

Beyond the Kale

URBAN AGRICULTURE AND SOCIAL
JUSTICE ACTIVISM IN NEW YORK CITY

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AND NEVIN COHEN**

THE UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA PRESS
Athens

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Athens, Georgia 30602

www.ugapress.org

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Set in 10/12.5 Minion Pro Regular by Kaelin Chappell Broaddus

Printed and bound by Thomson-Shore, Inc.

The paper in this book meets the guidelines for permanence and

durability of the Committee on Production Guidelines for

Book Longevity of the Council on Library Resources.

Most University of Georgia Press titles are
available from popular e-book vendors.

Printed in the United States of America

20 19 18 17 16 P 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Reynolds, Kristin, author. | Cohen, Nevin, author.

Title: Beyond the kale : urban agriculture and social justice activism in New York City /
Kristin Reynolds and Nevin Cohen.

Other titles: Urban agriculture and social justice activism in New York City | Geographies of
justice and social transformation ; 28.

Description: Athens, Georgia : University of Georgia Press, [2016] | Series: Geographies of
justice and social transformation ; 28

Identifiers: LCCN 2015043957 | ISBN 9780820349497 (hardcover : alk. paper) | ISBN
9780820349503 (pbk. : alk. paper) | ISBN 9780820349480 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Urban agriculture—Social aspects—New York (State)—New York.

Classification: LCC S451.N7 R48 2016 | DDC 338.109747/1—dc23

LC record available at <http://lccn.loc.gov/2015043957>

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Beyond the Kale

CHAPTER 1

Seeing Beyond the Kale

In the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood of Brooklyn, Yonnette Fleming of Hattie Carthan Community Garden begins one of her food justice workshops with a tribute to the late Ms. Carthan, a Bed-Stuy neighborhood environmentalist and activist after whom the garden is named. The garden's trees provide a welcome respite from the rising city heat on this late-summer day. As the participants settle in, Fleming calls attention to the many other gardeners and community members who have participated in the garden's evolution since its founding in the late 1970s, recounting its history and its importance in this particular community.

Following personal introductions and a discussion about food accessibility in the neighborhood, "Farmer Yon," as Fleming often refers to herself, helps the participants understand various forms of oppression and the ways these forces shape food and agricultural systems. Discussions cover topics such as how racism, patriarchy, and policies rooted in mainstream economic paradigms lead to limited food access, health disparities, and diminished levels of local control in low-income communities and communities of color—in Bed-Stuy and around the world. Fleming calls on participants to think about how these structures may have affected their own lives and what they might do to confront them. She is accepting of individuals' personal circumstances, yet unrelenting in her drive to help them move beyond the type of thinking that perpetuates power imbalances at the individual and societal levels, and to help them experience how agriculture can be at once about food, environment, and liberation.

In addition to Fleming's food justice training sessions, she and other members of Hattie Carthan Community Garden lead regular events that similarly extend the understanding of gardening beyond an activity focused on food. Summer weekends feature two on-site farmers' markets, one of which is held at the "Herban Farm," a second, smaller site that Fleming and other community members have recently transformed from a vacant lot into a vibrant green space. Seasonal events throughout the year celebrate the heritage of the African

Diaspora and feature dishes that Fleming (who is originally from Guyana but has lived in the neighborhood for many years) and other community members have prepared using eggs and produce from the garden and farm. Fleming also leads regular women-only discussions about health and spiritual wellness, along with women-centric events designed to foster leadership and personal empowerment among participants. Beyond the more obvious themes of these events—food access, urban green space, safe spaces for women—the gatherings also focus on community resilience and, particularly through Fleming’s leadership, ways that racial justice and women’s empowerment can be cultivated through food production, herbalism, community-based markets, education programs for youth of color, and policy advocacy growing out of urban farms. Fleming speaks regularly about how various forms of oppression play out with respect to food and the environment, and she explains, “I’m interested in understanding how women can become true advocates for flora and fauna and justice in the world.”

By calling herself a farmer and helping to maintain Hattie Carthan Community Garden as a public green space, Yonnette Fleming underscores the significance of growing food in the city, particularly in historically low-income neighborhoods like Bed-Stuy, where fresh food can be prohibitively expensive or hard to find. She also reclaims the identity of a farmer, as a person of color and a woman, despite the association of agriculture with exploitation among many people of color and despite the stereotype of US farmers as white and male. By growing food, working to break down oppressive social and political systems, and celebrating connections between people and the land, Fleming exemplifies the potential power of longtime neighborhood residents to create change in their own communities.

Advocates of urban agriculture often see city farming as a way to advance social justice, and while this presumption is fraught with paradoxes, particularly with respect to race, class, gender, sexual preference, and community control, activists like Yonnette Fleming demonstrate how farm and garden programs can create food and environmental systems that are more just at their core. In such systems, fresh, healthy, culturally acceptable food is accessible, and environmental and public health risks and benefits are equitably distributed among all communities. In addition, people of color and working-class people are meaningfully involved in food and environmental decision making—and are recognized for their leadership—and governance structures reflect members’ articulated social justice values (e.g., see Bullard 1993; Cole and Foster 2001; Mohai, Pellow, and Roberts 2009; Pellow 2000; Schlosberg 2004).

Beyond the Kale examines these aspects of urban agriculture in New York City, as well as the work of people of color and women activists to attain specific social justice goals. It is not a book about the overarching benefits of urban agriculture; many others have covered this topic. Rather, it is about how urban

agriculture groups led by people of color and women should, can, and do reflect more socially just systems, and about the processes through which these goals can be achieved.

Urban Agriculture and Social Justice

Urban agriculture, the act of growing crops and raising livestock in cities and their peripheries, is common worldwide but has expanded greatly in the Global North within the past two decades. In the United States, backyard and community gardens have been joined by aquaponic systems (which integrate fish and vegetable production) and rooftop farms, which have redefined growing spaces and helped maximize urban food production, often in unlikely places. As they have for decades, neighborhood residents have organized to clean up vacant lots, but gardeners have also practiced phytoremediation—cultivating plants to remove soil toxicity—and local youth have learned about ecological systems, healthy eating, and leadership skills from working at urban farms. The scope of urban agriculture continues to grow.

Urban agriculture has also become popular among a wider range of city residents, expanding from longtime neighborhood gardeners and people growing food primarily to meet their dietary needs to include so-called locavores intent on eating food grown close to their homes, entrepreneurs capitalizing on consumer interest in supporting smaller-scale farms, and postcollege “hipsters” steeped in do-it-yourself culture. Networks of backyard farms, along with farmers’ markets and low-cost community-supported agriculture (CSA) models selling food grown within the city, have expanded opportunities for residents to benefit from urban agriculture, even if they do not garden or farm themselves; similarly, value-added products from salsas to pickles made with urban-grown produce have spawned professional training programs, small-business incubators, and community-based economic development projects linked to urban gardens and farms. Media coverage of these activities has helped fuel their popularity, though at times such coverage has favored initiatives led by young, middle-class white people over those led by people of color who have been growing food for decades—like many of the gardeners at Hattie Carthan, including Farmer Yon.

As urban agriculture has expanded, so too has recognition that farming and gardening projects produce multiple benefits, and many studies have documented these benefits in cities throughout the United States and the world (e.g., Draper and Freedman 2010; Blair 2009; Golden 2013; Bellows, Brown, and Smit 2003; Brown and Carter 2002; K. H. Brown et al. 2002; Kaufman and Bailkey 2000; Smit, Ratta, and Nasr 1996).

Joining those who support urban agriculture for more ideological reasons, landscape architects, designers, and urban planners have examined physical

aspects of urban agriculture, exploring both the possibilities of creating interconnected, productive spaces within city landscapes (Viljoen, Bohn, and Howe 2005) and a number of architectural, design, and planning innovations to integrate farms and gardens into the cityscape (Gorgolewski, Komisar, and Nasr 2011). In a similar vein, government reports and policy papers on urban agriculture have highlighted its potential to foster self-help (through self-provisioning of healthy food, for example) and to encourage community development—though they have just as often defined it narrowly in terms of neighborhood beautification, greening, and increased property values, sidestepping concerns about gentrification and control of public space. Research and policy papers have added to the growing understanding of urban agriculture as a beneficial part of the city, though not always with full consideration of the broader social and political contexts within which farms and gardens are situated.

Many discussions of the benefits of urban agriculture have focused on the ability of farms and gardens to provide fresh, affordable, and culturally appropriate food in low-income communities lacking conventional food retailers. However, some have also recognized urban agriculture as a way to increase green spaces in neighborhoods with few parks, to foster relationships among neighbors of different ethnicities and ages, to improve neighborhood safety by bringing people and activities to neglected spaces, and to help cultivate leadership and job-related skills among youth and adults (Draper and Freedman 2010; Blair 2009; Golden 2013; Bellows et al. 2000; Brown and Carter 2002; K. H. Brown et al. 2002; Kaufman and Bailkey 2000; Smit, Ratta, and Nasr 1996). Studies have found that farmers' markets and microenterprises associated with farm and garden sites are ways for participants to contribute to community economic development and supplement individual and household incomes (e.g., Feenstra, McGrew, and Campbell 1999). Observers have also highlighted the racial and ethnic diversity of urban farmers and gardeners in the United States, suggesting that urban agriculture is a way to bring people from different cultures together (e.g., Hynes 1996; von Hassell 2002).

These and other positive effects that farms and gardens can have on public health, community development, and the environment underscore the fact that urban agriculture reaches far beyond gardens as places for food production or neighborhood beautification. This conventional understanding has led to a broadening of networks, policy initiatives, and funding to support it: Farm and garden enthusiasts have engaged in informal collaborations to exchange information and share supplies. Municipal officials have crafted supportive policy statements, created governmental advisory bodies, and taken actions such as amending zoning ordinances to recognize farms and gardens as legal uses of urban space. City governments have adopted policies granting permission to keep small-scale livestock and have amended building codes to allow for rooftop greenhouses, and both municipal and state governments have created tax

incentives for commercial urban farming. Private foundations have expanded or created new funding sources for urban agriculture and related activities, and nonprofit organizations and some university-based extension services have stepped up technical assistance and education (see Cohen, Reynolds, and Sanghvi 2012; Surls et al. 2015; Reynolds 2011).

As the benefits of urban agriculture have become more broadly recognized, public consciousness about food access and public health disparities has also deepened, leading to policy initiatives and public discussions about the intersection of socioeconomic status, food, and health. For instance, First Lady Michelle Obama's "Let's Move" campaign was created in 2010 to encourage healthy eating and active lifestyles in response to the finding that nearly 40 percent of the children in African American and Hispanic communities were overweight or obese, a higher percentage than for other racial and ethnic groups (Let's Move 2014). Government agencies and food policy councils throughout the United States have increasingly recognized the connections between access to healthy food and diet-related health issues. At a broader scale, debates about major cuts to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly the Food Stamp Program) in the 2014 Farm Bill elevated public awareness about the links between food access and poverty. This growing awareness of food system inequities has joined decades-old analyses of environmental injustice experienced by low-income communities and communities of color, which gave rise to the environmental justice movement in the late 1980s and early 1990s.¹ Though long recognized by the people and communities who bear the brunt of their negative effects, food and environmental inequities are increasingly part of public and political debates.

Heightened awareness of food system and environmental inequities, along with the growing recognition of urban agriculture's multiple benefits, has led some supporters to see it as a solution to an array of urban problems. When the benefits of urban agriculture are tied to broader issues like urban sustainability, public health, and economic development, for example, increasing the number of farms and gardens can seem like a win-win opportunity for individuals, communities, policy makers, and cities writ large. The dominant narrative, which sees farming and gardening as part of building more socially just and sustainable cities because they provide food and green space, create jobs, and build community, often obscures the underlying social and political structures—such as racism, classism, patriarchy, and heteronormativity—that give rise to the very inequities that supporters hope to address.

Understanding agriculture as a multifunctional and beneficial use of urban space has often glossed over the historical and contemporary processes that have led to food system and environmental inequities. Residential redlining, government disinvestment, and property abandonment, especially beginning in the mid-twentieth century, have concentrated poverty within many neighbor-

hoods of color, discouraged food retailers from locating in low-income communities, and left vacant lots in low-income neighborhoods throughout the United States. Visions of urban agriculture as a way for communities to manage the effects of economic inequities have been fostered by neoliberal political ideology in the US government, which emphasizes community self-help and market-based solutions to societal problems along with a withdrawal of government services and support for basic human needs. Unavoidably situated within this wider context, urban agriculture can be a release valve for pressures on local and national governments to address deeper societal injustices like racialized poverty, educational disparities, and political disenfranchisement that are at the core of many urban problems (e.g., see McClintock 2013; Weissman 2015a, 2015b). These paradoxes give pause to a common assertion that urban farming and gardening build systems that are socially just.

Supporters have often framed urban agriculture in an overly positive light in an effort to bolster its legitimacy in the eyes of potential critics. In doing so, however, they have paid scant attention to the structures that create inequities or to any possibility of deleterious, if unintended, social or political effects. Recently, however, scholars and activists have begun to question the presumption that farms and gardens have only positive or liberatory functions. Pudup (2008), for example, has proposed that community gardens (which she identifies as “organized garden projects”) have been used to cultivate “citizen-subjects” who may act either in step with or in opposition to the neoliberal state. Others have asked whether urban agriculture picks up where the state leaves off in terms of ensuring social welfare, allowing neoliberalism and market-based solutions to flourish (Heynen, Kurtz, and Trauger 2012; Weissman 2015a, 2015b; Tornaghi 2014). Still others have argued that for urban agriculture to lead to structural change, it must simultaneously be “radical” in approach and engage with the mainstream capitalist market system (McClintock 2013). Scholars and activists have also observed what many would consider unjust race and class dynamics in urban agriculture systems (Cadji 2013; Cohen, Reynolds, and Sanghvi 2012; McClintock 2013; Metcalf and Widener 2011; Crouch 2012; Markham 2014; Meehan and Hoover 2012) and have argued that urban agriculture can mask deeper structural inequities (Colasanti, Hamm, and Litjens 2012; Cohen and Reynolds 2014; Yakini 2013; DeLind 2015).

Thus, beneath the surface of public enthusiasm for urban agriculture lie some fundamentally different understandings of the origins of inequity and social injustice, along with some ideas about how these issues should be addressed. While we generally agree with the recent analyses of urban agriculture in the context of neoliberal political and economic systems, we believe that dwelling on the neoliberal *question* is not needed in the interest of supporting the work of grassroots groups to address food, environmental, and economic inequity. Rather, examining the structural roots of inequity and contributing to

an action-oriented dialogue about how urban agriculture can be (and is being) used to create socially just urban systems are the main goals of this book.

Race, Class, and Urban Agriculture

In addition to debates about whether farming and gardening help solve urban social justice problems in a broader sense, the representation of these activities in public forums presents an inaccurate impression of who is involved in urban agriculture today and how the representation of urban agriculture might connect to advancing racial and economic equity—the goals of many social justice advocates. Urban farming and gardening have long been survival strategies for low-income city residents, many of them people of color, including those with roots in the Global South (e.g., see Hayden-Smith 2014; L. Lawson 2005; Smit, Ratta, and Nasr 1996). However, in the United States, books, magazines, and social media often paint a picture of young white people as the most innovative farmers and gardeners in the post–World War II era, despite the many people of color who have been growing food in their neighborhoods and hometowns for decades and even generations.

For example, as described in chapter 2, urban agriculture has evolved over the course of New York City's history, sometimes practiced as a subsistence strategy among residents living in poverty, and at other times used to spur community revitalization and development. Since the 1960s and 1970s, community gardening in particular has been concentrated in low-income communities and communities of color (Eizenberg 2013, 2008), and community members such as Hattie Carthan in Bed-Stuy have often led in developing gardens on these sites (see the NYCCGC website). Yet community gardening in the New York of the 1960s and 1970s has often been depicted as a process of “urban homesteading” in which gardeners, usually young, middle-class whites, were modern-day “pioneers.” At best, this narrative ignores the fact that the neighborhoods in which these “pioneers” and “homesteaders” were creating gardens were well-established communities, often communities of color. Worse, it reproduces colonialist mentalities in which imported white culture should be used to “tame” indigenous peoples.

More recently, mainstream media reports have focused on white-led initiatives as drivers of the contemporary urban agriculture movement. News articles have identified a number of mostly young white farmers in New York City as the “new class of growers” (see Stein 2010), for instance, and have described some of Detroit's white urban farmers as twenty-first-century “pioneers” moving to the economically devastated city to “fight blight” by establishing new urban farms (see “Detroit Foodies” 2013; Midgett 2014). Media pieces on high-tech projects such as rooftop farms and other entrepreneurial urban agriculture initiatives that seek to capitalize on the fashion of growing farm-to-table cuisine have also

tended to focus on young, middle-class white people. These and similar pieces have presented urban agriculture as an innovative way to reclaim vacant land, start new businesses, or challenge the industrial food system, yet with scant attention to the race and class dimensions of the movement or of the problems that farming and gardening purportedly solve. Often absent from this narrative is the fact that people of color in New York, Detroit, and many other cities have long gardened and farmed to address the effects of inequity in their own communities.

Recent attention to entrepreneurial urban agriculture projects led by young, middle-class whites may stem in part from the notion popularized by theorist Richard Florida (2002) that members of the so-called creative class—formally educated, young, affluent, and preponderantly white urbanites—are the economic engines of cities. Municipal governments, planners, and real estate developers adhering to this concept have sought to attract members of this creative class to economically depressed neighborhoods as a way to increase property values and tax revenues and strengthen cities' overall economies. While Florida's thesis has been widely critiqued (e.g., Peck 2005; Markusen 2006), the notion that innovation and creativity drives economic development remains, and the idea that the "creative class" consists primarily of white people acts to obscure existing and equally important innovations forged by people of color (see Yakini 2013).

Thus, while not explicitly stating that urban farming and gardening are white, middle-class activities, the portrayal of young white faces in news articles and online forums has suggested white dominance of, and helped reinforce white privilege in, urban agriculture systems (Reynolds 2014; Meenar and Hoover 2012). Media coverage is, after all, a cultural and political resource that can contribute to the maintenance of power among dominant groups (Entman 2007; Ryan, Carragee, and Meinhofer 2001). Coupled with the overall tendency for white people and white culture to dominate US society, the representation of middle-class, white-led urban agriculture in cities with racially diverse groups of farmers and gardeners has added insult to injury by suggesting that urban agriculture, in and of itself, addresses inequities linked to race and class, while reinforcing these very inequities.

In addition to the dynamic of public representation of urban agriculture and its potential effect on social equity, establishing new farms and gardens in low-income communities can stimulate or exacerbate gentrification (the process by which increasing property values and new investments *directly* displace residents and businesses, or *indirectly* lead to displacement as real estate prices and taxes on rising property values become prohibitively expensive for existing residents). Gentrification, too, presents a paradox with respect to urban agriculture and social justice (e.g., see Cadji 2013; McClintock, 2013; Crouch 2012; Markham 2014). For instance, urban farms and gardens can contribute to "eco-

logical gentrification” (Dooling 2009; Quastel 2009), a process through which environmental improvements such as cleaning up toxic sites or converting abandoned lots to green space leads to increased property values and displacement of longtime, often low-income residents. When relatively higher-income, economically privileged people move into historically low-income neighborhoods to establish gardens on vacant lots—or occupy gardens that have already been established and perhaps abandoned—there can be similar effects, increasing property values near the gardens, making the neighborhood unaffordable for longtime residents (Voicu and Been 2008).

In some New York City neighborhoods, like the Lower East Side and Harlem, the establishment of green spaces managed by local residents, together with public policies to encourage the development of luxury and middle-class housing, has facilitated gentrification, leading to displacement of lower-income residents over a number of decades. There are signs of this process taking hold in other New York City communities, such as Bed-Stuy and East New York (Lawhead 2014). For these reasons, farm and garden projects led by (often white) neighborhood newcomers, though typically well intentioned and at times sanctioned or funded by local governments, are not always welcomed by longtime residents (often people of color) because they may lead to displacement. Such projects may be viewed as examples of “outsiders” taking control of community space (Eizenberg 2012a; DeLind 2015; see also appendix 4 for select New York City population characteristics).

These race and class dynamics of urban agriculture illustrate the point that farming and gardening in the city do not necessarily create more socially just systems and can in fact perpetuate inequities that many supporters hope to address. To be sure, many urban farmers and gardeners hope to reduce inequities—even race- and class-based disparities—by growing and distributing food or creating jobs in low-income neighborhoods. This is valuable work. The problem with the trends described above is not that whites, or people with financial means, or new community residents are growing food in cities—or even that their projects may raise property values in a neighborhood. What *is* problematic is that the uncritical embrace of urban agriculture as a solution to a variety of urban inequities, without attention to the racial and class dynamics that underlie them, allows unjust structures to remain unchecked.

The focus that the media, policy makers, funders, and others place on high-tech and other trendy urban agriculture initiatives influences both the kinds of programs and policies designed to support urban agriculture, and, often, the demographic of farmers and gardeners who receive the resources to implement such programs. At the broadest scale, the tendency to support the tactical practice of farming or gardening as way to advance social justice—regardless of who leads and who benefits, or what impact a given project has on specific social justice goals—can mean that already well resourced groups receive a disproport-

tionate amount of support. This unequal distribution of support can perpetuate status quo social, economic, and political dynamics. Ultimately, attention to certain types of farms and gardens limits the success of the urban agriculture system overall by exacerbating disparities among groups and limiting the capacity of organizations that are less well known or less resourced to develop, expand, and sustain their programs.

Seeing Urban Agriculture through the Lens of Structural Oppression

One way to understand urban agriculture's role in advancing (or hindering) progress toward more socially just systems is to examine it through frameworks that illuminate the intersecting forms of oppression that exist at multiple levels of contemporary society. Critical race theory, along with theories of intersectionality and social oppression, help us do just this.

Critical race theory (CRT) explains that racial inequities grow from patterns of implicit racial bias—which exist within whole institutions and extend throughout society—not simply from individuals' explicitly racist beliefs or isolated instances of racial discrimination. Specifically:

- **Internalized racism** exists within individuals, as private beliefs and biases manifest as feelings of inferiority among people of color or as feelings of entitlement among white people.
- **Interpersonal racism** occurs between people as they act on their internal beliefs and biases, often surfacing as racial discrimination or racial violence.
- **Institutionalized racism** is the effect of specific institutional policies and practices (such as school district policies that result in the concentration of children of color in lower-quality schools) that routinely produce inequitable outcomes for groups of individuals, privileging whites and placing people of color at a disadvantage.
- **Structural racism** is the cumulative system of racial bias that extends across society and perpetuates disadvantage among communities of color. Examples of structural racism include unchallenged media portrayals of people of color as criminals, which pervade the public consciousness, and perpetrating discriminatory treatment grounded in an association of all people of color with criminal behavior (Apollon et al. 2014; see also Bonilla-Silva 1997; Conley 1999; Omi and Winant 1994). Often stemming from collective, subconscious beliefs, and often unintentional, structural racism is at the root of many social and political inequities, from police killings of unarmed black men to food retailers avoiding communities of color under the false assumption that people of color do not value, and will therefore not purchase, fresh and healthy food.

Within structurally racist societies, white privilege is understood as whites' historical and contemporary advantages in access to quality education, jobs, livable wages, home ownership, and multigenerational wealth (Bonilla-Silva 1997; The Aspen Institute 2014; Keleher and Sen 2012; Omi and Winant 1994; McIntosh 1990; Taylor 2009). Critical race theory, as elaborated in the United States, thus helps explain the pervasiveness of racial inequity in US society despite progress beginning with the emancipation of enslaved Africans in 1863, extending through the civil rights era and into the twenty-first century, including the election of an African American president.

Of course, questions of social justice and equity clearly extend beyond race and racism. The concept of intersectionality recognizes that individuals have overlapping identities and loyalties, including race, class, gender, sexual preference, spiritual beliefs, and region of origin (Delgado and Stefancic 2012), and that these “shape structural, political, and representational aspects” of the social world (Crenshaw 1991). Further, structural analyses of injustice and its opposite—social justice—also engage with concepts and conditions of oppression. Political scientist and feminist theorist Iris Marion Young identified oppression as having five forms, *exploitation*, *marginalization*, *powerlessness*, *cultural imperialism*, and *violence*, comprising a “system of constraints,” though not necessarily resulting from intention on the part of an identifiable oppressor (Young 2009). The resulting lack of power—or “absence of choice” (see hooks 2000, 4–7)—experienced by “oppressed” groups extends beyond the US experience and is thus relevant in considering questions of social justice in the global food system, such as how international trade policies affect Mexican farmers' decisions to emigrate to the United States for low-wage jobs in commercial agriculture or the restaurant industry.

Together, CRT and theories on intersectionality and oppression help us understand that issues such as the lack of income that prevents some households from accessing fresh and healthful food are not merely a function of individual failures to secure employment or manage personal finances, but rather a function of social cues, professional connections, and, often, the intersection of multiple levels of oppression that span generations, as well as political and geographic boundaries. These theories also help us see that individuals' abilities to influence policies affecting their communities stem from the degree of access that their social and professional networks have to policy makers and official policy-making processes, and that discrimination based on gender or sexual preference, for example, is perpetuated by dominant cultural norms that privilege men and those who embody a set of narrowly defined roles and identities. In short, social power and relative privilege are derived not from one sphere, but from the intersection of identities, relationships, and lived experiences that exist

in any social or political venue (Crenshaw 1991). Recognizing these dynamics is key both to understanding the sources of inequity among urban agriculture groups and to supporting initiatives to dismantle oppression and advance social justice.

Urban Agriculture as Social Justice Activism

Though farming and gardening are fundamental components of urban agriculture, the physical spaces in which farms and gardens are situated are only *part* of a given city's urban agriculture system. Such systems are composed of interconnected networks of farmers and gardeners, government agencies, supportive organizations, foundations, and investors, as well as the natural environment and the policies and programs that affect the city's food and environmental systems. New York City has one of the most extensive urban agriculture systems in the United States, with approximately nine hundred food-producing gardens and farms ranging from tiny community plots tended by neighbors to commercial rooftop greenhouses producing hydroponic produce for grocers and restaurants (Altman et al. 2014; Cohen, Reynolds, and Sanghvi 2012). As in other cities, this system also includes a wide range of actors beyond gardeners and farmers who support or have some purview over food production. These individuals include nonprofit organization staff who advocate, provide technical assistance, and run farms and gardens; policy makers and government agency officials who provide resources and write laws to make it easier (or more difficult) to farm; staff of private philanthropies who fund agricultural projects; and supporters in many other sectors. (See appendix 2 for a more detailed discussion of New York City's urban agriculture system and appendix 3 for descriptions of groups detailed in this book.)

While some urban farmers, gardeners, and supporters see food production as urban agriculture's primary purpose, for others it is also about creating social or environmental change—a form of activism intended to improve conditions in specific communities and at broader scales. For many gardeners and farmers, urban agriculture is a form of political expression, social activism, or environmental politics. For example, community gardens are for some activists “spaces of contestation” against neoliberal policies and the privatization of urban space (Eizenberg 2012b), and for others they are places where humans redraw connections with the natural environment that have been lost through the processes of capitalist restructuring and urbanization (McClintock 2010). Urban gardens are sites for “everyday resistance” to environmental injustice (Milbourne 2011) and places to enact urban environmentalism (Certomà 2011, 7). For some “urban agriculture activists,” as we refer to them throughout the book, urban farms are places to resist food insecurity brought about by the domination of capitalism, and spaces where black and Latino/a community members can reclaim cultural

roots, practice self-determination with regard to food and agriculture, or respond to the latent crises of discrimination and government abandonment in “poor and disinvested” [*sic*] neighborhoods (White 2011a, 2011b; Bonacich and Alimahomed-Wilson 2011; Bradley and Galt 2013; Kato, Passidomo, and Harvey 2013; Broad 2013; Mares and Peña 2010; Myers and Sbicca 2015). Examples of urban agriculture activism can be found throughout the United States, from the San Francisco Bay Area to Detroit, from New Orleans to New York.

As is common among social and political activists, many urban agriculture activists adopt different political positions on different issues and form strategic alliances as political opportunity arises in order to be as effective as possible in achieving their goals (see Hajer 2003; Taylor 2000; Wekerle 2004). Some draw from social movements and intellectual traditions in a framing process that environmental justice scholar Dorceta Taylor (2000, 511) suggests helps activists express social and political grievances and convey the philosophies of their work to potential supporters. This may include describing their farming or gardening using conceptual frameworks such as environmental justice, food justice,² or food sovereignty³ that are recognized within these respective movements and by an increasing number of policy makers, funders, and other potential supporters. Activists also use both long-standing and newer community-organizing strategies, from word-of-mouth networking to running social media campaigns, to build participation in and strengthen the effectiveness of specific initiatives.

Not all urban farmers and gardeners envision their agrarian efforts as a means to social or political change, of course; however, as discussed in chapter 2, activist goals have been at the heart of an increasing number of initiatives in New York and other US cities since the late 1960s. Yet even among decidedly activist-oriented urban agriculture initiatives, not all are focused on social justice as a main objective. Despite the many farmers and gardeners who run programs such as garden education or low-cost farmers’ markets (which do have important social goals), relatively few activists engage in efforts to dismantle the oppressive systems—including structural racism, xenophobia, classism, sexism, patriarchy, heterosexism, and the five forms of oppression noted above—that continue to shape food and environmental systems. Fewer still may take into account their own positionalities—racial and ethnic identities, immigration status, class position, gender, and sexual preference—and how these intersecting aspects of identity affect the overall success of their programs. Moreover, because “social justice” can take on different meanings, activists can use this concept to describe their work without clearly articulating what it means in practice.

Urban agriculture activism can also take many different forms. Activists may or may not be focused on social justice issues, and they may or may not clearly articulate what they mean by “social justice” work. Additionally, although some urban agriculture activists use strategic framing to communicate about

the significance of their initiatives, others refrain from describing their work as activism *per se*. While individuals like Yonnette Fleming explicitly connect their urban agriculture work to broader social justice concepts like dismantling structural racism and patriarchy, others feel that their efforts to respond through farming and gardening to the day-to-day effects of racialized poverty or government neglect speak for themselves. “Everyday” actions—raising chickens, keeping bees, gardening in abandoned lots—can thus be forms of social and political activism, ecological citizenship, and participation in policy making (Certomà 2011; Travaline and Hunold 2010; Nairn and Vitiello 2009) when they lead to community changes, even if they do not appear at a surface level to be connected to activist goals (e.g., see Bang 2010; Marsh 2011, 76; Kato, Passidomo, and Harvey 2013). The efforts of farmers like Abu Talib (described in chapter 2), whose leadership at Taqwa Community Farm has helped fellow neighborhood residents manage the long-term effects of government disinvestment in the South Bronx, can be considered a form of social justice activism, even when community leaders do not identify their work as such.

Whether urban farmers and gardeners explicitly connect their initiatives to broader social justice frames or work to manage the effects of inequity in their own geographic and cultural communities, the distinction between these and the wider universe of urban agriculture projects lies in their drive to grapple with multiple forms of social and political oppression. Urban agriculture as social justice activism, as we consider it throughout this book, involves dismantling oppression at its core. And while it is important to avoid characterizing individuals’ actions in ways that do not reflect their own beliefs, it is also important to understand the significance of different urban agriculture programs, and distinctions between them, insofar as they address specific social justice concerns. Failure to distinguish between programs that are actively working to address the structural roots of food and environmental inequities and those that are less focused on these deeper aspects of justice can limit the support from nonprofit, philanthropic, or government sectors, ultimately limiting possibilities for urban agriculture to help advance far-reaching sociopolitical change. Understanding how urban agriculture activists put their anti-oppression and social justice theories into practice is therefore key for those hoping to engage in or support this work.

Whether people explicitly align their work with broader ideas about social justice, like Yonnette Fleming, or engage in change making through everyday actions that address the effects of inequity, like Abu Talib, these activists embody two important aspects of urban agriculture that are often left out of the dominant narrative. First, although farms and gardens can provide many tangible benefits to individuals and communities, such as access to healthy food and green space, urban agriculture activists can do much more by working to dismantle multiple forms of oppression that play out in food and environmen-

tal systems. Second, despite a dominant narrative that has focused on projects led by young, middle-class white people, many urban agriculture programs are led by people of color and first-generation immigrants from the Global South, activists who have long-standing roots in the geographic and cultural communities in which they work. These are key, though frequently overlooked, aspects of the urban agriculture story that *Beyond the Kale* aims to tell.

This Book as an Action Research Project

Beyond the Kale adds to a growing body of critical urban agriculture scholarship and activist analysis by examining farm and garden programs focused on advancing social justice in New York City. But in addition to deepening understandings of the intersections between urban agriculture and social justice activism, the book is part of a broader action research project that we hope contributes to creating more socially just food and environmental systems.

Inspired by the work of feminist economic geographers who use the combined pen name J. K. Gibson-Graham, we see the potential for scholarship to help make improvements in everyday reality. Gibson-Graham proposed that “thinking and writing,” which they identified as some of the more tangible products of work performed by scholars, should be viewed as interventions, or processes that shift the understanding of reality and lead to individual and societal change (Gibson-Graham 2008). They also suggested that theory (another potential product of scholarly work) should be used to “help see openings and provide [spaces] of freedom and possibility” in addition to its more conventional role of explaining phenomena (Gibson-Graham 2008). Scholarly work should be used not to “explain why,” they argued, but to “explore how,” with an interest in “learning, rather than judging” (Gibson-Graham 2008). In contrast to the conventional notion of value-neutral expertise, their stance was that academics can approach inquiry with an interest in participating in social change. They argued, in fact, that scholars have the responsibility to disinvest from stand-alone practices of “critique and mastery” and to undertake instead a more complex praxis of “thinking that [energizes] and support[s]” alternative realities (Gibson-Graham 2006, 6).

While Gibson-Graham’s ideas have been influential within critical social sciences, to be satisfied with simply thinking and writing about “alternative realities” would be to fall into the same trap as many alternative food initiatives, such as farmers’ markets or farm-to-school programs, which have been critiqued for developing innovative but somewhat limited strategies for change that allow inequitable power relationships to remain unchecked (e.g., see Allen 2008; Allen and Guthman 2006). Indeed, Gibson-Graham’s work has itself been critiqued for not going far enough in its analysis of power structures, for not paying attention to the influence of global and national systems over the local, and for

not sufficiently recognizing the influence that policy and political processes have over social life (Glassman 2003; Kelly 2005; Laurie 2005; V. Lawson 2005). For scholarly work to contribute to liberation, it must go farther than Gibson-Graham's important conceptualization of scholarship as social action and engage with the multiple and evolving contexts in which oppression is created and reproduced.

With these ideas in mind, we have approached *Beyond the Kale* not as “experts” on the topic of urban agriculture, but as knowledgeable participants in a movement to advance social and environmental justice through urban agriculture work. Our intent in researching and writing this book has been to learn from community-based leaders and to practice shifting the power dynamics between academic researchers and those based outside of academic settings. We have drawn inspiration from a number of scholars whose activist-oriented work has engaged with political aspects of dismantling oppression. Specifically, we have taken to heart lessons learned from author and social activist bell hooks, who identifies “theory as liberatory practice” but emphasizes that “[t]heory is not inherently . . . liberatory, or revolutionary [and] fulfills this function only when we ask that it do so and direct our theorizing to this end” (hooks 1994, 59–75). The suggestions of political scientist and sociologist Francis Fox Piven (2010) have compelled us to do more than simply observe, reflect on, and write about injustice—rather, to engage with community-based activists more as colleagues than as participants in “our” study.

By envisioning ourselves as participants in movements for social justice, we have sought to explore how the process of research and writing about urban agriculture can step beyond explanation and observation into the role of uncovering and co-creating possibilities with activists who are working outside of academic spaces. As noted in chapter 7, our discussions with urban agriculture activists have shaped our perspective on scholar-activism. They have also helped us reflect on how we understand and communicate about scholarship and research. Additionally, we have at times found ourselves in the uncomfortable position of needing to balance the requirements of our academic professions, such as producing particular types of scholarly analysis, with the responsibility to be accountable to our community-based colleagues. The process of engaging in this type of action research has taught us much about the intersections of scholarship and urban agriculture activism and has solidified our commitment to this work.

Overview of the Book

Beyond the Kale examines urban agriculture in critical yet constructive ways, attempting to “energize” efforts to achieve food system, environmental, economic, and social justice writ large. It argues that efforts to address injustice

through urban agriculture must attend to social and political structures, such as structural racism and the roots of political disenfranchisement, in addition to providing food, education, employment opportunities, and environmental amenities. Throughout the book we provide examples of urban agriculture activists who work to address multiple forms of social and political oppression in their communities and beyond.

Uncovering urban agriculture activists' deeper analyses and contributing to an action-oriented dialogue about dismantling oppression through urban agriculture are two main goals of this book. Additionally, in an effort to fill in significant gaps in the dominant urban agriculture narrative, the book seeks to lift up the work of people of color who are using urban agriculture to improve conditions within and beyond their own communities. Following Mares and Peña (2011), who argue for the recognition of food practices of marginalized groups as autonomous from those shaped by dominant discourse and paradigms, *Beyond the Kale* specifically and intentionally highlights community-based initiatives, grounded in deep understanding of oppression, that have often been overshadowed by trendy projects. The urban agriculture activists described in this book are primarily, though not exclusively, people of color who run farm and garden programs in New York City. Many of the activists that we spoke with describe their programs as a part of their work to dismantle forms of oppression. Most, even those who do not describe their urban agriculture work as "activist" initiatives, are responding to the effects of structural forms of oppression such as racialized poverty and government abandonment in the communities in which they are deeply embedded. For the purposes of the analysis presented in this book, we consider these individuals to be urban agriculture activists.

Beyond the Kale is based primarily on in-depth interviews conducted in 2013–2014 with farmers, gardeners, and organizational leaders in New York City whose urban agriculture work focuses on eliminating both the causes and effects of inequity and oppression. We prioritized the work of people of color and individuals working in communities in which they are deeply embedded. In addition to interviews, in 2014 we convened a focus group with interviewees and a public forum on collaborations between community-based activists and academic faculty, students, and staff. Our own participation in New York City food systems activism, advocacy, policy making, and planning processes has also informed the analysis presented throughout this book. (See appendix 1 for a more detailed description of research methods.)

The chapters that follow illustrate the prevalence, importance, strategies, and potential impacts of urban agriculture and agriculture-related projects that see "beyond the kale," focusing on achieving food systems and urban environments that are fundamentally more equitable and just. By highlighting individuals and groups that have been trying to dismantle the structural roots of inequity through their work, we hope to make their strategies and practices more recog-

nizable as possibilities that can be replicated, adapted, and potentially scaled up by other farmers and gardeners, policy makers, and diverse supporters. We also explore how urban agriculture activists frame and articulate their work. In doing so, we attempt to explain how these practices relate to broadly recognized movements, and to highlight how some urban agriculture groups are already enacting supporters' ideals. The book also identifies challenges activists encounter that are related to power dynamics, including race-, class-, and gender-based disparities within the urban agriculture system, as well as policies and practices of government agencies, philanthropic organizations, and nonprofit organizations that favor some groups and projects over others—particularly over those that more directly challenge the status quo.

We view our analysis not as truth seeking but as productive inquiry. Using precedents set by the activists and organizations highlighted in this book, along with their visions for future work, we offer ideas that may be used by other farmers and gardeners, funders, organizations, researchers, and policy makers to strengthen urban agriculture's potential to contribute to social justice in food and environmental systems. Though focused on contemporary programs, the book also illustrates how urban agriculture is part of a longer history of community-based social justice activism in order to present a more comprehensive narrative than that put forth by mainstream media coverage and much of the urban agriculture literature to date. While the book focuses on New York City, the lessons drawn from the cases presented here are applicable to urban agriculture and social justice initiatives in many other cities, and in the final chapter, we profile three activist groups in cities beyond New York.

This chapter has provided an overview of urban agriculture, social justice, and activism. Chapter 2 discusses New York City's urban agriculture system, illustrating the history and evolution of food production in the city. Opening with a story from Taqwa Community Farm in the South Bronx, the chapter focuses on several galvanizing historical moments over the last forty years that have led to the diverse and networked farming and gardening system that exists today.

Chapter 3 describes the efforts of farms and gardens to address forms of oppression through the ways in which they grow and distribute food, steward green spaces, educate people from the community, and foster economic development. The chapter begins with a vignette describing Brooklyn Rescue Mission, a social service organization run by clergy and community members in Central Brooklyn that uses its farm-based activities to foster community self-determination.

In chapter 4, we discuss attempts to challenge oppressive structures by enacting social justice theories through distinct organizational structures, representative leadership, and popular education. The chapter opens with La Finca del Sur, a farm in the South Bronx led by women of color and their allies, which has

a nonhierarchical structure that leaders view as in line with their social justice theories.

Chapter 5 examines urban agriculture groups' efforts to influence policy priorities and redesign governance structures through formal policy making, strategic collaborations, grassroots advocacy, and "everyday" actions. The networking of Friends of Brook Park and the New York City Community Garden Coalition are highlighted to show how urban agriculture activists ally with other social justice-oriented groups. We also describe other efforts to advance policies that support urban agriculture.

In chapter 6, we turn to the uneven power dynamics that urban agriculture groups have experienced in their work to advance social justice. Rather than reiterate well-documented challenges of insufficient funding, materials, land tenure, and time, this chapter focuses on power imbalances within the city's urban agriculture system as an underlying challenge not often discussed in the literature or the movement. We connect concepts in this chapter to those elaborated by urban agriculture activists including Karen Washington, longtime urban farmer in the Bronx.

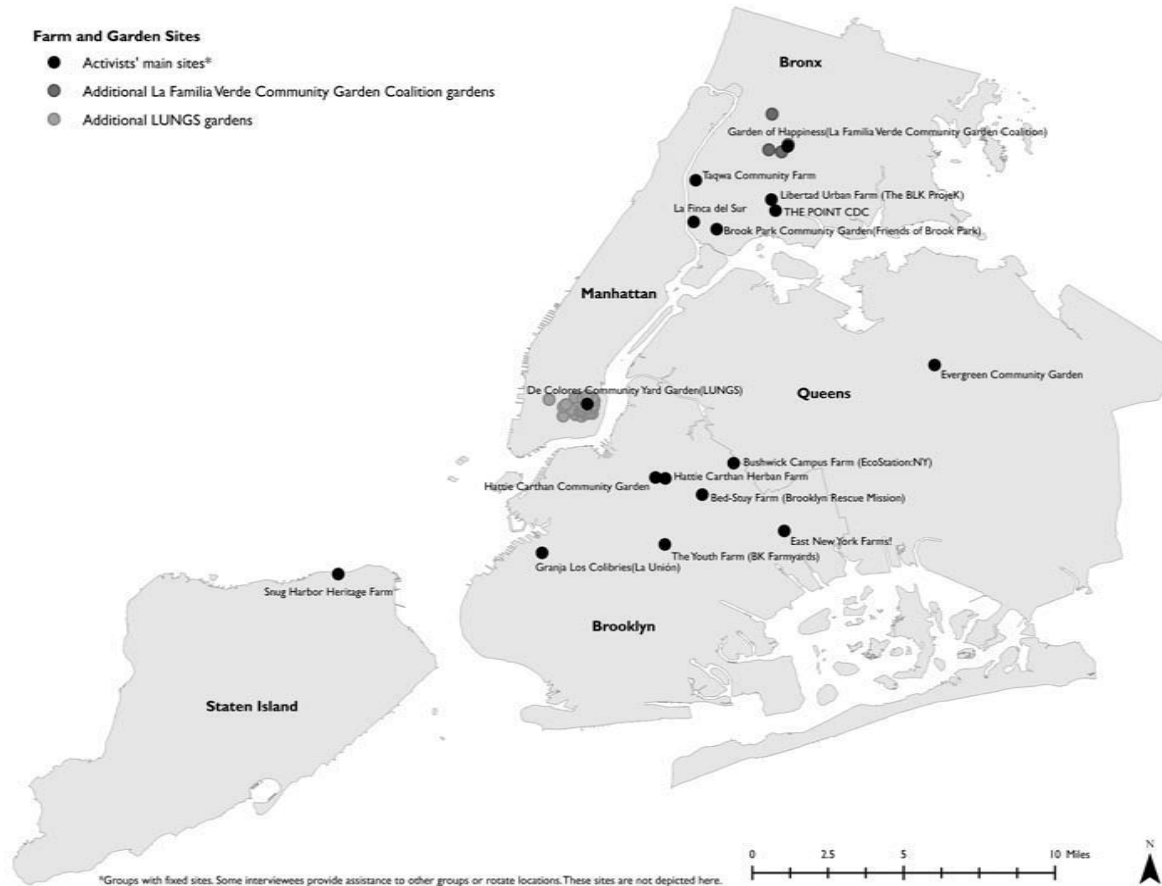
Chapter 7 delves more deeply into the intersections of scholarship and activism and discusses research processes and frameworks that can advance the work of social justice-oriented urban agriculture groups. Drawing from farmer and gardener insights and our own analysis, it addresses the role of researchers in this kind of work, as well as collaboration strategies for researchers and practitioners. Opening with a vignette about the public forum we convened to discuss these issues, the chapter also takes the concept of a "scholar" to task.

The final chapter summarizes our findings and connects the themes in preceding chapters to urban agriculture activism elsewhere in the United States, providing examples of initiatives in Detroit, Michigan; Goldsboro, North Carolina; Santa Fe, New Mexico; and El Paso, Texas. It illustrates that urban agriculture as social justice activism, led by people of color and women, extends far beyond New York City.

Our hope is that *Beyond the Kale* and its approach to research and scholarship contributes to both scholarly dialogue and broader efforts to realize social justice in food and environmental systems. At the same time, we have remained conscious of our own social locations and professional status as white academic researchers as we have sought to highlight the experiences and leadership of people of color and working-class people whose efforts have too often been obscured in the dominant urban agriculture narrative. Although the analysis presented in this volume is our own, we rely heavily on the words of these community-based activists to convey meanings throughout the book.

Farm and Garden Sites

- Activists' main sites*
- Additional La Familia Verde Community Garden Coalition gardens
- Additional LUNGS gardens



*Groups with fixed sites. Some interviewees provide assistance to other groups or rotate locations. These sites are not depicted here.

Locations of farms and gardens included in study. Map prepared by Peleg Kremer.