From left: Jamila Norman of Patchwork City Farms, Karen Washington of Black Urban Growers and Dara Cooper of the National Black Food and Justice Alliance, photographed at Norman's farm in Atlanta on Jan. 18, 2021.Credit...Photograph by Nydia Blas. Set design by Beth Pakradooni. Set designer's assistant: Harry Smith.

The New York Times Style Magazine

The Activists Working to Remake the Food System

They're committed not just to securing better meals for everyone, but to dismantling the very structures that have long exploited both workers and consumers.

By Ligaya Mishan

Feb. 19, 2021

AN ALTAR IS a sacred space, but you can make one anywhere, out of anything; out of what you're given. On Dec. 5, a small group gathered in downtown Springdale, Ark., to line the cement steps of a public square with Our Lady of Guadalupe candles, chrysanthemums and white cards bearing the handwritten names of local poultry workers who had died of Covid-19. Under each name was the legend "¡Presente!" ("Here!") at once invocation and exhortation, used in Latin America to proclaim the continuing presence of the dead among us, particularly victims of oppression. White helmets were set beside the cards, and blue vinyl aprons hung from the railings: part of the uniform the workers once wore as they stood shoulder to shoulder, breaking down up to 175 birds a minute even as the pandemic raged, in a city dominated by chicken and turkey plants and decreed by the state to be the Poultry Capital of the World.

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For months, the worker-based organization Venceremos (We Will Win), which arranged the vigil, had fought for protective equipment and staggered shifts at the plants to decrease the risk of exposure to the virus. (By the end of May alone, more than 16,000 poultry- and meat-processing workers across the country had been infected, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.) "You were in the hurricane, just surviving," says Magaly Licolli, 38, Venceremos's Mexican-born executive director. "And suddenly you start counting the deaths." The people whose names were inscribed on the cards had died because they were "essential workers," as the government calls them now: essential, which implies value, but in this case there was neither esteem nor reward, only coercion.

Yet for a number of Americans, the phrase "essential workers," with its heroic overtones, has revealed for the first time something of the long-ignored lives of the farmers, meat processors and grocery store employees without whom there would be no food on our tables. "Covid has illuminated for a broader public that we *have* a food system," says Navina Khanna, 40, the executive director of HEAL (Health, Environment, Agriculture and Labor) Food Alliance, who lives in Oakland, Calif. This is in part because business leaders stoked fears of empty supermarket shelves, warning in the early days of the crisis that lockdowns might jeopardize the food supply. (In the blunt equation of capitalist production, the workers are worth less than the chickens they are processing.) Tyson Foods, headquartered in Springdale and the nation's largest meat processor — in 2020, it reaped $43.2 billion in sales, $800 million more than the previous, non-pandemic year — took out a full-page ad in major newspapers in April. "We have a responsibility to feed our country," John Tyson, the chairman of the board, wrote. "It is as essential as health care."

Taken alone, it was a radical statement from a corporate titan. For years, social reformers have been pointing to the dangers of a food system focused narrowly on profit. To treat food as a commodity rather than a necessity is to accept that there will always be people who can't afford it and must go hungry. Feeding America, a Chicago-based nonprofit network of food banks, estimates that in the past year roughly 50 million people, one in every six Americans, lacked reliable access to food — witness the 60 percent rise in demand at food banks across the country, with lines sometimes stretching for miles, and the dramatic increase in shoplifting of staples like bread — but even before the pandemic, that number was already 35 million, yet few companies were insisting on the importance of feeding the country. Nor were people turning to food banks in 2020 because of shortages: After the president issued an executive order in April to keep meat-processing plants open, ostensibly to "ensure a continued supply of protein for Americans," levels of production allowed top companies to export hundreds of thousands of tons (and billions of dollars) of meat abroad.

From left: Carina Kaufman-Gutierrez and Mohamed Attia of the Street Vendor Project at New York City's Urban Justice Center, photographed at Rolando and Ana Perez's produce stand in Brooklyn on Jan. 15, 2021. Photograph by Nydia Blas. Set design by Beth Pakradooni. Set designer's assistant: Harry Smith.

It's no coincidence that as Americans have grown ever more estranged from the sources of their food and the largely unseen labor required to produce it, food itself has become a national obsession, from televised cooking shows and the deification of chefs to Instagram #foodporn. This could easily be dismissed as late-empire hedonism, thrown into sharp relief by pandemic lockdowns that divide those who must stay out in the world, picking tomatoes and restocking grocery shelves, and those with the luxury of sheltering at home to await their contactless deliveries. But the fetishizing of food suggests anxiety, too, and a yearning, however inchoate, to reconnect with our origins. For those seeking change in the world of food, like Licolli and Khanna, that represents an opportunity: to reach out to a public newly (if belatedly) awakened to the urgencies of our time — the chasm between rich and poor, racial inequity and environmental degradation — all of which were with us before the pandemic and will, without systemic change, outlast it.

THE DYSFUNCTIONS OF the modern food system go back to the first sugar plantations, on the Portuguese-controlled island of Madeira in the 15th century, and to the first global corporations, born of the 17th-century spice trade. Europeans built riches by extracting cheap and often involuntary labor from other lands: a paradigm too profitable for many to resist, despite the human cost. By the late 18th century, British abolitionists were decrying the suffering behind each cup of tea, with its spoonful of sugar grown and processed by African slave labor in what was then the West Indies. "If we purchase the commodity, we participate in the crime," the bookseller William Fox wrote in a 1791 pamphlet, "An Address to the People of Great Britain, on the Propriety of Abstaining From West India Sugar and Rum," that became the most widely distributed of its time, with more than 100,000 copies in circulation on both sides of the Atlantic. "In every pound of sugar we may be considered as consuming two ounces of human flesh."

The Quaker social reformer Sophia Sturge knocked on thousands of doors in Birmingham, England, to persuade people to boycott West Indies sugar, and some merchants advertised, as a selling point, that they did not stock goods derived from chattel slavery. This eventually gave rise to the Free Produce movement and spread to America, where many Quakers had already renounced cane sugar in favor of maple syrup and refused to wear cotton from Southern plantations. (Free Produce has a latter-day analogue in Fair Trade certification, first introduced in the 1980s, which places a moral premium on paying enough for goods to guarantee small farmers and rural producers a profit — although how this is monitored and who truly benefits remain subjects of controversy.)

Migrants and asylum seekers at a camp in Matamoros, Mexico, line up for meals from a nonprofit run by the chef José Andrés in March 2020. Christopher Lee for The New York Times

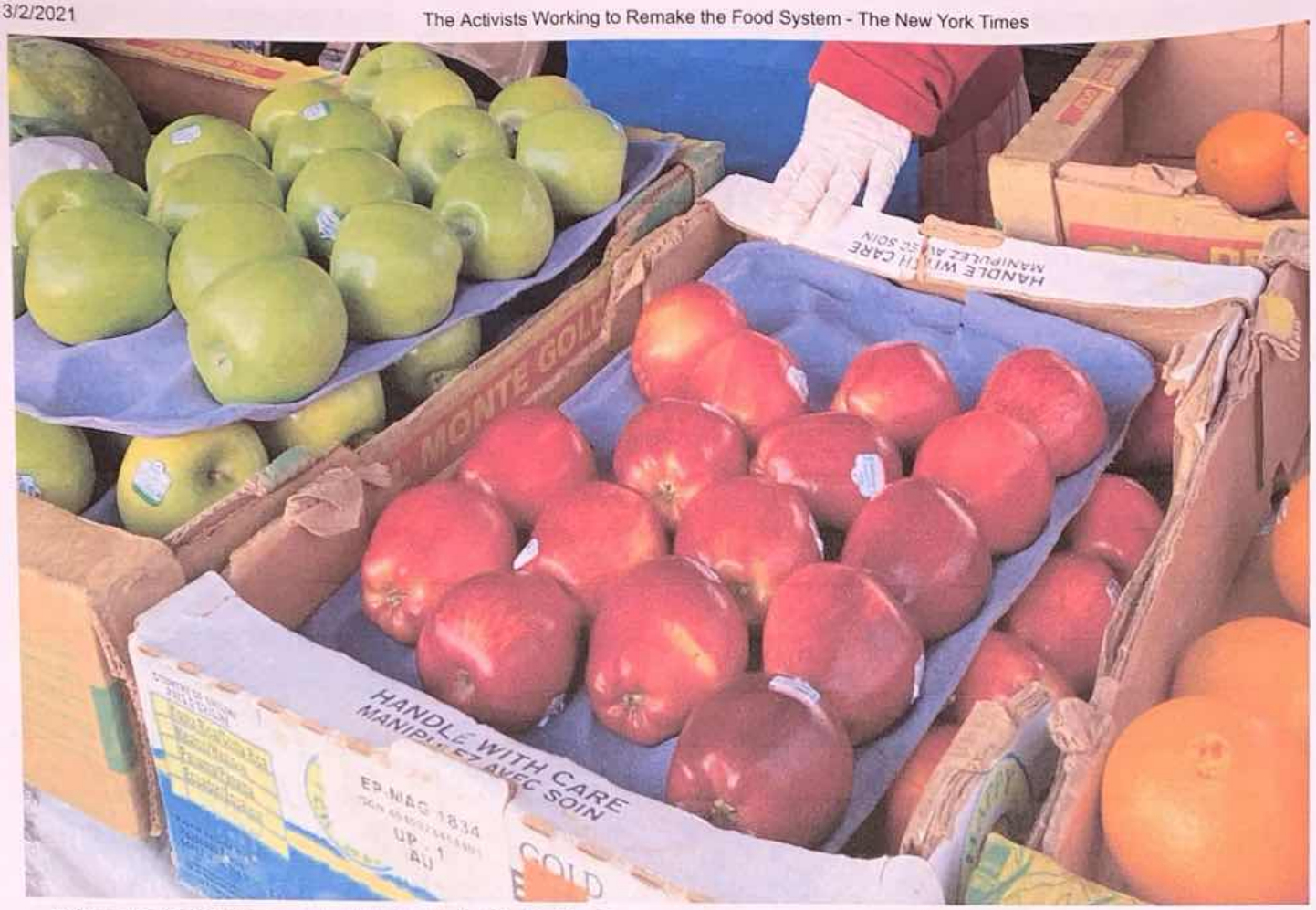
Today, activism exists at every point in the food supply chain: how it's produced (unsustainable farming practices; unsafe working conditions and exploitation of undocumented immigrants and prison labor; abuse of animals), who gets to produce it and how it's sold (racial disparities in lending and investment; the corporate advantage of scale; misrepresentation and erasure of minority cultures) and who gets to eat it (poverty and hunger; neighborhoods lacking access to fresh, healthy food; moralizing over how food stamps are used). Some of these issues have been championed by high-end chefs, who in our obsessive food culture command a certain reverence, although their public exhortations tend to be more celebratory than confrontational — embracing seasonality and farm-to-table dining, for example — and stop short of policy recommendations. That might be changing with the pandemic: The Spanish-born José Andrés, who runs restaurants in Las Vegas, Miami and Washington, D.C., and who has provided disaster food relief for millions in the wake of hurricanes and disease, recently criticized the government for failing to end hunger due to a lack of "political will."

But much of the deep work is happening out of sight, in grass-roots efforts like the community gardens that Karen Washington, 66, has built in the Bronx, which started in 1988 with a single garbage-strewn lot across the street from her home. She didn't have a grand plan — it was enough at first just to have transformed an eyesore into an oasis she called the Garden of Happiness, and to be able to share fresh vegetables with her neighbors — but she soon found herself joining forces with other urban gardeners to fight the city's attempt to evict them and auction off these once-neglected and now thriving sites for development. (In the end, conservation groups stepped in to buy some of the lots.) She has since cultivated many gardens and drafted policy proposals for government officials, but the heart of her work is still local, done in and for her community. During the pandemic, she went around the neighborhood checking that the elderly had enough to eat, and much of her harvest has gone to food pantries and soup kitchens. "If we're cooking, we cook a little extra," she says.

At the same time, she knows this is only a stopgap solution. "For so long we've been beholden to charity," she says. "Food is given out; we stand on line. No one asks, '*Why* are we on the line?'"

THE FIELD OF food activism is so vast, it's inevitably fragmentary, with many constituencies, from migrant blueberry pickers in Washington state, choking on the smoke of wildfires in summer, to Black urban farmers in Atlanta, contending with a racial legacy of land dispossession, to taco truck and halal cart operators on the streets of New York City who lost up to 80 percent of their sales at the start of the pandemic and were excluded from government relief because they deal mostly in cash, with limited documentation, at the fringes of the official economy. Many found themselves down to their last few dollars after working for years, sometimes 14 hours a day, and had to turn to food pantries to survive. "It's shameful," says Carina Kaufman-Gutierrez, 30, the deputy director of the Street Vendor Project at the Urban Justice Center in Manhattan, which has a staff of six to advocate on behalf of around 20,000 street vendors, "that the people waiting in line for food are the people who've spent their lives serving food to others."

Yet, since the 1980s, the primary message of the food movement to reach the broader public has been not a call to arms but rather a vaguely feel-good mantra: to eat more healthily by shopping at the farmers' market and buying organic, unprocessed, non-mass-market foods. Certainly these strategies help the environment and support small businesses, but this sometimes seems like just a side benefit, with the emphasis on personal wellness, as if the only way to persuade people to "vote with their fork" on behalf of laborers or the planet were by appealing to their self-interest. It points to a tension in food activism between trying to influence individual acts of consumption, in hopes of bringing about incremental change, and taking direct political action. "The belief that we will change things through individual market choices is a way of not questioning the market itself," says Eric Holt-Giménez, 67, an agroecologist and the former executive director of the Oakland-based think tank Food First. "We tend to concentrate on the romantic — the small farmer growing organic vegetables — when all this time we could've been fighting for parity and antitrust laws."



Rolando and Ana Perez have operated their stand in East New York for 20 years. Carina Kaufman-Gutierrez

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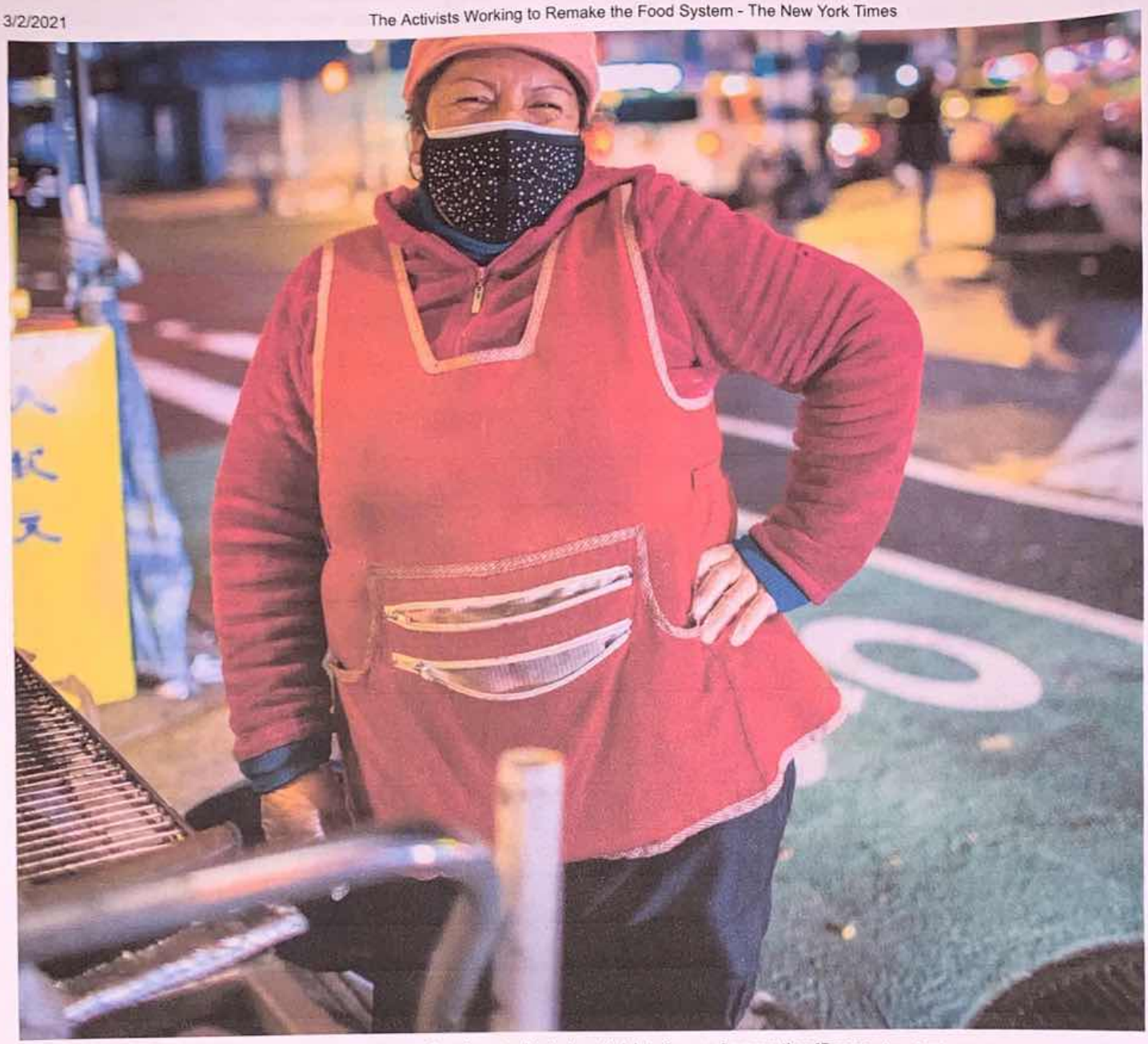

Gladys T., who has sold Ecuadorian chuzos and ice cream from her stand in Jackson Heights, Queens, for more than 15 years. Corey Torpie

Perhaps the most difficult task in activism is opening someone's mind. The Nigerian-born writer and chef Tunde Wey, who is 37 and lives in New Orleans, has made a mission of it. Untethered to a restaurant, he carves spaces for himself in the world: a food stall where white customers are charged $30 for a plate of food that costs Black customers only $12, to reflect the disparity in median income between white and Black households in New Orleans, or a church hall where the gentrification-themed dinner menu lists a half chicken for $50,000 — again for white diners only, with Black diners eating for free. These are not quite provocations nor surreal jests, but more like gambits in a cerebral game with real-world consequences. His projects "don't match the scale of the problem, because they can't," Wey says. He finds he distrusts people who too readily engage in his work because he knows "how difficult it is to change." The real work "is on the inside," he says. "For me, too."

"It requires more of you to care for others," says Rosalinda Guillén, 69, the executive director of Community to Community Development in Washington state. The daughter of a migrant farmworker, she picked strawberries in the fields as a child in the 1960s. Three decades later, she led a campaign to unionize the grape workers of Chateau Ste. Michelle, Washington's largest winery, setting up picket lines, protesting at shareholder meetings — activists bought shares in the company so they could attend and disrupt — and, perhaps most important, getting the world to listen. In solidarity, the country-music icon Willie Nelson dropped out of a concert hosted at the winery; longshoremen refused to unload crates of the company's wines in Europe and flight attendants refused to offer them to passengers. It took years of Guillén treading the pavement, being menaced by security guards and finding the tires of her car punctured and sugar poured down the gas tank, but the workers won their collective-bargaining contract, the first of its kind for farm workers in the state.

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The 48-year-old food-system scholar Raj Patel, who teaches at the University of Texas at Austin, notes that, internationally, activists in the past few decades have subscribed to a more sweeping notion of food sovereignty, a term introduced by La Via Campesina, a network of farmers and agricultural workers founded at a conference in Belgium in 1993. This goes beyond simply having reliable access to healthy food to recognizing the importance of cultural context, ecological stewardship and a fundamental right to have a say in your destiny. "Are you eating an organic banana because you think your body is a temple, or because the people affected most by pesticides are farm workers?" Patel asks. (Indeed, there's a troubling historical connection between organic food and white ethnonationalism, drawing on the language of purity and a gauzy, idealized notion of a nativist relationship to the land, which must be kept unsullied by industrial pesticides or "foreign substances," in the words of the Nazi scientist Werner Kollath, who during the Second World War promoted the slogan "Lasst unsere Nahrung so natürlich wie möglich" — "Leave our food as natural as possible" — alongside forced sterilization and eugenics. At the beginning of January, one of the far-right insurgents arrested after the invasion of the United States Capitol was reported to have demanded organic food in jail, in order to keep from getting sick.)

A picket outside the Chateau Ste. Michelle Winery in Woodinvile, WA, 1993. Margie White/Courtesy of Betsy Pernotto

During the so-called Gilded Age that followed the American Civil War, the rapid pace of industrialization and the consolidation of wealth in the hands of a few gave rise to a new class of workers, many of them recent immigrants who were scorned for their ethnic backgrounds and excluded from the better-paid trades, so they had little choice but to accept the lowest forms of labor, however filthy and potentially lethal the settings. When the writer Upton Sinclair documented conditions at slaughterhouses and meatpacking plants in his landmark novel "The Jungle" (1906), it was a sensation — but, he soon realized, for the wrong reasons: Readers were more horrified by the thought of eating tainted meat than the grim fates of the workers. "I aimed for the public's heart, and by accident I hit it in the stomach," he later wrote.

Still, the increasing precariousness of today's labor force across industries, both blue and white collar, and the millions of people now out of work because of the novel coronavirus may reframe the conversation. "The idea that people can just buy their way out of what we have now is a deeply ingrained individualist, capitalist mentality," Khanna says, "versus us understanding that we're all being screwed over."

CRITICS ON BOTH the right and the left have accused the food movement of elitism. It takes a certain amount of privilege and financial resources to be able to eat in a way that's commonly defined as healthy, and so labels like "organic" risk becoming simply a mark of status and virtue, while food-stamp recipients are regularly scolded for using government assistance to purchase the "wrong" kinds of food. S. Margot Finn, a Michigan-based food scholar, argued in a 2019 article that mostly white, wealthy activists have skewed the food agenda by

prioritizing community gardens, urban farming, subscription vegetable boxes and access to fresh ingredients over, say, universal health care or a higher minimum wage, revealing "an impoverished moral imagination about what is worth wanting when it comes to food." (It is possible, of course, to fight for all these things at once.)

Street Vendor Project members demonstrate during a rally in Brooklyn in Nov. 2020. Gabby Jones/Bloomberg/Getty Images

But while healthy food might be merely a matter of lifestyle for the privileged, minority communities in America have for decades been systemically denied even the option to eat it, and securing reliable sources of nutrition remains a major part of activism led by people of color today. In 1969, the Black Panther Party started giving free breakfast to schoolchildren, first in Oakland and then across the country: a menu of sausage, bacon or eggs with toast or grits as well as milk, juice or hot chocolate and fresh fruit at least twice a week. They saw food insecurity as a form of suppression, and lack of nutrition as not incidental but part of a system designed to keep Black people down. The free breakfast was never considered a solution to racial inequity; it was one of the Panthers' survival programs — "survival pending revolution" — to sustain the Black community until they were in a position to "deliver themselves from the boot of their oppressors," as Huey P. Newton, one of the Panthers' founders, wrote in 1972.

The federal government had launched a small pilot version of its own free breakfast program in 1966, but didn't expand it nationwide until 1975, after the F.B.I. had effectively destroyed the Panthers and their social services were lost. Free school meals have taken on new urgency during the pandemic: In many cities, even when public schools have been closed, their cafeterias have stayed open, with food service workers coming in to cook and hand out breakfast, lunch and sometimes dinner, not just to children but to others in need. In extending the federal Community Eligibility Provision, which allows schools in certain districts to feed everyone without the burden and stigma of requiring documentation of income, then-Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue declared, "Children can't focus on learning if they are hungry" — which echoed the editors of the Black Panthers' newspaper, who wrote, more than half a century ago, "How can our children learn anything when most of their stomachs are empty?" The same spirit moved the many volunteer organizations that supplied meals to protesters at the Black Lives Matter marches last spring, where food was both sustenance and statement: We are with you.

Feeding your people, when food has not always been something you can rely on, can be an act of defiance — an acknowledgment that deprivation is a kind of violence. Growing up on the South Side of Chicago in the 1980s, Dara Cooper, 43, who now lives in Atlanta and is the executive director of the National Black Food and Justice Alliance (N.B.F.J.A.), watched her mother work hard but still struggle to put

food on the table. When her family went to the grocery store, the produce was always old, pale and bruised, unlike the crisp, vivid ingredients found in richer and whiter parts of town. Once, neighborhoods without easy access to fresh, healthy food sources were described as food deserts, as if this lack were a natural, inadvertent phenomenon and not a consequence of the federal policy of redlining: the denial of services and credit in neighborhoods deemed "hazardous" for investment — including almost all neighborhoods that were predominantly home to minorities — by the Home Owners' Loan Corporation in the 1930s. Although the tactic was officially banned under the Fair Housing Act of 1968, disparities persist; activists now call it food apartheid, a term that gained traction in 2008 when the Community Coalition of South Los Angeles campaigned to slow down the proliferation of fast-food franchises in low-income neighborhoods.

Dara Cooper in the Fresh Moves bus, 2011. Bob Stefko

In 2011, Cooper helped transform a decommissioned city bus into a mobile market, Fresh Moves, that sells vegetables from local farms and plies the streets of underserved neighborhoods, both to draw attention to the problem and to offer a prototype of a solution. The issue isn't just proximity to a grocery store but who's running it: When big-box stores move into Black communities, they often bring bias with them, which manifests in uneasy interactions with customers and a reluctance to hire local staff. As with Karen Washington's gardens in the Bronx, Fresh Moves was intended to be a business in and for the community, and demand was high. "We were next to an ice cream truck, and our line was longer," Cooper says.

For a number of Black activists, the idea of growing your own food is potent, as both an act of self-sufficiency and a repudiation of an agricultural past in which Black people were not owners but enslaved. During the pandemic, N.B.F.J.A. has received a record number of calls asking for guidance in starting vegetable gardens. Soul Fire Farm, a nonprofit in upstate New York, offers workshops that combine hands-on training in traditional African agrarian practices with an examination of the food system through the critical lenses of race and class. As for those subscription Community-Supported Agriculture (C.S.A.) boxes — a program offered by farms as a way for customers to buy shares in a year's harvest, with deliveries of fresh produce as regular dividends — mocking them as a white-progressive accessory ignores the pioneering efforts of Booker T. Whatley, a professor of agriculture at Tuskegee University in Alabama, who urged readers of his 1987 "Handbook on How to Make $100,000 Farming 25 Acres" to establish what he called clientele membership clubs in which customers would pay up front for a season of food, as a way of guaranteeing business.

To Jamila Norman, 41, an environmental engineer who turned to urban farming because of a lack of food options in her Atlanta neighborhood, it's important that she owns the land where she farms and that she runs a profitable enterprise, to "create and present agriculture as a business model that works for people of color, so they see a path." According to data collected by the United States Department of Agriculture, in the past century the total number of farms decreased by 68 percent, from close to 6.5 million in 1920 to just over 2 million in 2017 — but the number of Black-run farms dropped from around 925,000 to 35,000, a far more drastic decline of 96 percent, representing the dispossession of millions of acres, due in part to discriminatory lending practices by both banks and the government. (In a 1998 report, the U.S.D.A. acknowledged its "long-term bias and discrimination against minority farmers.") With Patchwork City Farms, originally opened in 2010 on land leased from a local public school and now located on a plot she bought around the corner from her house, Norman feels that she's "reclaiming the narrative" of the Black farmer. The goal is a future in which, she says, "there is nothing exceptional about me because everybody is farming."

THE PANDEMIC HAS forced many food activists to shift from advocacy to emergency work — Newton's "survival programs" — just to meet basic needs: to feed the hungry, raise funds for small businesses teetering on bankruptcy and keep "essential" workers from dying. There is a danger that, by the end, the public will be exhausted and demand a return to "normal." But "our normal is deadly," Guillén says. Holt-Giménez is pessimistic, too: "The pandemic has favored billionaires, big corporations, big chains," he says. "It's an opportunity — look who's taking it." The problem of scale, as Wey points out, is nearly insurmountable. Norman has resisted drafting her children, now in their teens or early 20s, as farmhands because, she says, "I got to be able to do this work — to operate without exploitation." Meanwhile, large corporate farms can easily charge lower prices by treating their labor force as disposable, even "sacrificial in times of crisis," Guillén says. "There is still that thought: 'How close to the legal line of slavery can you get?'"

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Still, the crisis of today won't fade with the virus, a zoonotic disease that crossed over from animals into humans and thus is arguably a byproduct of habitat encroachment and the existential threat of our unrelenting claims on the environment. With the acceleration of climate change and the persistence of racial injustice and age-old structures of wealth and power, both within America and on a global scale — not to mention the batten-down-the-hatches attitude of those who've been in power so long, they can't see sharing it as anything but downfall — food has become at once an emblem and literal embodiment of the troubles around us. Activism can be a march, a boycott, a campaign to knock on a million doors or even a handful of seeds: a future, staked in the earth. It can be voices in chorus and a rising consciousness that the way we eat not only reflects, often ignobly, our choices as a society but shapes them; and that we have the power to change those choices, and the way we live.