

Garrett M. Broad, **More Than Just Food: Food Justice and Community Change**, Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2016, 296 pp., \$65.00 (hardcover), \$29.95 (paperback).

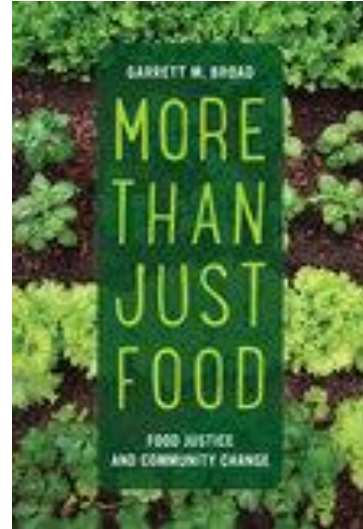
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From pulling weeds in a community garden, to challenging the fundamentals of the “non-profit industrial complex,” author Garrett M. Broad dishes himself a full plate in his new book exploring the food justice movement. Overall, ***More Than Just Food: Food Justice and Community Change*** lives up to its title by connecting the quest for food access with larger issues of racial justice and social change. Focusing on the work of food justice groups in South Los Angeles, the book offers valuable insights for communication scholars, media practitioners, and anyone connected to the food justice movement—from activists to funders.

More Than Just Food is rooted in Broad’s engaged ethnographic research working as a volunteer with the food justice organization, Community Services Unlimited (CSU). Broad examines how the organization, which grew out of the Southern California Black Panther Party, operates within a networked communication ecology. At the heart of the exploration are questions of how the organization seeks balance—between social change ideals and the compromises necessary to maintain fiscal solvency; between a focus on community needs and broader national and international movements; and between communicating with local residents and larger publics. While Broad roots these questions in a very particular case, the discussion has relevance to many groups seeking social change at the local level while swimming in the seas of nonprofit or development industry power structures.

The book’s first chapter makes the case for looking at community-level activism as a key site in the “age of neoliberalism” (p. 21). Broad outlines criteria for successful food justice organizing—including the importance of local storytelling about food and justice, a theory of change that accounts for a broader social justice context, networked partnerships, and an orientation towards “cultural and political transformation” (p. 26). He also lays out his theoretical framework, adapting a communication ecology perspective (Ball-Rokeach et al, 2012; Wilkins et al, 2007) that looks at the network of communication resources organizations put together to pursue their goals.

More Than Just Food also offers an overview of the larger context of the fraught contemporary food system and alternative food movements in chapter 2. This includes critiques of U.S. food movement projects that favor apolitical individualized consumer choices over community-centered approaches that recognize the structural reasons behind “food deserts” (or his preferred term, “food swamps”). Broad, who reflexively acknowledges his own positionality as a white man, also points to a “normative whiteness” that haunts many initiatives: “Projects are too often initiated and controlled by well-meaning but uninformed



privileged whites, and their programs consistently ignore racial and cultural difference with respect to inequities in the food system” (p. 52). The author puts CSU in the context of people-of-color-led food justice groups that have incorporated the critical traditions of the environmental justice movement and attempt to navigate neoliberal constraints while serving their communities.

The next two chapters draw from Broad’s personal involvement as an activist-scholar. He explores the struggles and successes of CSU in its attempt to create a healthier food system in South Los Angeles, and to use food as a gateway to discussing larger issues of racial justice and social change with community participants, including youth. Broad also participates in a national youth food justice summit, *Rooted in Community*, allowing him to reflect on how groups like CSU work to connect their efforts at the local level with larger movements for change. CSU’s rich history and Black Panther Party (BPP) origins is the subject of chapter five. Broad shows that some of the tensions CSU faces—juggling social change principles with the need to secure funding from establishment sources like the government and foundations—have echoes of earlier conflict within the BPP between transformative goals and the need for “survival pending revolution” (p. 136). Finally, chapter 6 contrasts CSU with newer food justice projects in South L.A. that have been heavy on media and financial resources but lighter on genuine community engagement and social change orientation.

More Than Just Food offers critical perspectives on food justice projects—from what Broad characterizes as more obviously flawed white-savior-outsider-led endeavors to the more sympathetically portrayed but still imperfect CSU. At the same time, the book goes beyond critique by offering recommendations for a range of actors with the potential to move the needle on food justice. For those interested in media and communication for social change, some of the most interesting insights come from Broad’s reflections on the central importance of storytelling. For grassroots groups like CSU, communication resources are finite. Broad observes that the organization generally opts to focus on outreach to local residents, often through low-tech means such as flyers distributed door-to-door. For CSU, it is more important to encourage community members to participate in an event surrounding a new community garden or marketplace, than getting a mainstream media outlet to cover said event. However, Broad suggests the disconnect (and distrust) between community organizations and media can result in a missed opportunity for grassroots groups to connect their story to larger issues. In the case of South Los Angeles, this means more media savvy and brandable operations (he gives the example of the Teaching Gardens Program) have been able to dominate narratives circulating about food justice—even if, as Broad argues, these narratives are simplistic and potentially damaging for the long-term pursuit of social change.

Interestingly, Broad draws a parallel between critiques of the broken windows theory in criminology (which suggests addressing small signs of disorder like vandalism or loitering can prevent more serious crime and instability) and what he calls a “magic carrot” approach to food justice. He criticizes well-meaning projects that claim to be solving problems with food alone. Showing children how to plant seeds in a school garden, or making fresh produce available in a corner store are good things, but will be of little use if a family lacks access to a kitchen to prepare meals. For this reason, Broad credits CSU’s attempt to use conversations about food to engage community members in larger discussions about

economic and racial justice—though critical scholars may find Broad’s conclusions that it is possible to challenge the neoliberal system from within overly optimistic.

Some readers will also undoubtedly be concerned with the very subjective positioning from which Broad attempts to evaluate food justice projects. As a CSU volunteer, Broad does not pretend to be an objective observer. His critiques of other organizations are no doubt informed by this perspective. One of the groups he is most critical of has had negative encounters with CSU. However, by repeatedly disclosing his positioning, and combining ethnographic observations with interviews of a range of actors, Broad is able to make a case for the value of evaluating organizations as an engaged researcher—both for the organization and for analytical understanding. Being embedded within the organization allows Broad access he would not have as an outsider, and while his proximity no doubt shades his findings, his openness about his role allows readers to interpret his conclusions with this in mind.

The case of CSU in *More Than Just Food* offers a nuanced portrait of how one organization has grappled, with varying degrees of success, to forge a pathway between revolutionary ideals and neoliberal funding and media realities—accepting a degree of compromise without becoming co-opted. Through this case, Broad offers valuable takeaways for this and other groups seeking food justice aims. While he also makes recommendations for funders, policy makers, and media producers—including calling for “a media system that would actively promote the public interest” (p. 207), these would hold more weight if they were backed by a similarly extensive examination from within those perspectives. For example, Broad seems somewhat dismissive of journalistic norms which he suggests favor “simplified and overly stylized narratives” (p. 207). Conversations with journalists could shed light on how they view their role and communication disconnects they’ve had with community organizations that they feel see them as mere mouthpieces for public relations narratives. Understanding these gaps could help facilitate more productive communication if not collaboration. While ethnographic study of media practitioners and foundations was beyond the realm of this book, one could imagine the value of exploring how these actors view storytelling and “magic carrot” versus systemic approaches to social change. In the meantime, *More Than Just Food* raises a considerable number of substantive issues for anyone interested in food justice, community organizing, and nonprofit systems to chew over.

References

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- Wilkin, H., Ball-Rokeach, S., Matsaganis, M., & Cheong, P. (2007). Comparing the communication ecologies of geo-ethnic communities: How people stay on top of their community. *Journal of Electronic Communication*, 17(2), 1-2.