Mandela parkway dead-ends right next to the West Oakland, California, train station. Most days, people pass through there only to park their cars and commute to other parts of the city. Why would they linger? Although only a few miles from Oakland’s bustling downtown, the area is deserted. An empty lot marks a victorious environmental justice campaign to close the toxic Red Star Yeast factory, and the first-floor business level of a recently built mixed-use complex stands nearly empty. The jobs that originally attracted African American migrants from the South, many of them former sharecroppers, went the way of most American manufacturing. The sparse landscape seems industrial, except for the lack of any industry.

But on Saturdays, as farmer Leroy Musgraves describes it, positive energy “bubbles up through the concrete into the air.” Each weekend, Leroy drives the one hundred miles from his Central Valley farm to help create the Mo’ Better Foods Farmers’ Market. Beneath cheerful orange tents, vendors’ tables display brightly colored organic produce, soul food, homemade jams, and sweets. Market managers and regular shoppers take turns playing funk and soul music records and occasionally a customer or vendor launches into an impromptu dance performance. Like many farmers’ markets, Mo’ Better Foods is more than a place to shop—it’s a community event. According to market founder and food justice activist David Roach, “People come here to talk. They might buy just a little food, but they know each other. They sit here, listen to the music, and talk for a long time.” When he’s not spinning records, Roach can often be found at the manager’s table, engaged in a longstanding chess rivalry with several regular customers.

To patrons of most farmers’ markets accustomed to purchasing fresh produce in a vibrant public place, the Mo’ Better Foods market might come as a surprise. Unlike numerous busy markets throughout the San Francisco Bay Area, the market draws only about one hundred customers on a busy Saturday. Fewer customers mean low economic returns, and so the number of vendors fluctuates, though some dedicated farmers and home-based businesspeople maintain a steady presence. And unlike the markets a few miles up the road in Berkeley, Mo’ Better Foods cannot rely on an already existing demand for fresh produce. Instead, it must create demand within an African American community whose agricultural narrative remains dominated by the history of slavery. That history is reflected not only in the foods for sale—the collard and mustard greens, the okra, yams, and black-eyed peas—but also in the strategy through which Mo’ Better Foods Market associates food justice (commonly considered by activists to mean food access as a basic human right) with racial empowerment.

The market’s vision brings together local food-system advocacy, racial pride, and grassroots economic development. “Being in California,” says David Roach, “you have the benefit of seeing farmers markets. But we did not see them in our communities.” Roach sought out Will Scott of Scott Family Farms, who was also the president of the African American Farmers of California. “When David came to me, I dropped everything to come to West Oakland, because he had a vision,” recalls Mr. Scott, who, along with his wife and two adult children, makes the 150-mile trip from Fresno each Saturday. David Roach

Not only have African Americans been systematically denied the ability to produce food, but they often cannot purchase what their families once grew.
conceived of the market as a way to support black farmers while providing healthy, culturally appropriate food to a food-insecure community. He was influenced by Booker T. Washington’s economically oriented Tuskegee model, and as the market grew from an individual farm stand at a local high school to larger quarters, it also came to provide a venue for local home-based businesses.

The Historical Context of Food Insecurity

Market organizers recognize that most small farmers are struggling, but they call attention to the particular history of African American farmers. Throughout the twentieth century, black farmers lost their land at a rate three to four times higher than white farmers. Those few remaining have survived extensive discrimination by the federal agencies whose loans and subsidies support most farms. In 1997 the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) settled a class-action lawsuit filed on behalf of fifteen thousand African American farmers, who claimed that they had been fed false information about government programs and were either denied or given insufficient or arbitrarily reduced loans. That same year, a USDA internal audit revealed that current loan applications filed by blacks were reviewed three times slower than those filed by whites, and that black farmers were treated with “bias, hostility, greed, ruthlessness and indifference.”

Not only have African Americans been systematically denied the ability to produce food, but they often cannot purchase what their families once grew. In the 1960s, as federal highway projects demolished African American neighborhoods and downtown areas began to decline, urban supermarkets closed their doors to reopen in the suburbs. Activists call this phenomenon “supermarket redlining,” likening it to the racist residential and banking policies that institutionalize segregation. According to Leroy Musgraves, West Oakland is “an area where the produce that I bring to the market and the things that I talk about nutritionally

Above: Leroy Musgraves at his farm in Livingston, California, where he tends five acres of organic crops by hand. At the Mandela Farmers’ Market in West Oakland, Musgraves enthusiastically shares his decades of knowledge about the benefits of a healthy diet with people who visit his booth.

Photograph by David Hanks © 2005
are very important, because [residents] don’t have access to wholesome, healthy food and they certainly don’t have access to wholesome, healthy food that is right off the farm.” Local residents have few options beyond the limited packaged foods offered at corner liquor stores, which cost more than similar items in suburban grocery stores. Lack of healthy food is one explanation for the high rates of diabetes, obesity, and other diet-related illnesses in West Oakland and other communities of color.

Activists posit the farmers’ market as a response to discrimination against black farmers and the lack of readily available healthy food in black communities. They also see it as a way to develop an explicitly antiracist perspective on sustainable agriculture. But the inability to produce and consume healthy food is only a small part of the legacy of racism in West Oakland. Notorious for poverty and violence, the neighborhood couldn’t differ more from the upscale image usually associated with organic food. According to community activists Van Jones and Ben Wyiskida, “In the poor parts of Oakland, neighborhoods of mostly black and Latino residents, 40 percent of young people suffer chronic respiratory ailments….Ten thousand people on parole or probation lack opportunities for meaningful jobs.” Former market manager Jason Harvey describes the challenge of holding a market in such a neighborhood: “If there was a shooting in West Oakland on, say, Thursday, and they showed it on the news, I guarantee you’ll see a drop in community participation at the market that following Saturday. That’s just something that I noticed over time.” While only about 5 percent of Oakland residents live in West Oakland, the neighborhood claims approximately 20 percent of the city’s homicides.

Yet at one time West Oakland was a thriving community of African Americans who were largely employed in manufacturing. Numerous black-owned businesses and cultural enterprises prospered there. Longtime resident and occasional market vendor Iolode Kinney remembers the West Oakland of her childhood. “My mom used to bring me here,” she said, “because, along Seventh Street, that was the music place. You don’t know about West Oakland? My God! That’s where the jazz was… Ike and Tina Turner. All the greats used to come to The Barn and New Roofie’s Inn… all those places. It was awesome! Lots of culture here.”

West Oakland was also a focal point for the Black Panther Party and the Black Power movement of the 1960s. The association between food and black empowerment has roots in the Party’s free breakfast program. According to one regular customer and former party member, “Huey [Newton] and the other [movement] builders just didn’t want to see kids arrive at school hungry, and established that it was their right and their role in the community to champion that.” Like the Mo’ Better Foods Market today, the Black Panther Party sought not only to supply food, but to create opportunities for African Americans to do, rather than be done for. According to David Roach, who as a young child was influenced by his brothers’ participation in the Party, Mo’ Better Foods promotes African American-produced food “so that you don’t just have to be a consumer in your own neighborhood.”

**Culture and Agriculture**

Like other farmers’ markets, Mo’ Better Foods works to create a local food system. The discourse used to frame this struggle, however, is vastly different from other markets because it emphasizes racial identity and economic injustice. “The market is a novelty idea for groups like us because we aren’t addressed by other markets,” says Will Scott. “Twenty years ago, [black farmers] couldn’t get in to other markets, so we need to be doing it ourselves. This market fights the systems put in place to keep down sharecroppers like my father and grandfathers.” This focus on inequality, and indeed the market’s understanding of the raced and classed nature of the food system, aligns the market and its aims with the growing movement for environmental justice and allows it to encourage participation in a local food system as an affirmation of African American racial pride.

Furthermore, through the consumption of culturally specific foods, market participants can come to physically embody this part of their heritage and history. The table belonging to Leroy Musgraves of Good Foot Farm is always covered in various shades of greens—collards, mustards, and lamb’s quarters in addition to the kale and chard found at many other markets. Charlotte Coleman’s Pots to Jars Canned Goods features southern specialties such as cha-cha relish, a spiced, fermented cabbage preserved in vinegar. The Scott Family Farm always puts out a large sign exclaiming, “We have black-eyed peas!” whenever they’re available. The Scotts also specialize in okra, yams, and watermelon, all of which were first cultivated in Africa before being transported by slaves across the middle passage.

References to southern cuisine and culture produce a particular African American agricultural narrative that is grounded in the specific geographic and historical experience of migration. Ted Dixon, a longtime West Oakland resident employed by a local school-garden program, describes a variety of collard greens that his family has grown since the 1890s. “They’re the only greens I’ve
ever seen that when you cut a leaf off, it grows back right in the same spot,” he says proudly. “We came from Louisiana and brought them across Oklahoma and all that. Everyone’s got a different name for [their own variety], but we call it Louisiana blue.” Across the aisle Will Scott and an African American customer discuss their childhoods in Oklahoma. “When I was younger there was a farm family and they had eleven sons and two daughters,” the customer says. “They supplied all of our food. We didn’t have Safeway.” By connecting to Will Scott, the customer re-creates an experience that recalls the rural community in which she was raised. If African American cuisine reflects a history of migration from the American South, Mo’ Better Foods Market enables West Oakland residents to digest and embody that history. And when it comes time to celebrate, African American identity becomes the central theme. This year’s Black History Month found the Scott Family Farm displaying information about important black figures from the past. On the first Saturday of the month, market manager David Roach gave a short speech about the history of black farmers, highlighting George Washington Carver’s contributions to American agriculture. Charlotte Coleman sold homemade pins with red, green, and black ribbons signifying a connection to Africa. The market also organized a fundraiser for Hurricane Katrina victims that featured several bands and a vegan version of soul food. Two local young women sold T-shirts reading “Kanye was Right,” referring to hip-hop artist Kanye West’s assertion that “George Bush doesn’t care about Black people.” These celebrations merged support for African American farmers with a positive affirmation of black identity.

Not all of Mo’ Better Foods’ customers are African American. Describing the community the market seeks to serve, former manager Jason Harvey notes that “The community is black people, and the community is everyone in West Oakland.” Indeed, my survey of one hundred market customers revealed that slightly less than half identified as African American, though nearly all of the regular vendors are black. Even though participants sometimes refer to it as a “black market,” nonblack customers describe warm relationships with vendors, managers, and other customers. According to Daniel, a white West Oakland resident, attending the market allows him to “be a positive member of a black community and contribute something good to it without taking away from its blackness.” And according to occasional vendor Iolode Kinney, “We’re putting it on for us, but everyone is welcome.”

Although the strongest theme of the Mo’ Better Foods Market is African American culture, an eco-spiritual poetics is also present. Wendell Berry has urged us to participate knowledgably and ethically in agriculture, so that we may “become acquainted with the beautiful energy cycle that revolves from soil to seed to flower to fruit to food to offal to decay, and around again.” In a similar vein, Leroy Musgraves posits farming as a pathway through which humans can amplify natural cycles. In a self-published book of poetry, this former Wallace Stegner fellow at Stanford University writes:

Give melons a good
Watering just before
New moon of July
The vines will grow under the filling moon
They need the water there in earth
When their Spirit runs and fills its belly with seeds.

Musgraves depicts cultivation practiced in harmony with biological cycles and invokes romanticized images of nature that are associated with sustainability. This idea also surfaces in an interview in The Nation, where David Roach intertwines ecological and cultural themes: “Agriculture is just what it says, it has a lot of culture in it. It relates to health, it relates to economics, it’s pride as people. Spiritually, it’s about having that communion with the earth.” However, although Wendell Berry’s idealized vision of an alternative food system exists within the narratives of Musgraves and Roach, their language of racial empowerment is absent from most local food system discourse, and thus their approach is radically different. It is precisely the integration of environmental and social goals that the emerging food justice movement seeks to achieve.

Beyond West Oakland

Mo’ Better Foods Market is at the forefront of a growing movement that brings together issues of environmental and social justice. Not only are a number of activists working within West Oakland and other low-income communities of color, but their message is beginning to be heard in other contexts. At the national level, groups like the Community Food Security Coalition work to ensure “healthy, culturally appropriate food from non-emergency sources for all people at all times.” Regionally, organizations such as

Right: Michelle Scott and her family drive nearly 300 miles from Fresno to Oakland to participate in the Mandela Farmers’ Market each Saturday. It’s important to them to bring fresh fruits and vegetables to the residents of this lower-income area in West Oakland.

PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVID HANKS © 2005.
as the Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program have sought to provide resources for farmers of color and food-insecure communities. Policy-oriented think tanks such as Food First! have begun working with local groups to influence the latest farm bill in the US Congress. Discussions of food security can be found at many gatherings that have traditionally promoted local food systems, from the culturally focused Agriculture, Food and Human Values conference to the market-based, solution-oriented Bioneers. Organizations working to address food security have been featured in the publications of traditional environmental organizations, such as the Natural Resources Defense Council and the Sierra Club, signifying a shift from wilderness-focused priorities that are often inaccessible to people of color. To paraphrase environmental justice scholar Dorceta Taylor, the question of how food should be grown can no longer be separated from questions of who can grow and consume it.11

Early stages of this coalescence of food security and local food system activism can also be seen in farmers’ markets operating in wealthier neighborhoods. A visit to the North Berkeley Farmers’ Market, located in a neighborhood nicknamed the “gourmet ghetto,” finds several organizations dedicated to making healthy, organic food available and affordable to all. Daniel Miller, founder of Spiral Gardens, can be hard to spot standing behind the profusion of seedlings on his table, which he grows and sells in order to fund free gardening courses for low-income Berkeley residents. As the market ends, volunteers from Food Not Bombs arrive with their bike carts, ready to collect food donations for homeless people. Revenue generated by the market goes to support other Ecology Center programs, including Farm Fresh Choice, through which local youth sell discounted produce in low-income neighborhoods. Food justice is becoming an important issue in both sustainable agriculture and traditional environmental activism.

Yet despite such enthusiasm, the notion of food justice remains a challenge within the organic movement, which aligns environmentally sustainable farming with an industry promoting high-priced gourmet foods. Many customers support markets like those in Berkeley primarily to procure high-quality produce for their families; only a few express concern for the accessibility of this resource. The social justice concerns of farmers and other vendors do not always extend beyond their own economic struggles, which cause many of them to feel that customers need to pay more, not less, for their food. “People don’t like to pay,” one vendor at the North Berkeley market told me, “but at Safeway, you pay later. You pay for it with your health; you pay for it with the kind of culture you create.” He later told me that he does not blame the people who shop at Wal-Mart. “But instead of talking about low wages and other constraints,” he said, “we need to rethink the percentage of our budget that we spend on food. Only when people are willing to pay for it will our relationship with the land become more sustainable.” This vendor was right to point out that government support for corporate-owned monocultures creates artificially cheap food. However, his comments show little regard for the circumstances of an ever-increasing class of service-sector employees who receive low wages and no benefits, the people with no money to pay for a more sustainable food system. His narrative paints wealthy consumers as ethically superior. If alternative food projects catering to wealthy clientele wish to ally with groups like Mo’ Better Foods, they will need to challenge the elitism within their own projects while continuing to provide economic opportunities for sustainable farming.

The West Oakland Market

Mo’ Better Foods Market also has its challenges. While most North Berkeley customers are already convinced of the nutritional and cultural values of locally grown, organic food, West Oakland residents are only beginning to learn about them. Jason Harvey tried a number of strategies to boost market attendance when he worked there, from passing out fliers to special events to walking around the neighborhood to spread the word. The market has been written up in local newspapers and magazines, and local food pantries and nonprofits have distributed coupons for market produce. They also sponsor activities for children. “We’ve had a lot of publicity,” notes Will Scott. “We’ve been on TV, and afterwards, I got some phone calls. But we’re still working towards making that connection [to local residents].” Publicity fails to create a sustained increase in market attendance. Disappointed with meager profits, all but three core vendors tend to cycle in and out of the market, creating something of a Catch-22. Without steady and diverse products, attracting customers is difficult and without customers, recruiting vendors is difficult.

Although Mo’ Better Foods has received foundation grants to cover some of its operating costs, the market is truly driven by the dedication of its vendors. “The market is true grassroots, like the seeds I’ve been planting,” says Jason Harvey, recognizing that Mo’ Better Foods requires more from its vendors than do other markets. Charlotte Coleman even acts as an informal welcome committee, greeting regular customers and orienting new ones. “It’s
not my business, my own thing, that I’m trying to cultivate,” she says, smiling. “When I see somebody come in here, I send them up and down the line. I tell them to get their produce from the farmers, to get soaps and shea butter and sweets.” She is committed to the success of the market as a whole. For Leroy Musgraves, the market is a vehicle through which he can provide health and healing for a community in need. “There’s a lot of people I love here, and they’re sick,” he says emphatically, “so I’m doing everything I can to be here.” But it is Will Scott’s daughter Michelle who perhaps most clearly captures the vendors’ dedication. “When I get up at an ungodly hour to come here,” she says, “I think, ‘How can I make Oakland better?’ not ‘How can I make money?’ We take pride in producing and bringing to the community.” For the customers who have discovered the treasure that is Mo’ Better Foods Market, Michelle Scott’s early wake-up is a catalyst for healthy eating and cultural pride.

NOTES
1. Unless otherwise specified, all quotes are taken from over two years of ethnographic fieldwork conducted at the Mo’ Better Foods and North Berkeley Farmers Markets, or from interviews conducted with managers, vendors, and regular customers. Research began in March 2005 and concluded in April 2007.
2. While the farms are not actually certified as organic, market farmers follow organic standards, calling their produce “chemical free.” Farmers cite cost and bureaucratic difficulty as the key obstacles to certification.
3. This statement approximates the Community Food Security Coalition’s definition of food security. See www.cfscc.org. In the context of the farmers’ market, “healthy” usually refer to fresh fruits and vegetables.
12. See www.cfscc.org