If the present order persists by making radical solutions “unthinkable,” we must rely on values that are more powerful than thought to break through: kindness and love, values that cannot be commodified or administered or rationalized (Trauger 2017, 122). Fred and Diane’s comments spoke to these values as necessary ingredients for a successful, cohesive collective project—being in good “emotional health” seemed to mean that one was ready and able to be kind and loving. Yet these are also values that sit uncomfortably with non-profits as professional workplaces, as Fred and Will both suggested, especially given how contentious and distrustful the environment at Growing Justice became. The challenge is to specify love not just as a personal feeling but as a political praxis—a shift which will probably make love seem even less rational or comfortable within organizations as we know them.

As I noted in chapter two, radical democracy is something that we as state subjects have known only fleetingly, if at all. For this reason, a radical democratic praxis will necessarily be counterintuitive for those who think within the dominant value system. But here is where Sandoval’s (2000) ‘methodology of the oppressed’ provides a
compelling account of political consciousness, of practicing something we don’t yet know or understand. Those who critique or resist the dominant ideology—the racial, colonial, gendered, capitalist state—feel themselves isolated and estranged, but as they move away from that dominant community they draw near to another, much larger community that is hard to perceive. This is the community of all those rendered other and different, who have developed an array of “forces, skills, methods, and techniques” (ibid, 128) to survive and oppose domination—a set of tools which Sandoval calls ‘differential consciousness.’ On the one hand, this differential consciousness is a method for seeing and reading the dominant ideology, denaturalizing it, perceiving its gratifications. But adopting this consciousness also opens the possibility of moving between “alternative realities [that] provide individuals and communities with increased and novel forms of communication, creativity, productivity, mobility, and a different sense of ‘control’” (ibid, 136). Note the affinity here between differential consciousness and Laclau and Mouffe’s (1985, 174) call for democracy to institutionalize the moment of “openness,” or Lefort’s (1988, 19) claim that democracy entails “the dissolution of the markers of certainty”: democracy demands ways of being that are radically different from that of bureaucracy, ways that relinquish the familiar forms of productivity, control, and certainty that feel so necessary in familiar forms of organization.

Sandoval’s Methodology proposes a theoretical basis for practicing coalition across difference. Her concept of ‘differential consciousness’ describes the skills and orientations necessary for practicing a radical democratic form of food justice, and I have tried to demonstrate this practice hear through my reading of this case. Radical democracy requires that institutions remain flexible and power relations remain always in
question (Mouffe 2000). Because ideology’s force stems from its relation to sites of power (Hall 1996), democratic institutions must also make ideology available for contestation. Meeting this requirement entails, first, naming the oppressive and dominating dimensions of familiar ways of being in organizations; and second, refusing the gratifications that accrue to those who continue to invest in such ontologies. The benefits of this reorientation are by no means trivial. Rigid, anti-political institutions operate on dichotomies of ‘right’ and ‘wrong,’ ‘clever’ and ‘silly,’ ‘cost’ and ‘asset,’ whereas democratic praxis refuses the mechanical form of productivity that drives such thinking. Instead, this praxis discovers a different kind of productivity and values other kinds of work: for example, mobilizing a commitment to racial justice is no longer read as a ‘cost’ on a balance sheet, whereas condoning oppressive behaviors is a cost—for social justice. Properly democratic organizations will inevitably seem incoherent to many, but we must establish and defend them all the same. In the process we will find that democracy “shimmers behind all we think we know” (Sandoval 2000, 145) about food justice.
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Researcher’s Statement
I am/We are asking you to take part in a research study. Before you decide to participate in this study, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. This form is designed to give you the information about the study so you can decide whether to be in the study or not. Please take the time to read the following information carefully. Please ask the researcher if there is anything that is not clear or if you need more information. When all your questions have been answered, you can decide if you want to be in the study or not. This process is called “informed consent.” A copy of this form will be given to you. You must be 18 years or older to participate.

Principal Investigator:   Dr. Amy Trauger  
Department of Geography  
atrauger@uga.edu

Purpose of the Study  
This project examines how community food projects (such as Growing Justice) aim to spread social justice through food and farming activities. Because race and gender play important roles in farm work and in activism, some questions focus on your experiences based on race or gender, or in terms of discrimination or differential treatment. The research also seeks to understand alternative visions for how to make food and agriculture more socially just and equitable. The questions focus on your experiences and understandings of activism and non-profit organizations.

Study Procedures  
If you agree to participate, you will be asked to …
• Answer questions in an interview or focus group based on your experiences and thoughts. Your answers will be recorded and written down at a later time.
• Interviews will take approximately 30 to 90 minutes. The focus group will last between 60 and 120 minutes. I will be performing research between February and August 2016. The final research project will be completed in April 2017.
• I will be conducting semi-structured interviews and a focus group, as well as performing participant observation, meaning I will be taking notes at meetings and during daily farm activities.
• Interviews will focus on your experiences. Some questions are sensitive in nature. YOU DON’T HAVE TO ANSWER ANY QUESTIONS THAT YOU ARE
UNCOMFORTABLE WITH. Sensitive questions involve race, gender, economic inequality, and discrimination.

- Audio recording will be used during interviews.

Risks and discomforts
- The primary risk associated with participation in this study is a breach of confidentiality. The interviews and focus groups may elicit sensitive information about interpersonal relationships in the organization or about perceptions of race, gender and economic status, and thus a risk of compromised relationships with institutional and funding partners. To mitigate this risk, confidentiality will be a top priority. Names and locations will not be included in all future reports. Particular care will be taken to make sure that there are no risks of job loss, legal risks, or loss of any other benefits.

Benefits
- The research will focus on empowering community members and building organizational capacity. Therefore, there may be a benefit to Growing Justice, its participants, and the community it serves.
- This research intends to improve the practice of social justice activism. Therefore, there may be a benefit to society.

Incentives for participation
- There are no financial incentives related to your participation in this research.

Audio/Video Recording
Audio recording will be used so that interviews can flow with conversation and the co-P.I. will not need to transcribe answers as they are spoken. Recordings will be stored on a personal password-protected laptop and transcribed later. After transcription and analysis, audio recordings will be erased.

Interviews
Please provide initials below if you agree to have this interview (audio) recorded or not. You may still participate in an interview even if you are not willing to have the interview recorded.

_______I do not want to have this interview recorded.
_______I am willing to have this interview recorded.

Focus Group
Please provide initials below if you agree to be recorded as part of the focus group.

_______I do not want to be recorded, so I will not participate in the focus group.
_______I am willing to be recorded as a participant in the focus group.
Privacy/Confidentiality

- To mitigate risks from a breach of confidentiality, information collected will only identify you by first name and date (of interview, focus group, or observation). If you prefer, a false name will be assigned to your information at this stage. Identifiers based on race, gender, age will only be included if offered during interviews. Data will be stored on a personal password protected laptop. Field notes and audio recording devices will be kept on hand by the researcher at all times. Only the P.I. and co-P.I. will have access to the data unless data is requested by departments at the University of Georgia responsible for regulatory and research oversight.

- All notes, recordings, and transcripts will be treated as sensitive material. All notes will be transcribed within 1-2 weeks of recording, and names will be replaced with false names according to an encrypted code book stored on a password-protected laptop. Original notes will be destroyed at that point. Audio recordings will be erased when transcription and analysis are complete, which may last into Spring 2017 but not later than April 2017. Transcripts will be identified by a false name, according to the encrypted code book, and will be erased once the research project is complete in April 2017.

- Prior to the focus group, researchers will emphasize to all participants that comments made during the focus group session should be kept confidential. However, it is possible that participants may repeats comments outside of the group at some time in the future.

- Researchers will not release identifiable results of the study to anyone other than individuals working on the project without your written consent unless required by law.

Taking part is voluntary

Your involvement is voluntary. You may refuse to participate before the study begins, and discontinue at any time. Refusal to participate or withdrawal from the study at any time will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Your decision to participate or not will have no bearing on your relationship with Growing Justice. You may skip any questions you are uncomfortable with and move on to the next question. If you decide to withdraw from the study, the information that can be identified as yours will be kept as part of the study and may continue to be analyzed, unless you make a written request to remove, return, or destroy the information.

If you have questions

The main researcher conducting this study is Amy Trauger, a professor at the University of Georgia. Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact Amy Trauger at atrauger@uga.edu. If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a research participant in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) Chairperson at 706.542.3199 or irb@uga.edu.

Research Subject’s Consent to Participate in Research:
To voluntarily agree to take part in this study, you must sign on the line below. Your signature below indicates that you have read or had read to you this entire consent form, and have had all of your questions answered.

_________________________  _________________________  ______
Name of Researcher        Signature                   Date

_________________________  _________________________  ______
Name of Participant        Signature                   Date

Please sign both copies, keep one and return one to the researcher.
APPENDIX B

RECRUITING PROTOCOLS

By phone or in person:
For volunteers, community members, affiliates –
“Hi, ______ . My name is Jon Magee and I’m a graduate student from the University of Georgia doing research on community food projects under the direction of Principal Investigator Dr. Amy Trauger. I got your contact information from Growing Justice in Middlefield, and I’m contacting you based on your involvement with the farm there. You must be 18 years of age or older to participate. The purpose of my research is to study how activism around food tries to meet community needs. Would you be interested in being interviewed about your experiences working with Growing Justice? The interview would last approximately 30 to 90 minutes. The only risk associated with this study would be a breach of confidentiality, but we will employ several measures to help ensure that does not happen. You may experience a benefit resulting from this research in that this study is attempting to improve the outcomes of food activism and to make your organization (and those like yours) better. There is no incentive or penalty should you agree or decline.”

For staff and board members –
“Hi, ______ . My name is Jon Magee and I’m a graduate student from the University of Georgia doing research on community food projects under the direction of Principal Investigator Dr. Amy Trauger. The purpose of my research is to study how activism around food tries to meet community needs. I got your contact information from Growing Justice, and I’m contacting you based on your involvement as a staff or board member. You must be 18 years of age or older to participate. Would you be interested in being interviewed about your experiences working with Growing Justice and your opinions about community food activism? The only risk associated with this study would be a breach of confidentiality, but we will employ several measures to help ensure that does not happen. You may experience a benefit resulting from this research in that this study is attempting to improve the outcomes of food activism and to make the farm better. There is no incentive or penalty should you agree or decline.”

For the farm’s clients–
“Hi, ______ . My name is Jon Magee and I’m a graduate student from the University of Georgia doing research on community food projects under the direction of Principal Investigator Dr. Amy Trauger. The purpose of my research is to study how activism around food tries to meet community needs. I got your contact information from Growing Justice in Middlefield, and I’m contacting you based on your involvement with their vegetable share program. Would you be interested in taking part in a focus group with other customers about your experiences working with Growing Justice? It would last 1 to 2 hours. You must be 18 years of age or older to participate. The only risk associated with this study would be a breach of confidentiality, but we will employ several measures to help ensure that does not happen. You may experience a benefit resulting from this research in that this study is attempting to improve the outcomes of food activism and to
make Growing Justice better. There is no incentive or penalty should you agree or decline.”

**By email:**
For volunteers, community members, affiliates –
“Dear ______,
My name is Jon Magee and I’m a graduate student from the University of Georgia doing research on community food projects under the direction of Principal Investigator Dr. Amy Trauger. I got your contact information from Growing Justice in Middlefield, and I’m contacting you based on your involvement with the farm there. You must be 18 years of age or older to participate. The purpose of my research is to study how activism around food tries to meet community needs. Would you be interested in being interviewed about your experiences working with Growing Justice? The interview would last approximately 30 to 90 minutes. The only risk associated with this study would be a breach of confidentiality, but we will employ several measures to help ensure that does not happen. You may experience a benefit resulting from this research in that this study is attempting to improve the outcomes of food activism and to make your organization (and those like yours) better. There is no incentive or penalty should you agree or decline.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at this address, or Amy Trauger at atrauger@uga.edu.

Regards,
Jon Magee”

For staff and board members –
“Dear ______,
My name is Jon Magee and I’m a graduate student from the University of Georgia doing research on community food projects under the direction of Principal Investigator Dr. Amy Trauger. The purpose of my research is to study how activism around food tries to meet community needs. I got your contact information from Growing Justice, and I’m contacting you based on your involvement as a staff or board member. You must be 18 years of age or older to participate. Would you be interested in being interviewed about your experiences working with Growing Justice and your opinions about community food activism? The only risk associated with this study would be a breach of confidentiality, but we will employ several measures to help ensure that does not happen. You may experience a benefit resulting from this research in that this study is attempting to improve the outcomes of food activism and to make the farm better. There is no incentive or penalty should you agree or decline.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at this address, or Amy Trauger at atrauger@uga.edu.

Regards,
Jon Magee”
APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Interview questions for board members, staff, volunteers. Note that interviews were only loosely structured, and questions like these were only a starting point for conversation.

Introductory questions
1. How long have you been involved at this community farm?
2. What is your current role at the organization?
3. How long have you lived in [or near] the town of Middlefield?

Experiences with activism
1. What other experiences have you had with activism, around food and agriculture or otherwise?
2. What brought you to consider working with this community farm?
3. Is there a particular aspect of its mission or of its programming that you find exciting?
4. How would you characterize the mission of the organization?
5. How do you think the mission relates to the farm's activities?
6. Are there particular strengths or gaps in that relationship?

What are the social problems which are prevalent in the local community?
Which of these problems does the farm organization seek to address, and how?
10. What do you believe is the potential for food and farming activism to promote social justice?
11. How well do you believe the organization approaches that potential for change?

Diversity and inclusion
1. How would you characterize the backgrounds of those who founded the organization?
2. Those who participate as staff and volunteers?
3. Those who benefit from farm programming?
4. Those who the organization would like to benefit from its programming?
5. Are there significant differences within these groups?
   5a. Are there significant differences among these groups? If so, how do such differences manifest when these groups meet?
6. How do these differences relate to larger issues in the community the farm serves?
7. How do you understand the principle of ‘diversity’ in relation to farm activities, staffing, leadership, and so on? How do you believe others in the organization understand the principle of diversity?
8. And ‘inclusion’?
9. And ‘empowerment’?
10. What effect have discussions around these terms had at the farm?

Organizational structure
1. Please describe the organizational structure of the farm.
2. What are the divisions of labor at the farm?
3. To your knowledge, how has the farm come to be structured as it is (a non-profit with volunteer board and professional staff, etc.)?
4. How do you feel the present organizational structure (as a non-profit, with a volunteer board and professional staff) affects the farm's potential to promote social justice?
5. How does this structure relate to those of partner organizations (non-profits, government, corporations)?
6. What other models of food activism are you aware of?
7. How, in your perception, would other models of organizing deal with issues of diversity and inclusion?

History of the town farm and public welfare
1. Please describe what you know of the history of the Middlefield town farm (“poor farm”).
2. How does that history inform the current mission and activities of the farm organization?
3. How does the community perceive the current farm relative to the historical farm?
4. How do community farm programming and services relate to entitlement programs?
5. What role does the community farm play in the lives of its beneficiaries?

Do you consider this work charity?
APPENDIX D
INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

Research participants from interviews and focus group. All names falsified.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewee</th>
<th>Title/role in the organization</th>
<th>(Primary affiliation: staff, board, volunteer, or affiliate)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Diane</td>
<td>President of the board</td>
<td>(Board)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fred</td>
<td>Former president of the board</td>
<td>(Board)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samantha</td>
<td>Former board member; administrator in other non-profits</td>
<td>(Board)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert</td>
<td>Board member; director of local non-profit service provider</td>
<td>(Board)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sally</td>
<td>Board member; administrator of another local non-profit</td>
<td>(Board)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corin</td>
<td>Former board member; director of non-profit using community garden space</td>
<td>(Board)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ron</td>
<td>Former executive director</td>
<td>(Staff)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allison</td>
<td>Executive director</td>
<td>(Staff)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kathleen</td>
<td>Office staff, program development</td>
<td>(Staff)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Will</td>
<td>Outreach coordinator</td>
<td>(Staff)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tara</td>
<td>Former farm manager, former intern</td>
<td>(Staff)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kait</td>
<td>Former education coordinator</td>
<td>(Staff)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ted</td>
<td>Former farm manager, former intern</td>
<td>(Staff)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darren</td>
<td>Volunteer; former staff and board member</td>
<td>(Volunteer)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gracie</td>
<td>Former volunteer; anti-racist activist</td>
<td>(Volunteer)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelly</td>
<td>Volunteer at local non-profit using farm’s community garden space</td>
<td>(Affiliate)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacob</td>
<td>Social worker at low-income housing development</td>
<td>(Affiliate)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alan</td>
<td>Official at state office disbursing food assistance</td>
<td>(Affiliate)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus group</th>
<th>Role at the organization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jackie</td>
<td>Assistant farm manager (Staff)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Les, Casey, &amp; Ash</td>
<td>Farm crew (Staff)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## APPENDIX E

### PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION PERIODS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Duration</th>
<th>Participant-observation sites</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12 days, 3-6 hours each</td>
<td>Growing Justice farm during field work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 days, 1-4 hours each</td>
<td>CSA pickups, at the farm and in town</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 hours</td>
<td>Farmers market</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 hour</td>
<td>Small food pantry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 days, 4-5 hours each</td>
<td>Growing Justice office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 hours</td>
<td>Board meeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 hours</td>
<td>Community workshop on the farm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 hour</td>
<td>Regional meeting of local non-profit service providers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 days, 8 hours each</td>
<td>Third-party anti-racism workshop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 days, 1-2 hours each</td>
<td>Free community meals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 hours</td>
<td>Local forum on hunger</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Sites of participant observation, June 2016.*
APPENDIX F

CODES AND THEMES FROM CONTENT ANALYSIS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code/Theme</th>
<th>Total length of all coded excerpts (word count)</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Community</td>
<td>8,501</td>
<td>The nature of community; the ideal community; the actual or ideal relation of an organization to the community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Needs assessment and satisfaction</td>
<td>10,167</td>
<td>How needs are identified or not; particular needs that are identified; how identified needs are or are not met and by whom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desires and motivations</td>
<td>6,966</td>
<td>What prompts actors to take part in the organization; what they want for or from the organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mission and goals</td>
<td>4,522</td>
<td>What the organization should do or achieve; processes of defining those goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social difference</td>
<td>8,506</td>
<td>Understandings or claims regarding race, gender, class, and other markers of difference; processes of learning about and navigating social difference in the community or in the organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-profit organizations</td>
<td>23,580</td>
<td>Structure, possibilities, demands, or limitations of non-profits; ways of working in or managing non-profits; comparisons between non-profits and other forms of collectivity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deliberation and conflict</td>
<td>28,843</td>
<td>Episodes of disagreement, negotiation, or conflict; ways of thinking about or responding to such episodes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Codes and themes used in first round of content analysis.*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code/Theme</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Community Desire/Passion</td>
<td>Statements of what individuals care about or want to achieve through the organization; characterizations of the desires which ‘the community’ has expressed through different venues, including the 2010 public forum.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Success</td>
<td>Descriptions and characterizations of what it would mean for the organization to be successful.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>Narratives about effective or problematic forms of leadership; normative statements about what leadership is or should be.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooperation</td>
<td>Descriptions of cooperation: what it is, what it requires, what benefits it confers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning/Skills/Expertise</td>
<td>Statements either about the need to learn particular skills or knowledge, or about the process of learning from the group experience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change</td>
<td>Accounts of what (social/political/economic) changes the organization has brought about or can bring about; descriptions of what kind of change is needed.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Codes and themes used in second round of content analysis.*
APPENDIX G

ALTERNATIVE RESEARCH PRODUCTS

Because this thesis engages directly with problems of organizational practice, I feel compelled to make the research both accessible and accountable to practitioners. I list below several forms that this effort will likely take.

1) Presentation to Growing Justice. The board of directors and various staff members and volunteers have expressed interest in the findings of this study. As of this writing, the board has extended an official invitation to present my findings and recommendations. My presentation will focus on two issues: first, the problem of charismatic, hierarchical leadership and the interpersonal conflicts it has stoked; and second, the problem of organizational ontology, or what values and logics are mobilized in the ways that we structure collective action. The bibliography of this thesis includes a variety of resources developed by activists working at the intersection of social movements and formal non-profit organizations, and I will offer an annotated bibliography of these references for further study.

2) Public presentations and facilitated dialogues. Community food and farming organizations regularly hold national and regional conferences to discuss policy, practices, and strategy. I will present my findings from this project in order to generate reflection and discussion on the challenge of non-profits making social change. I intend these workshops to serve as follow-up to anti-racist/anti-oppression trainings, which have become popular among non-profits. Typically such trainings serve as introductions to an anti-racist framework, and because of their limited duration (usually 2-3 days) rarely have the luxury of addressing the problems particular to non-profits and institutions. By drawing specifically on organizational resources developed by activists, and by sharing the annotated bibliography mentioned above, I hope to facilitate more long-term learning by practitioners, in an area of research that is poorly represented in professional settings.

3) Summary report for community food non-profits. In order to share the findings of this research project beyond the spaces where I am able to present in person, I will write a brief report to accompany the annotated bibliography. This report will offer a concise analysis of how organizational ways of being reproduce inequality and scuttle efforts for social justice. I will summarize work by activists to reconfigure power relations in and through organizations.

4) Book for publication with a non-academic press. This thesis relies heavily on the writings of activist-scholars, typically published by non-academic presses (Abron 1998; Dixon 2014; Cornell 2011; Freeman 2013; Barrington-Bush 2013; Lakey et al. 1995). This thesis seeks to contribute to the lively dialogue taking place in this literature, speaking to the practical and theoretical problems that most concern activists in movements for social justice. While items 1-3 may productively draw this research out into the public realm, each of those forms is unlikely to offer enough space to engage deeply with the theoretical problems I describe here. A full-length monograph will offer sufficient space for such engagement.