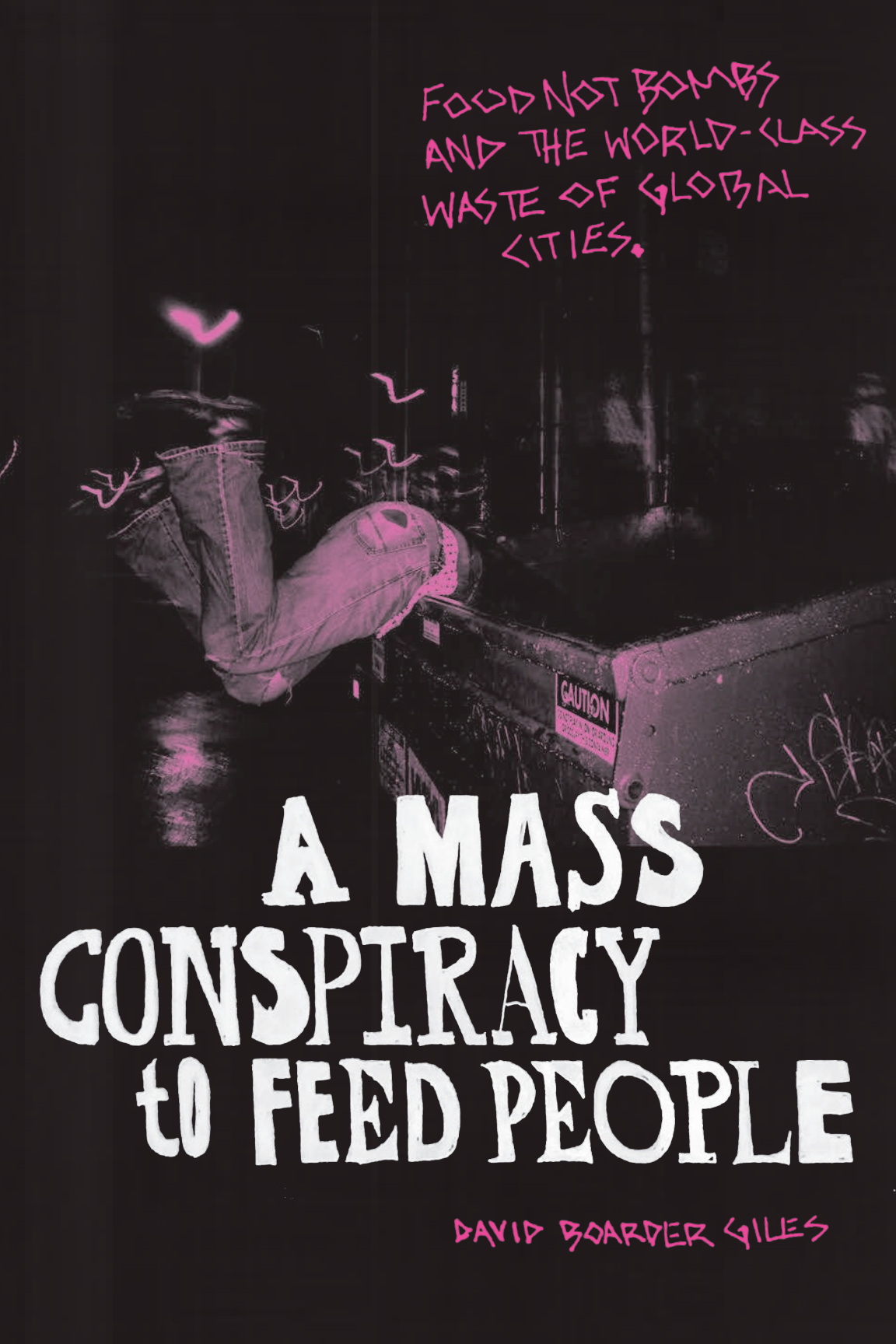


FOOD NOT BOMBS
AND THE WORLD-CLASS
WASTE OF GLOBAL
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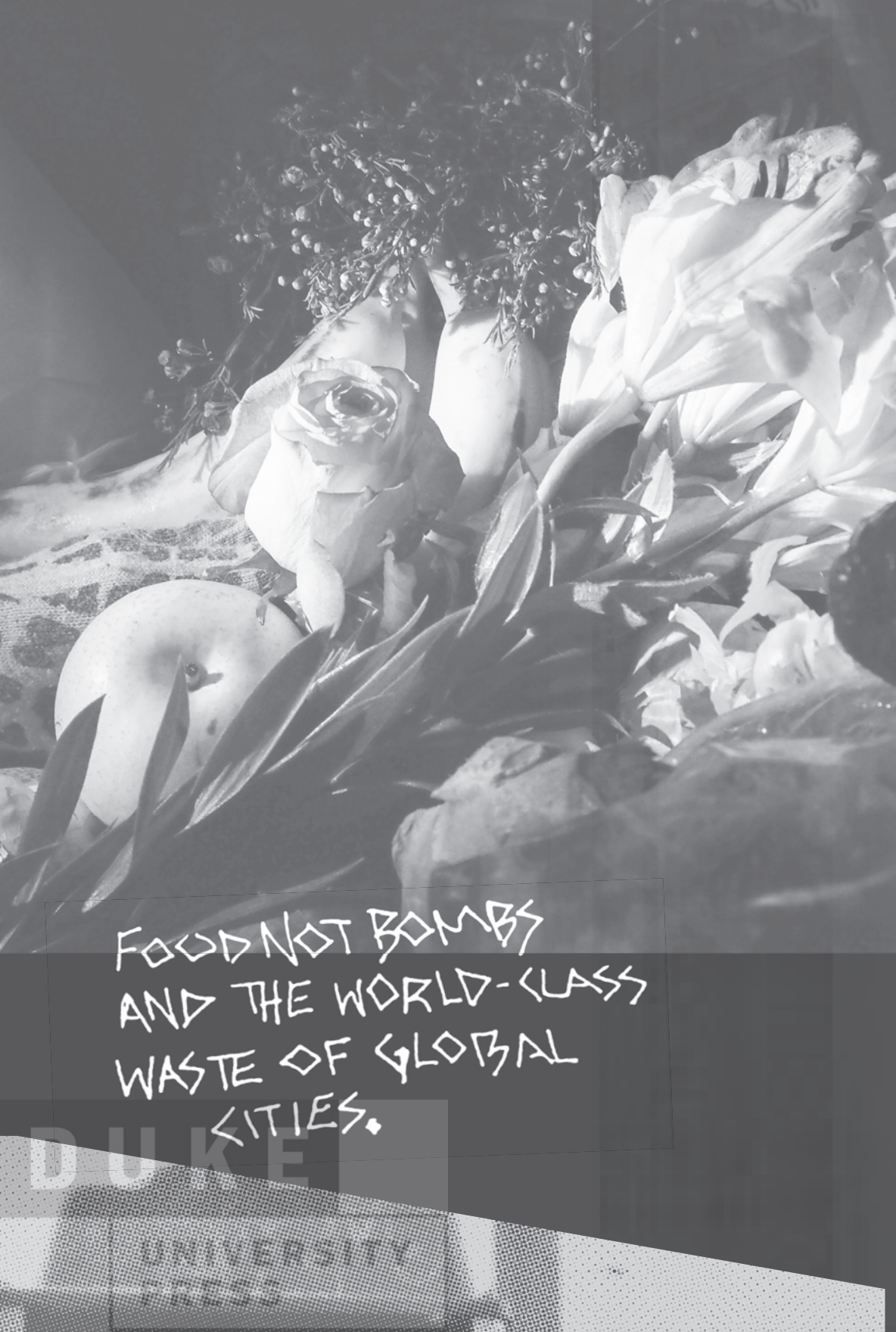


A MASS CONSPIRACY to FEED PEOPLE

DAVID BOARDER GILES



A MASS CONSPIRACY
TO FEED PEOPLE

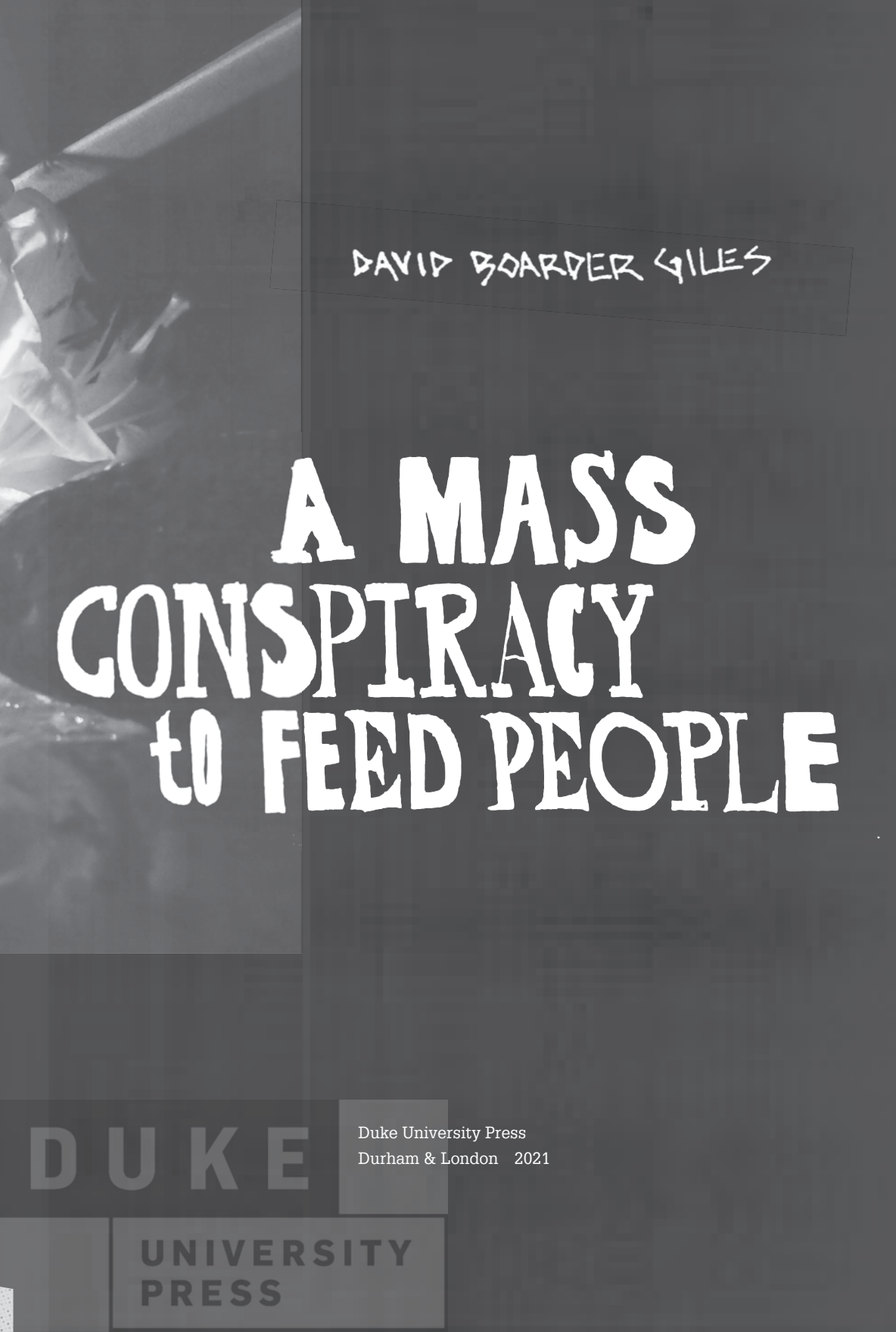


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DAVID BOARDER GILES

A MASS CONSPIRACY to FEED PEOPLE

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preface/ **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

This book will see daylight nearly in time to celebrate the fortieth anniversary of Food Not Bombs' very first meal. On March 26, 1981, its organizers dressed as self-styled hobos and held a Depression-era soup kitchen with donated castoffs outside the Bank of Boston's stockholders meeting. It was pure political theatre. (In 1981, the sight of homeless people crowding American streets remained an anachronistic novelty. If you can imagine that.) The spectacle was meant to illustrate the epic financial crash augured by the bank's investment in nuclear energy and militarism. Nobody quite guessed the soup line would grow into an international gastronomic conspiracy.

Much has changed over the past forty years—and Food Not Bombs with it. In retrospect, they weren't wholly wrong about the depression: the twin tides of globalization and neoliberalism have borne cascading, interwoven crises that have seen wealth pool among the super-rich while inequality, hunger, and homelessness grow starker by the year in many cities. That great transformation has also been the crucible from which emerged a global movement of anarchist soup kitchens.

This book tells a tale of its forging, and of the landscapes from which its raw materials precipitate. It is a work of slow scholarship, in some ways dating back to my earliest days with FNB, when both the movement and I were a spry twenty-five years old. Since then, I have watched both Food Not Bombs and the urban crises that stoke it deepen and evolve. This book aims to capture something of that long arc. I hope it contains a useful—albeit partial—map for advocates, radicals, and scholars to navigate some of the next forty years.

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That future is singularly hazy right now, amid recession, pandemic, and political unrest unprecedented in recent memory. We cannot know how they will transform our world. Some of the world-class business districts described in this book, for example, have been evacuated for now—by those who can afford it. Who can say when or how they will return? Yet these crises exacerbate the underlying conditions of our era in ways that seem familiar to anyone who's spent time with FNB: supply chains are disrupted and food languishes in the fields while unemployed Americans queue for blocks at understocked food banks, yet the contradiction between squandered food and hunger has always been at FNB's heart; the COVID-19 pandemic devastates some neighborhoods and largely spares others, revealing older urban divisions that are the impetus for FNB's mutual aid; and urban uprisings proliferate globally at never-before-seen speed, emerging from the kinds of everyday structural violence, and the dynamo of police repression and grassroots resistance, that give rise to nonviolent insurrections like Food Not Bombs. (As I type this, some of my FNB collaborators in Seattle have lent their bodies to a motley, mutinous coalition, led by the Black Lives Matter movement, to peacefully occupy a six-block "autonomous zone" against police brutality and urban disenfranchisement. Within the zone—as elsewhere around the world—FNB and other activists continue to ply the skills of mutual aid and civil disobedience to share food freely, despite the pandemic.) The story of Food Not Bombs might, I hope, teach us much about the world that emerges from this moment.

Countless people have made that story, and this book, possible. Above all, I owe the book to the caring labor of the Food Not Bombs collaborators alongside whom I have volunteered. They have been friends, critics, and peers. And among the wider political landscapes that FNB inhabits, I am grateful to Victoria Law, Natalie Novak, Tim Harris, Rachael Myers, Anitra Freeman, Wes Browning, Keith McHenry, Simon Stephens, Graham Pruss, Kelly Whitmore, Spike Chiappalone, and particularly Jeff Juris, whose advice resonates through this book and whose passing is a loss to us all. For institutional support I thank Deakin University, the Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation, the University of Washington's Department of Comparative History of Ideas, the Harry Bridges Center for Labor Studies, the Simpson Center for the Humanities, and the Nancy Bell Evans Center on Nonprofits and Philanthropy. For helping me incubate these thoughts, I thank Ann Anagnost, Miriam Kahn, Celia Lowe, Phillip Thurtle, Maggie Dickinson, Patricia Lopez, Katie Gillespie, Victoria Lawson, Sarah Elwood, Teresa Mares, Trang Ta, Da-

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FOOD NOT BOMBS



Free Food! Comida Gratis!
Every Sunday @ 2:30PM,

A typical Food Not Bombs flyer sums up its philosophy.

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PROLOGUE

ANY GIVEN SUNDAY IN SEATTLE

On any given Sunday, the Pike Place Market in Seattle is a busy place. Just try driving a van between the throngs of tourists who seem not to distinguish between sidewalk and road. Like Hindu cows, they wander where they like without fear of reprisal. They spill out onto the street with nary a glance at oncoming traffic like me.

You can't fault them. The red bricks in the road are their domain, really. Integral to the market's image and identity, the terra-cotta-colored paving echoes the old storefronts that line it and that have done business for the better part of a century. The bricks in the road only date to the 1970s, but they're here (in lieu of asphalt) to

Throngs of tourists. The red bricks in the road are their domain. (Pike Place Market, October 2018)



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lend an ambiance of seamless, world-class historicity to the place. With a panoply of restaurants, cafés, and stalls, Pike Place is one of Seattle's most iconic tourist destinations. Its produce stands have connected local farmers to the city since 1907. And it still does a brisk business in the twenty-first century. At the peak of summer, that can mean almost sixty thousand visitors in a day. Sixty thousand sacred cows (by revenue). Ten million a year. Over the course of six years, I've spent hours—maybe days—of my life behind the wheel of various vehicles waiting for them to move out of the way.

In a way, I've come here for the same reason as them: the food is world-class. The market's postcard-perfect rows of fruits and vegetables inspire high-ticket tourism. Glossy shots of its apples and avocados peek out from postcard racks across the city. The food is a symbol not only for the market but also for Seattle's global aspirations.

Postcard-perfect produce. (Pike Place Market, October 2018)





Postcards of perfect produce. (Pike Place Market, October 2018)

Like many cities whose futures seemed uncertain in the late twentieth century, as manufacturing industries ebbed south, Seattle turned its fortunes around by attracting global capital via business investment and tourism. It became the fastest-growing city in the United States at one point—and one of the richest (Balk 2014), home now to some of the wealthiest people who have ever lived. To this end, the city has capitalized on its urbane image: cosmopolitan but down to earth; diverse but not outside the middle-class traveler's comfort zone; bohemian enough to be interesting but pro-business, and with high-class shopping to boot. Qualities that

appeal to a globe-trotting set with cash to spend or liquid capital to invest. Like so many cities, Seattle appeals to their bellies. And in this, Pike Place has been a perennial success.

Unlike the tourists, however, I haven't exactly been grocery shopping here. I gather the leftovers. From the rows of picturesque produce, many market-goers are looking for just the right apple. Or pear. Or tomato, or avocado, and so on. And with stalls vying to attract the attention of 10 million passersby, a lot of apples inevitably won't make the cut.

It takes a lot of waste to keep up Seattle's image.

On any given Sunday, that's where I would come in. For six years, I collected surplus food from stalls and shops around Seattle that were willing to donate it to a free meal project like ours, rather than throw it away. Many, quite upmarket: farmers' markets, high-end grocery stores, organic-friendly cooperatives, boutique bakeries, among others. They cater to the discerning tastes and disposable incomes of the upper echelons of Seattle's postindustrial economy—software developers, biotech researchers, aerospace engineers, and lawyers, for example. Seattle's median income has exploded over the past two decades, and many residents can afford to be choosy.

By contrast, the food I recovered ended up in the hands of people disadvantaged by the same economy—unemployed, underemployed, disabled, shelterless, and so on. The city's homeless population has now ballooned to over twelve thousand, the third largest in the country. Like other "world-class" cities, Seattle's postindustrial fortunes have amounted to the best of times or the worst of times, depending on whom you ask.

In this respect, the abandoned avocado, the bruised apple, and the other unwanted produce has often become part of a broad safety net of food banks, emergency meal programs, shelters, and other nonprofit organizations. A kind of after-market shadow economy built on world-class waste. This safety net would be unthinkable without the donated excesses of the city's consumers and markets. Then again, it wouldn't be necessary in a less starkly polarized kind of economy.

Once the surplus is taken off the shelves—and off the market—it's usually the last the tourists and shoppers ever see of it. If it doesn't end up in a market dumpster, it finds its way into charitable hands that redistribute it—normally indoors and out of sight of the shoppers. The shadow economy of wasted food moves in different spaces than they. It must. The aesthetics of abjection and poverty aren't compatible with Seattle's urbane image. My friend Carmen—alongside whom I've

served free meals for a few years and who has relied on emergency assistance herself at times—puts it simply: “People . . . don’t want to see the ugliness of their own city. And they certainly don’t want to be faced with the challenge of finding a way to address it.” It takes a lot of waste to keep up appearances.

In this respect, though, the group we both work with is unlike most other meal providers. It’s a sort of anarchist soup kitchen called Food Not Bombs (popularly “FNB” for short), a motley crew of punks, students, hippies, Quakers, vagrants, itinerants, and other radicals. Whereas most meal programs are hidden in church basements and other marginal spaces, we share food in public view. In fact, there’s a good chance that our forbidden gifts will reunite the tourists and their overlooked produce, passing each other unawares within a stone’s throw, like ships in the night. Each Sunday, while the tourists have been off visiting the Seattle Art Museum or the Space Needle, our group takes the food back to someone’s kitchen and improvises a vegetarian meal out of the waste. As those same tourists read restaurant reviews and ponder where to dine, our ragtag soup kitchen takes the meal not to a church or shelter, but to Pioneer Square, which—in addition to being home to a constellation of low-income housing, shelters, homeless services, and rough sleepers—is another popular tourist destination and a would-be hub for information technology businesses. The neighborhood is another focal point for Seattle’s world-class aspirations.

And although it disrupts these aspirations, and unsettles certain tourists and businesses, we serve dinner every Sunday in Occidental Park, smack dab in the middle of the neighborhood, with the day laborers, the homeless, the down-and-out, and anyone else who happens along.

In this, we follow a forty-year-old tradition of Food Not Bombs chapters. Throughout the US and dotted across the globe, small collectives gather unwanted food from local stores (either through donation or dumpster-diving), prepare it safely, and distribute it in public spaces. Often, in the process, they challenge antihomeless measures that restrict the public sharing of food precisely because it upsets the environs of urbane, cosmopolitan consumption. In effect, these measures ban eating in public for anyone who can’t afford to buy their own dinner.

On any given Sunday afternoon, we might eat dinner in the park with forty or fifty people. Sometimes more. We might also share Occidental Park’s red brick paving stones (a relatively recent installation) with sports fans cutting through from CenturyLink Field. Or tourists who’ve come here for the popular Grand Central Bakery, adjoining the park in another one of Seattle’s historic brick façades, or for the

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information booth on the other side of the park. When it's closed, they occasionally ask us for directions to local attractions.

In contrast, yet other sorts of visitors come to us for yet other sorts of directions. In my time with FNB, I've met train-hopping kids looking for a place to squat. A fisherman looking for space in the overcrowded shelters—he had paid his last dollar for passage to Seattle only to find that the job he was promised didn't exist and the fishing industry here had been restructured. (Seattle's homeless fishermen deserve a book of their own.) A disabled former dockworker with a third of his skull caved in by an on-the-job accident—as if a bowling ball had landed in soft mud—looking for more help than any of us could give. Other disoriented newcomers who bet on jobs or relationships that didn't materialize. Some, for whom there wasn't room in the shelters, looking for a blanket, or at least clean socks. Others looking for God. Alcoholics looking for a drink, or bus fare, or both. In six years, I saw a lot of lost faces.

The contrasts are uneasy. Between high-class consumption and abjection. Fine dining and this shadow economy of free leftovers. Ad hoc guacamole (an FNB standby) and the pristine avocados on nearby postcards racks. Sometimes businesses or tourists complain about us to the city, which in turn sends a squad car to eject us from the park. The ensuing controversies, as I'll describe in the pages that follow, throw these Dickensian contradictions into stark relief.

Nonetheless, these different spheres are integral, entangled parts of Seattle's economy. The forbidden gifts of anarchist soup kitchens like FNB, and the larger shadow economies of which they are a part, teach us a great deal about the ways in which waste and want, wealth and abjection, are manufactured in the pursuit of world-class dreams and urban renewal—in Seattle and many of the other global cities it so resembles. What follows is my own account of these urban transformations, of these shadow economies, and of my time with Food Not Bombs. It suggests something of the stakes of FNB's work worldwide and the upheavals of everyday life in the global city.

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Introduction

Of Waste, Cities, and Conspiracies

A Very Straightforward Blueprint

“Food Not Bombs is like a mass conspiracy,” says Francisco, pausing for effect. He grins mischievously under a mop of curly, jet-black hair. “. . . To feed people.” I laugh. And then it sinks in. In an era haunted by esoteric, far-right manifestos about the threat of outsiders and elites to take what’s “ours,” there’s something sanguine about a global plot to give things away. Against the mythos of scarcity, FNB’s propaganda of the deed is indiscriminate generosity. A conspiracy of abundance.

We’re in Occidental Park. Probably half a dozen of us are lined up behind a convenient low stone wall and a row of Food Not Bombs’ battered pots and pans. On the other side, ambling through the line, are a few dozen people waiting for stir-fry, a bowl of soup, or a doughnut. (Picking up leftover doughnuts from the bakery has been my job lately.) Often—and these are my favorite moments—they are here not only for the food but for the conversation. On days like today, an unlikely recipe of homeless itinerants, undocumented migrants, addicts, broke artists, musicians, students, activists, train-hopping punks, and visitors from overseas (categories that blur and overlap) all come here to hang out. Even, on occasion, a local homeless *curandera* who practices Mexican witchcraft and sometimes brings a live chicken to the park. It’s late in the year and it’s getting cold this time of day, but here we are eating, chatting, debating politics, and enjoy-

If it is the misfortune of the workers’ rebellions of old that no theory of revolution directs their course, it is also this absence of theory that, from another perspective, makes possible their spontaneous energy and the enthusiasm with which they set about establishing a new society.

. . . we begin to recognize the monuments of the bourgeoisie as ruins even before they have crumbled.

—Walter Benjamin

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ing each other's society. (The curandera is largely taciturn, except in defense of her chicken.)

I have found such motley, convivial scenes reprised in parks and kitchens across Seattle, San Francisco, New York, Boston, Melbourne, Brisbane, and some of the smaller cities where I've collaborated with the movement over a decade or so. In these moments, the meal is not only a source of calories but an end in itself. Travelers look us up by name. Local activists and artists meet one another here. In Seattle, rough sleepers and hungry locals refer to us simply as "the vegetarians" and come back week after week. A handful, even year after year. Together, we form an "accidental community of memory" (Malkki 1997). But however ephemeral, it leaves tangible traces. "It kept striking me that this did make such a difference," reflected one longtime Seattle activist and teacher, Patricia, of her decade with FNB, "that notion of working collaboratively . . . to make these lives sustainable." She asked rhetorically, "How does this feed us in these other ways?"

The ingredients of this community, both human and culinary, transform from week to week and from place to place. As my friend Koa (himself a sometime-itinerant, train-hopping punk) puts it, "Food Not Bombs is a revolving door." In my time, Seattle FNB volunteers were mainly young white radicals and students, along with recent immigrants, refugees, first-generation Americans, working-class and formerly homeless collaborators, among others. (All displaced somehow, but displaced differently, as I will describe.) In contrast, twenty-five years ago, Seattle FNB was a tight-knit group of punks and squatters, much like chapters I've met in Melbourne and New York. Different again, when I visited Berkeley, where FNB were mainly aging white hippies, Quakers, and retirees. Worldwide, FNB is an eclectic phenomenon. Every chapter is a different recipe.

As transient and diverse as they are, however, in this book I argue that these accidental communities scale up. Across time and space, they amount to a transnational form of organization whose effects belie its minor footprint in recorded political history. Francisco is mainly joking, but in some sense, this patchwork is just what one might expect a "mass conspiracy" to look like. From Borneo to Buenos Aires, in hundreds of cities, in dozens of languages, on every continent except Antarctica,¹ autonomous FNB chapters gather for reasons much like those of my collaborators in Occidental Park. "I see real strengths in groups just being able to pop up, and oftentimes with no interaction at all," Patricia told me. "And they're all legitimate Food Not Bombs, you know?" In warehouses, squats, community centers, communal kitchens, parks, and sidewalks, around cutting boards, buckets, and battered old pots and pans, this unlikely con-

stellation of co-conspirators repurpose food that would otherwise have been wasted (whether “dumpster-dived” or donated) and gift it publicly to people who might otherwise have gone hungry—often in spite of laws that forbid such largesse. Their menu is typically vegan, their organization egalitarian and flat. By convention, anybody can organize a chapter—without “needing to get approval from any central office,” as Patricia puts it—as long as they agree to practice nonviolence, make decisions based on consensus, and cook vegetarian food. As one Melbourne FNB collaborator put it, “It’s a very straightforward blueprint.”

Simple enough. And yet such a modest proposal might open new windows onto our economic and political lives. Food Not Bombs becomes a lens all the better with which to interrogate hunger, homelessness, our increasingly divided urban landscapes, and perhaps the shape of protest to come. This is not, therefore, just a book about FNB (of which several already exist; see McHenry 2012; Parson 2010; Shannon 2011). Rather, this is a tale of waste, cities, and conspiracies. It aims to capture something of the inexorable churn of mighty metropolises, and to make visible some of the communities and the political possibilities cultivated amid their detritus, where people and things that have been abandoned or overlooked gather. In this sense, FNB is the tip of an iceberg of postcapitalist surpluses.

Although “mass conspiracies” belong mainly to lurid fiction, as a metaphor they are nonetheless good to think with in a few ways. First, they are politically inscrutable: they hide in plain sight like the city’s discarded people and things, as we will see. Second, they are paradoxically esoteric and all-inclusive, organized and decentralized, much like Food Not Bombs. How both of these things might come to be, and what they have to do with each other, is at the heart of this book’s argument. Taking a cue from Francisco, the figure of the mass conspiracy is intended to capture those emergent forms of generosity, solidarity, and resistance that spring from the city’s overlooked remainders. Wherever capitalism’s leftovers have been scav-

What does Food Not Bombs achieve? It redistributes food that would probably get fucking trashed. It feeds people good nourishing organic food that they probably wouldn’t come across. It teaches people skills. It can be really fun, ‘cause you’re working with friends.

—Frank, Melbourne FNB,
ca. 1999–2005

Well, that’s the beauty of the potential of the design, right? . . . It creates this very practical entry point. We’re fulfilling a very obvious need. No entry requirements. All you have to do is be willing to chop vegetables. And in the process of doing that obviously good thing, you’ll often be subjected to state repression and you’ll see even more dramatically the nature of the problems we’re confronting and become radicalized in the process.

—Allan, San Francisco FNB, ca. 1990

enged and shared, its rule queered or held in abeyance, there might we find our conspiracy at work. In these decades of political uncertainty, it may be valuable to bring such illiberal, egalitarian political possibilities into better focus (lest authoritarian visions dominate the void left by the increasingly tattered liberal social contract).

The book's "conspirators" work both with and against the contradictions of capitalism. Follow the trail of abandoned food, hungry mouths, forbidden gifts, and urban developments from FNB chapter to FNB chapter, continent to continent, and it leads to larger intuitions about transnational capital, about its handmaiden the "global" city, and about the forms that political resistance may take in the years to come. To connect these dots, in this book I ask questions that seem initially unconnected. Why should our market economies (touted as bastions of efficiency) abandon so much unspoiled food? Why should it be illegal to feed the homeless? What makes a city "world class"? How does one organize a mass conspiracy?

Consider two facts. Since the 1980s, major metropolises around the world have increasingly been remade in the image of the so-named "global" city. From São Paulo to Dubai, their metastasizing glass-and-steel skylines glint from the pages of in-flight magazines in honor of their accession to a privileged niche at the apex of financial, managerial, and informational food chains. They perform the "command functions" of global capitalism (Sassen 2001, 6). Meanwhile, during precisely the same period, chapters of FNB have steadily multiplied, scavenging for leftovers the world over and feeding those at the bottom of the same economic food chains. These trends are related. Although FNB crops up in diverse places for diverse reasons (like crabgrass or any other rhizome), the oldest, most storied chapters—the ones that touch the most diverse lives and anchor an oft-ephemeral, swarm-like movement—have tended to assemble in globalized cities such as Seattle. Not only because these places are crossroads for teeming flows of people and ideas. But also because such mighty conurbations unremittingly manufacture the very surpluses, scarcities, and dispossessions that make FNB's labors both possible and politically meaningful. Food Not Bombs has been formed in the crucible of these cities' divided landscapes and it has, in turn, shaped those landscapes after its own fashion. In short, global capitalism and the global city create the conditions for a worldwide conspiracy to feed people.

This book develops a toolkit to sound out these entanglements between capitalism's wastes, urban transformation, and political resistance. Based on six years of collaboration and participant-observation with Se-

attle FNB (from 2005 to 2011), shorter, recurring research expeditions to FNB in San Francisco, New York, and Melbourne, and more than a decade of volunteering and personal affinity with FNB in the other cities in the book, it follows three lines of thought across time and space, each suggested by FNB's global scope and its location at the margins of economic value and urban space. First, FNB's redistribution of discarded food throws into relief the rhythms by which waste is produced and circulated under contemporary capitalism. Second, its struggles with food-sharing prohibitions highlight the relationship between waste-making, (bio)political power, and the production of urban life. And third, FNB serves as one possible map of the political potential of that waste, or what Anna Tsing calls "the possibility of life in capitalist ruins" (2015). Briefly, the book argues that capitalism manufactures scarcity through waste-making, world-class cities create both world-class waste and massive displacement, and from those discarded surpluses and displaced people may emerge novel forms of political organization and nonmarket economy, emblemized by FNB.

Accordingly, three themes wind their way through this argument. First, the book excavates what I term *abject capital*, those once-commodities that are still useful but that are more profitable to throw away than to sell. If capitalism is "patchy," as Tsing (2015, 5) puts it, these goods are banished to some of its most obscure patches. Out of sight, out of mind for many businesses and theorists alike, they are paradoxically discarded and yet still captured within the process of capital accumulation; their abandonment actively manufactures scarcity itself. So cast aside, however, abject capital is a kind of "latent commons," a hidden commonwealth that may be "catalyzed by infraction, infection, inattention—and poaching" (255). In this vein, I'll trace some of its social afterlives and the abject economies made possible by its banishment. They belie the myth of scarcity that is a cornerstone of market economics and capital accumulation.

Second, I explore strategies of municipal governance, particularly anti-homeless measures that punish public food sharing and privilege a world-class, commerce-friendly kind of public life. Among other things, this keeps waste matter in its place, out of public view. In the same move, certain modes of living are excluded and rendered "surplus life," "life that is considered unnecessary, and that is nonetheless productive of surplus value in neoliberal capitalism" (Willse 2015, 49). I'll call the urban polity by which these lives are excluded a "market-public."

Third, I chart some of the emergent forms of resistance and "counter-publics" (Warner 2002) cultivated in their exclusion from this version of public life. They share abject or marginal embodied political-economic

practices that I call “illiberal embodiments.” Here, I mean by *illiberal* not authoritarian or conservative, but rather queered with respect to the liberal social contract (following the term’s older meanings of “vulgar” or “ill-bred”). In their alienation from the mainstream public and its liberal economies, the city’s residua are freer to find unexpected affinities and allegiances, as Anna Tsing (2015) teaches us. They nurture the kinds of nonmarket shadow economies described in the prologue. Crucially, their fluid, heterogeneous forms of material solidarity are not neatly captured by the ascendant terms of political analysis that reduce affinity to identity. (Whether one’s preferred critique centers “workers,” “whiteness,” or what have you—although these are surely part of a larger, messier recipe.) Yet over temporal, spatial, and social distances, they emerge as an unstable yet effective political object. Both oppressed and released by their exclusion from the public sphere, and by the desuetude of its unwanted excesses, they form the kernel of political resistances like Food Not Bombs—something I will describe as a kind of slow insurrection.

In the coming decades, as growing ranks of people concentrate in increasingly polarized megalopolises around the world, these three dynamics may increasingly shape the fates of those cities that call themselves “global” and those people and things that are marginalized under their mighty economies. The nonmarket economies and forbidden gifts described in this book highlight relationships between food (in)security, municipal governance, and the global economy that hold broad implications for urban governance and political mobilization in these places. (The slow insurrection of FNB, for example, partially prepared the terrain for faster insurrectionary movements such as Occupy Wall Street, which likewise reassembled abandoned people and things in a global fashion.) And more broadly, the relationship between waste-making and political exclusion plays an often overlooked role in capitalism’s constant transmutations. In all of these ways, therefore, FNB’s example may hold valuable lessons for the twenty-first-century city.

The Global City

“This city is so fucked, I don’t know where to begin,” says my friend Rose, a tattooed artist who knows FNB from her time in the punk scene. “It makes me want to throw up. They are doing absolutely everything they can to push low-income folks out. Which, by the way, is now anyone who makes under \$72,000 for a family of three.”²

This is Seattle in 2018. Only two decades ago, its sleepy reputation was such that “Weird Al” Yankovic could rhyme “garage band from Seattle” with “sure beats raising cattle.” But now, all anyone can talk about is the rent. Seattle has become a boomtown. Cranes dot a skyline that I barely recognize from a mere three years before, and the cost of housing chases these brand-new towers skyward with reckless abandon. Rose is a single mother and dance instructor whose teaching studio rent has just increased by 40 percent all at once. (Her name is a pseudonym, like that of anyone else in this book who isn’t already a public figure or hasn’t requested otherwise.) Her sentiments are shared by countless friends and collaborators who have seen the city transform over the past decade—and their rent hike literally overnight. At one point, Seattle’s housing prices were increasing by an astounding five dollars every hour (Adolph 2018). As Seattle-area multinationals such as Microsoft and Amazon expand voraciously, and as transnational capital flocks into local markets, the city’s “growth machines” (Logan and Molotch 1987) fete its success. They’re not alone in the celebration, as various knock-on benefits—from world-class shopping to appreciating home values—trickle down to the middle class.

But others can’t fail to feel squeezed. As well-paid information technology workers with expensive tastes flood the labor force, beloved local haunts are shuttered or slated for redevelopment. Communities of color and blue-collar residents are priced out of their neighborhoods while offshore corporations park the anonymous wealth of global elites in luxury real estate and empty condominiums—which have, in the years following the global financial crisis of 2008, become a sort of global “currency” with increasing significance (Madden and Marcuse 2016; see also Sassen 2015; Florida and Schneider 2018). Meanwhile, FNB has seen growing lines of unhoused and food-insecure people join it for dinner in the park each week. Seattle follows the example of cities like Los Angeles and New York, where the ranks of people sleeping on the streets swell in proportion to housing costs (Glynn and Fox 2017). More than twelve thousand people now experience homelessness in the city—a threefold increase over the past fifteen years (All Home 2018). (Although a persistent myth envisions the homeless as drawn to the city’s bounteous social services—in reality an overstretched, ad hoc patchwork—the majority of Seattle’s shelterless were here before they lost their homes [City of Seattle and Applied Survey Research 2017].) The mayor declared Seattle’s runaway homelessness a state of emergency in 2015, but it grows apace, nonetheless.



"Now leasing": reflections of downtown Seattle (2017).

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On any given night, more than twelve thousand Seattleites experience homelessness. (First Hill, Seattle, 2017)



Yet the problem is more complex than gentrification or rent gouging; it's also a question of political power. Consider, for example, the 2018 “head tax”—a per-employee levy to be paid by high-earning corporations that was championed by Seattle’s City Council to fund solutions to the housing crisis (the burden of which falls increasingly on city coffers in an era of dismantled state and federal welfare supports). Political resistance from business leaders such as Jeff Bezos, Amazon’s CEO and now the richest man in the world, blocked the tax (Semuels 2018). In the subsequent City Council elections, Amazon devoted more than \$1 million—the largest individual donation in recent memory—to challenging progressive candidates (Beekman and Brunner 2019). Meanwhile, spurred on by the head tax controversy, a constellation of city elites and “Not-in-My-Backyard” homeowners’ coalitions have spun a partisan narrative about homelessness to stir up popular resentment against the same progressive politicians, perceived as being permissive or enabling, and to divert money from prevention to prosecution.

The city’s successes have not, therefore, trickled down to unhoused Seattleites. One longtime homeless advocate recently summed up the net gain of Seattle’s boom: “There’s sixty-five cranes on our skyline, and all we got were nineteen units of affordable housing. Beyond pathetic.”³ As Seattle ascends to the rank of global city, it is easy to read its trajectory in Manichean hues. (“This city is so fucked.”)

Rose could easily have been talking about most of the other cities I will describe in this book. Particularly Melbourne, New York City, and San Francisco—to which I have returned often in writing and in person, along with Seattle. Each city’s experience is distinct, of course. Their waves of transformation reflect local histories and geographies as much as global trends. But their parallel evolution over time is striking. Far-flung cities converge in form; they “move toward” one another (Simone 2010, 15) in such a way that three decades ago and eight hundred miles away, San Francisco FNB found itself pitted against much the same dynamic Rose decried in Seattle, expressed in much the same terms by Peter—who himself lived in a tent in Golden Gate Park when he began serving food with FNB in the late 1980s, in that very park. “What was happening was a transformation,” he explained. “The city was . . . moving out poor people wholesale.”

In part, these cities express the age-old story of haves and have-nots. But the restructured landscape of post-Fordist capitalism calls for more specific comparisons. Geographically distant, they are nonetheless bound by common ties to the world market. Following Saskia Sassen (1990, 2001), I use the word *global* to describe their shared patterns of devel-

opment. All cosmopolitan, postindustrial cities that have gradually been abandoned by manufacturers (and many stable middle-income jobs along with them), they have reinvented themselves as powerhouses—either emerging or established—within the informational industries that organize the world economy.⁴ In pursuit of that goal, coalitions of businesses, developers, and public officials work to give their landscapes a “world-class” makeover, but at the cost of great polarization and displacement.

There have long been “world cities” of great renown and influence (Geddes 1915; Hall 1966). But the “global city” is something newer: a metropolis transformed by the “new spatial division of labor” that emerged from the globalization and deregulation of production and finance in the late twentieth century (Friedmann 1986, 70). Coined by Sassen in the 1990s, the term *global city* captures the emerging command functions of cities like New York, London, and Tokyo—those industries central to regulating and directing the global economy (Sassen 2001). Although the global playing field has evolved since then, as different “global” cities adopt diverse strategies to compete with one another within the same niches (see Ren and Keil 2018), Sassen’s remains the canonical model. One of the ironies of the new world order, she argues, is that capital is both more mobile (in its investment) and more centralized (in its ownership and management) now than ever. As industrial production is increasingly atomized, far-flung, and flexible (“made in Mumbai-Detroit-Tokyo-Juarez-Shenzhen . . .”), and the international movement of finance has asymptotically approached a kind of tractionless instantaneity, global cities have concentrated the management of this production and movement, accumulating the relevant “producer services” (finance, information technology, research and development, corporate management, accountancy, and so on) and infrastructure (stock exchanges, office towers, high-speed broadband, etc.).

Sassen describes a hierarchical network of such cities fanned out across the world, facilitating flows of wealth and information—a postmodern, multimodal expression of Wallerstein’s “world systems theory” (1984), splintered and flung about the globe according to the needs of global capital. Seattle, Melbourne, San Francisco, and New York City have all become regional and/or international nodes within this network over recent decades.⁵ Although they vary in power and connectivity, they each have a stake invested in their command functions and the distinctive forms of urban transformation Sassen associated therewith.

Moreover, though most cities are not global cities strictly speaking, according to Sassen’s model, many aspire to become so. They are “globaliz-

ing cities,” as John Rennie Short (2004) puts it; a common sense of global “becoming and longing” animates them (Short 2004; see also Marcuse and van Kempen 2000; Ren and Keil 2018). And the contest is always changing. World leaders like New York City seek to maintain their status just as important regional centers such as Melbourne aspire to become global cities. Throughout this book, therefore, I describe my objects of study as both “global” and “globalizing” to capture the tension between extant and virtual, being and becoming.

As many have suggested, calling them “global cities” implies a certain ethnocentrism—even racism—as if the toxic fields of Delhi’s electronics recycling industries or the Taylorist barracks of Shenzhen’s factories were any less products of globalization. Surely, a city can be global in myriad ways (see N. Smith 2002; Mayaram 2009; Ong and Roy 2011; Simone 2010). But precisely the point here is that elite, ethnocentric visions of New York, London, Tokyo, and so on become hegemonic. The “global city” (and its cognate adjective, *world-class*) therefore becomes both a framework of analysis and an emic, ethnographic term embraced by cities that aspire to defend or usurp the command functions of such economic powerhouses (Sparke 2011). Representations of the global hold a weighty cultural cachet invoked in these places, a cipher to international economic and political success within what is not quite the smooth playing field the word often seems to claim.

Such global imaginaries enable an enormous project of place-making that remakes many of the everyday surfaces of metropolitan life. The global city itself is therefore a product, a sort of metacommodity, that emerges from such economic and cultural restructuring, and enables distinctive regimes of urban accumulation and agglomeration. That urban life, remade, turns out a wealth of world-class waste (food wasted in the interests of commodity aesthetics, buildings left empty for property speculation, and so on) and yet puts food and shelter financially out of reach for many. These conditions are ideal for scavenging, redistributive movements like FNB. As Marx and Engels might have it, therefore, what the global city produces, above all, are its own gleaners and garbage collectors.

Food Not Bombs

Meanwhile, back in Seattle, I’m at a meeting. A semiregular Food Not Bombs convocation to hash out the perennial quandaries of an anarchist soup kitchen. Whose house to cook at next month? Who’ll pick up the food? Will we cater for the upcoming demonstration? Could more peo-

It's 2017 now. I haven't been actively involved for five years (after chasing various teaching posts), so I recognize only a few friends. There's Jules, for instance. She's a core organizer, or "bottom-liner," as we call them. A single mother who has juggled raising two kids with casual employment and public assistance, she still routinely makes space for FNB in the small kitchen of her low-income apartment, embodying the can-do-make-do ethic that makes FNB possible. She's hosting this meeting in her living room. One or two friendly faces aside, however, these folks are all new to me. Yet the group feels instantly familiar. Its similitude underscores a par-

Food Not Bombs, New York City (2016).



adox: like many radical political projects, FNB is simultaneously ephemeral and perennial. In each city I have visited, FNB crews turn over as a matter of course, as volunteers move on and are replenished. “There were people all the time, every week, that were new . . . just coming through the same outlets that I did,” explained Kris, who as a teenage punk found FNB via flyers at Seattle’s Left Bank Books in the mid-nineties. “And you know that’s what Food Not Bombs thrives off of,” he beamed. “Long as you got bodies, that’s all you need. In a thing like Food Not Bombs, you don’t need, you know, a structured group of people. Like it’s kind of beside the point.” Yet though people come and go, the common conditions of the city reproduce shared dynamics and struggles that resonate from chapter to chapter across the movement. Forty years old now, Food Not Bombs represents a sort of global, recombinant commons (no longer latent) assembled largely of capitalism’s excesses. Although it fluctuates from week to week and cohort to cohort, it has expanded across decades and cities steadily, like the mounting food waste, hunger, and neoliberal globalization that have been its backdrop during the same time frame.

The familiarities are manifold. Like so many FNB conclaves before, a dozen or so of us are crowded around an ad hoc meeting space. If it’s not a living room, it’s a church. Or a park. Or a community center. Whatever can be begged, borrowed, or occasionally rented at a cut rate. By necessity FNB becomes expert at rendering the common at the margins of other economies, bearing out Bataille’s dictum that “life occupies all the available space” ([1949] 1991, 30). Similarly, logistical considerations like those rehearsed above echo from meeting to meeting and chapter to chapter. In fact, during my six years of previous involvement I learned many of the answers to the questions raised by relative newcomers at this meeting: Should FNB seek a permit to share food in the park? (Probably not, as we’ll see in chapter 4.) Who updates the web page? (That’s my old friend Vijay, a refugee who donates his IT expertise to grassroots groups rather than make a cent from it. He makes a cameo in chapter 5.) Veterans hand down some of this information. Other knowledge is acquired by each new generation under the selection pressures of food recovery in the global city.

From these conditions emerge a shared constellation of dispositions and skills—the know-how to open a locked dumpster or facilitate a meeting, for example. “There was just so many places where I’ve used the model of Food Not Bombs, that notion of just being able to grab whatever is accessible, and create this meal out of it,” reflected Patricia. “I was very compelled by the consensus model that was being used,” she said. “The fact that there was basically no budget, and that there didn’t really need



Passersby, Food Not Bombs, Seattle (2017).

to be. That it ended up being people just kind of diving in and taking responsibility and working cooperatively.” Such shared, embodied knowledge often knits together the disparate global constituents of radical political movements (Juris 2008).

The mood in the room is familiar, too, a predictable spectrum of responses to the sometimes exhausting, sometimes exhilarating endeavor of feeding the city’s most vulnerable members and improvising with the surpluses at hand, week in, week out. Some people here are earnest and idealistic. Some are restless and bored. Some, quietly pragmatic, and perhaps suffering burnout born of years of unpaid caring labor, working against the grain of a market society. (As one old hand from Melbourne FNB told me pithily, “There’s always somebody doing too much.”) And yet meetings like these are often warm, affirming affairs. Jules has made dinner for everyone. My new acquaintance Matt’s irrepressible sense of humor means he can’t hold himself to his promise of making only one

pun per agenda item. This buoyancy and solidarity, too, is familiar from my years with FNB in Seattle and elsewhere. As I argue in chapter 5, such

a mass conspiracy is animated and organized precisely by such bonds of feeling and affect.

If the things that make this meeting feel familiar spring from FNB's common urban context, so do the things that make it feel different and new. The new faces here, and the movement's constant turnover, are reflections of the diverse forms of mobility fostered by cities like Seattle. Social and economic "drift" are both a reflection of the precarity and flexibility of post-Fordist economies (Ferrell 2017) and also distinctive to globalizing metropolises, which tend to be nodes for larger patterns of domestic and international labor migration (Sassen 1996, 2001). Indeed, during my time, most of my FNB collaborators were touched by drift and displacement—from broke, train-hopping punk rockers and other unhoused volunteers who met us while lining up for dinner, to transplanted university students; from migratory service workers (international and domestic) working in the bottom rungs of the postindustrial economy, to underemployed youth following the suburban-to-urban exodus in search of a supportive counterculture and a better job. This not only afflicts FNB with a high turnover. It also lends FNB a distinctly networked, heterogeneous character that weaves together the largely white radicals and students who are the mainstay of much far-left protest with a spectrum

It was a crew of friends, and a big group of friends, you know? There was a hundred people in the punk scene, even more, that all supported in one way or another Food Not Bombs . . . Because we were cooking in our own houses . . . you know you'd always get your little things of households complaining, "Oh, bloody Food Not Bombs has been here again and they left a huge mess!" And then other people were like, "That's what I did—I cleaned up Food Not Bombs and that was my little bit that I did!" . . . It's a really positive, amazing, empowering thing to achieve—and the excitement and the little smile you see on people's faces when they hear that, wow, Food Not Bombs is still kicking off, and that it is worldwide . . . You just want it to spread. And that was always the philosophy of everyone I knew in Food Not Bombs: "This is not owned by us. This is something to be owned by every individual. And to be taken as far as you can take it." And, what we used to say to a lot of people when they say "Oh, you know, I want to help, I wanna help." And we'd go, "Start one up in your own area."

—Kay, founding member,
Melbourne FNB, ca. 1992

of other differently displaced outsiders in ways that remain illegible to frameworks that center class, race, or nation. (As such, FNB complicates some of the stereotypes associated with young, privileged, radical activists, as I argue in chapter 6.) And as diverse FNB collaborators move from city to city for diverse reasons, they often seek out new chapters, molding Food Not Bombs into a "network of networks" (Castells 1996; see also Juris 2008). As Vikki, a squatter and radical journalist from New York,

put it, “I think it’s one of those things that’s on a circuit, so while I was doing Food Not Bombs if I went to another city, I went and I tried to find Food Not Bombs.” Corrina, an ecologist from Oregon, agreed: “I definitely started traveling differently than I would have maybe in college before I was, I don’t know, more open to the radical community if you want to call it that. Like Food Not Bombs, and that kind of circle. Now, when I go to a city, I expect to be able to find a community there.”

Nothing illustrates this networked structure better than the Five Degrees of Food Not Bombs, a game I developed almost accidentally through chance run-ins in FNB kitchens early during my research. So mobile and well networked were my new friends, I realized that I could trace networks of personal acquaintance between literally any two of the FNB collaborators I met in any of the six cities on two continents I had visited at that point, within only five degrees of separation—without including myself. (It’s a variation, of course, on the popular Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon, played by connecting actors to Kevin Bacon via shared film billings. Aptly, a friend taught me that Five Degrees of Food Not Bombs could readily become Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon, because a close relative of the actor apparently once played in an East Coast punk band and was loosely associated with the local FNB chapter.)

After I had interviewed dozens of collaborators, some of whose stories date back to FNB’s salad days in the late 1980s, it became clear that the shared urban landscapes and cultural logics described in the last section have been a crucial medium for the movement’s growth. Although the name “Food Not Bombs” was first coined in Boston in 1980, it began as a different kind of project, under different historical conditions: the group was an outgrowth of the antinuclear Clamshell Alliance, and founder Keith McHenry described the original dinners to me as a sort of political theatre. Ironically, they had hoped to evoke

When I was in Toronto, I went and I visited my cousins—who are very sort of straight-laced, Hong Kong Chinese, living in Canada, working straight jobs. They study business or something like that. And they were really puzzled because I was walking around that part of Toronto where crusties hang out, and I would stop every single crusty on the street and ask them if they knew if there was a Food Not Bombs. Like every single one of them, and my cousins were really sort of puzzled by this. They were like, “She has stopped every homeless person under the age of thirty and asked them about something called ‘Food Not Bombs’” . . . so I think if I hadn’t been involved in Food Not Bombs, I wouldn’t have that sort of like, “I want to plug into this and see how it’s done someplace else. Gee, I don’t know where there’s a Food Not Bombs. Let me just ask homeless people.” Or “Let me decide to go an hour before my cousin is supposed to get married, wash cabbage with a really nice dress on.”

—Vikki, New York City FNB, mid-1990s

the shocking spectacle of Depression-era soup kitchens and breadlines—happily unaware that within a decade such spectacles would become an unremarkable part of the American landscape. FNB’s most explosive growth only came later, with the metamorphosis of American cities, particularly San Francisco. In 1988, after a relatively controversy-free eight years in the Boston-Cambridge FNB chapter, McHenry moved to San Francisco and organized a new Food Not Bombs chapter there. By that time its urban conditions of possibility were transformed. The deregulation of the global economy, the Reagan-era rollback of the welfare state, and the corresponding restructuring of US cities rendered the intersection of homelessness and public space a site of intense political struggle—acutely so in globalizing cities like San Francisco, Seattle, and New York. Those struggles are the primary content of FNB’s particular conspiracy. As I describe in chapter 5, the new San Francisco chapter faced intense opposition by police and public officials, and this newly globalized urban landscape became ground zero for the movement’s growth. By 1992,

I have this really great visual memory of people marching down Haight Street and having fun and, you know, like banging on soup pots, you know what I mean? It was really colorful. I mean Haight Street was really colorful anyway . . . So I was very taken by that. It was a total California experience. And very friendly people . . . I just felt like I quickly found a very welcoming community of people, friendly people, and people who were interested in a lot of the same issues that I was. I have a good visual memory—people were having fun, chanting “food not bombs” and all that. You know, it’s a very concise expression of a lot.

—Erin, San Francisco FNB, ca. 1990

new chapters had formed numbering perhaps in the dozens, enough to hold the first national FNB gathering; and within another decade the movement spanned the globe. Food Not Bombs chapters therefore each represent an expression of a kind of many-headed hydra growing out of the surpluses, excesses, inequities, and deterritorializations of urban globalization.⁶

Methods

In investigating this, I have followed anthropology’s signature approach, ethnographic participant observation. Ethnography’s firsthand, quotidian optics are well suited to exploring a patchy sort of global capitalism. Its local footing puts the ethnographer on the trail of concrete, lived traces of global phenomena—

or as George Marcus (1995) famously described it, “ethnography in/of the world system” (see also Ong 1999; Tsing 2004, 2015). I have therefore framed my field sites at multiple scales. On one hand, I have worked at the local scale of FNB chapters and the genres of space they inhabit (the park, the kitchen, the dumpster, and so on). On the other, I have imag-

ined “the field” at the scale of two emergent, transnational phenomena: Food Not Bombs and the global city. Both figures describe rhizomatic networks simultaneously global and place-based, moving assemblages of goods, people, information, and value—albeit of very different kinds. As Nik Heynen writes in his own work on Atlanta FNB, “Ethnographers have shown that the combination of local participant-observation complemented by engagement with these kinds of global networks can facilitate more meaningful understandings of the ‘global as local practice’” (2010, 1228).

Mapping these formations has demanded that I, too, be in motion. To that end, I have juxtaposed the kind of long, intimate participation for which ethnography is famous with shorter forays into the network of networks that is Food Not Bombs. In the former, I spent nearly every Sunday for the better part of six years with Seattle FNB, collecting, cooking, and sharing food, and then washing up afterward. In the latter, over a decade or more I made recurring visits to chapters in San Francisco, New York City, and Melbourne (Australia, not Florida), along with more limited visits to other chapters in the United States (Boston, Worcester, Berkeley, Davis), New Zealand (Wellington, Christchurch, and Dunedin), and Australia (Brisbane)—many of them facilitated by acquaintances within the Five Degrees of Food Not Bombs. Like so many other new FNB initiates, I chopped vegetables, cooked dinner, and shared it with new friends at each chapter. Not all of these places are “global” cities, of course. Like any good rhizome, FNB has many faces; each is the sum of its local, historically particular contexts. Nonetheless, even chapters in smaller cities offered a valuable vantage point from which to trace the movement of people and ideas, and their embeddedness in a trans-local political economy.

Additionally, none of these chapters represents a single “site.” As nodes in various larger networks and flows, every FNB chapter enables what Celia Lowe has called a “multi-sited ethnography in a single locality,” insofar as each can “reveal the travels of cultural meanings, objects, and identities across wider fields of engagement” (2006, 6). As has been well established by now, the locations we might describe as “field sites” in a narrowly geographic sense in fact contain multiple forms and structures—and don’t even contain them very well (Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Malkki 1997). In the same way, a single chapter of Food Not Bombs becomes multi-sited over time as its personnel and clientele turn over and the city churns with redevelopment.

And not only that. As we saw earlier, Food Not Bombs collaborators themselves are often on the move, and are avid networkers. Everywhere

I went, I met a Babel of itinerant co-conspirators from other chapters in countless cities and perhaps a dozen countries. I could have perhaps even stayed in one place and let the world come to me—and all the more so in the global city. Following the example of Jeffrey Juris's (2008) work on protest networks and global informational flows, however, I found it invaluable to follow the global distribution of embodied practices that make those flows possible. The best way to learn about FNB was to visit numerous kitchens and get my hands dirty.

It is helpful that Food Not Bombs is a cosmopolitan affair that welcomes sundry newcomers (and, indeed, anyone willing to chop vegetables). It comprises countless strangers who—not unlike anthropologists—often turn up enthusiastic and green, get to know their way around the kitchen and lesser-known corners of the city (dumpsters, shelters, and so on), and often drift from chapter to chapter, mapping out the larger social worlds of FNB as they go. It becomes an open book to collaborators, yet remains anarchic and illegible from without (as Francisco suggested with the word *conspiracy*).

It is also helpful that I identify as an enthusiastic co-conspirator. For more than a decade, I have been connected to FNB and the political and countercultural communities in which it is embedded—dumpster-divers, squatters, homeless advocates, punks, anarchists, and so on. My own experiences with FNB date back to age twenty-three, when I worked in the back of a thrift store in Davis, California, sorting through a cornucopia of unwanted, donated ephemera. I saved backpacks and personal hygiene supplies from the pile and handed them out alongside FNB. I had heard the group's recruitment messages on community radio: they always ended with, "And remember . . . Food is good, bombs are not." When I later moved to Seattle for graduate school—before I ever thought about writing this book—I sought out FNB and became quickly committed. In the process, I also cultivated relationships with a range of advocacy groups in Seattle, often cooking with FNB for fundraising benefits, demonstrations, marches, and anarchist book fairs, cultivating individual relationships with communities of homeless advocates and service organizations.

This is all the stuff of ethnography. Jeffrey Juris (2007), who found a productive synthesis between ethnography and activism during the counter-globalization protests of the early 2000s, writes: "One has to build long-term relationships of mutual commitment and trust, become entangled with complex relations of power, and live the emotions associated with direct action organizing and activist networking. Such politically engaged ethnographic practice . . . generates better interpretations and analyses"

(165–66). In the same fashion, I and other FNB collaborators have put our bodies on the line in visceral, practical ways, from doing outreach in some of Pioneer Square’s darkest alleys to throwing my back out carrying too many boxes of produce. I, along with my co-conspirators, have lived the feelings associated with FNB’s brand of direct political action, from the anger stoked by police pressure to the despair shared with homeless friends at their desperate circumstances, the joy of finding the perfect peach in a dumpster, the frustration of washing dishes until midnight with too little help, or the gratitude at finding a couch upon which to stay the night. I lost many an hour of sleep looking for new kitchen spaces. I literally wore out my car’s shock absorbers driving nigh on a half-ton of food and volunteers around Seattle each week. Juris (2007) defines this embodied political engagement as “militant ethnography.”

This political action becomes differently legible in a global perspective, against the backdrop of the global city. In that sense, the global city is my primary “field site.” Its transnationally networked character and the flows of people, things, ideas, and money to which it gives rise lend it a multilocal ethnographic reality. I therefore follow urbanists such as Joanne Passaro (1997) who suggest that the cultural politics of homelessness are embedded in a globalized political economy in a way that constitutes a coherent heuristic for fieldwork (see also Bourgois 2010; O’Neill 2017). Passaro argues that the chaotic experiences of urban life in a major city like New York are no more complex than those at any other point in the (post)modern, globalized world. Or, as she puts it, you can, in fact, “take the subway to the field” (Passaro 1997). In these ways, this book aims to present a multiscale account of both Food Not Bombs and the global city, informed by local ethnographic realities and transnational trends.

Plan of the Book

The book is divided into three parts dealing with waste, cities, and political organization, respectively. Ideally, the argument will unfold like a three-course meal, inspired by the models and methods of discard studies, global urbanists, and radical social movements. Following the venerable example of *Das Kapital*, it begins with a symptom, the humble commodity (and here, its route to the dumpster); connects the dots that trace its origins; and highlights its political implications.

Part I, “Abject Capital,” traces the origins of our mass conspiracy’s raw materials, both people and things. It asks why capitalism should abandon edible food and other useful surpluses to the dumpster and how the act

of their abandonment circumscribes political membership and exclusion. The first chapter explores the cultural economy of commercial waste and the reasons it might be profitable for businesses to throw away goods that are still useful. This waste, I argue, represents an ongoing contradiction for capital that inflates the value (and price) of newer stock. Paradoxically abandoned and yet still part of the process of capital accumulation, I define such waste as “abject capital.”

The second chapter explores the social spaces that are implicated in the creation of abject capital. Under liberal capitalism, the creation of value defines a particular kind of public sphere, an imagined community of people who are understood to share the basic language and conventions of commerce and exchange. If abject, wasted capital has a role to play in establishing the value of those things left on the shelves, it must remain absent from this particular public sphere. If it circulates at all (and it must, for it cannot be willed into nonexistence), it must do so apart from those people who participate in the market, both spatially and socially. This sphere is what I call a “market-public.” The chapter explores the disenfranchisements that result from the weld between its economic and political imaginaries, as public needs and priorities are defined in ways that privilege commerce. At the same time, I suggest that other nonmarket “counterpublics” (Warner 2002) might be constituted in the recirculation of capitalism’s excesses. It is exactly this counterpublic dimension that is expressed by Francisco’s metaphor of the mass conspiracy.

Part II, “World-Class Cities, World-Class Waste,” explores the relationship between waste, political inclusion, and the transformation of cities by neoliberal globalization. Chapter 3, the first in this section, describes the concrete processes by which abject capital and market-publics are produced in globalizing cities, particularly in the speculative and spectacular projects that lend global cities currency and prestige within the world market, and in their reimagining of the urban landscape, from luxury consumption and gentrification to inequality and displacement. The process intensifies turnover of capital of all kinds, much of which is rendered abject and removed from circulation.

Chapter 4 teases out the implications of this waste for urban space and policy. It describes the forbidden gift—the efforts of Seattle and dozens of other cities to restrict the free outdoor distribution of food and other necessities. These prohibitions against sharing represent an instrument with which to remake public life in the image and interests of the global city, and they constitute the chief site of struggle for our book’s conspiracy. Meanwhile, the circulation of abject capital—wasted food in particular—

is consigned to marginal spaces within the city. The chapter looks more closely, too, at the assumptions and attitudes of policymakers, public employees, and philanthropic organizations in Seattle, many of whom accept the basic priorities and claims of a market-public and are distrustful or antagonistic toward counterpublic efforts like Food Not Bombs that circulate these free gifts.

Having described the provisions and proponents of the conspiracy and the counterpublic shadows in which they operate, in Part III, “Slow Insurrection,” I describe their forms of organization and mobilization. Chapter 5 explores the uneasy relationship between city governments and Food Not Bombs—from the hundreds of arrests of Food Not Bombs volunteers in San Francisco during the 1980s and 1990s to the episodic police pressure enforced in Seattle and my other research sites. Drawing on Zibechi’s (2010) model of insurrectionary political movements, I sketch out a symbiotic relationship between a peaceful, “slow insurrection” like Food Not Bombs—one that unfolds opaquely over decades—and the municipal state apparatuses with which it is entangled and which have an interest in keeping out of public circulation precisely the abject capital and surplus life that are FNB’s raw materials. In policing the ways and spaces in which people can survive in the globalizing city—particularly by limiting the nonmarket circulation of food—they provoke FNB’s mobilization and expansion.

In chapter 6, I explore Food Not Bombs’ global proliferation not only through conflict with municipal authorities but also through mutual aid among nonmarket counterpublics of dumpster-divers, squatters, gleaners, and other scavengers. This chapter asks what new forms of global, embodied relationships are made possible by the availability of global capitalism’s wasted surpluses, particularly food and shelter. These counterpublics hold open the possibility of assembling a diverse spectrum of bodies and practices excluded from mainstream, liberal public spheres. Illegible from without, this assembly nonetheless makes new lives and embodiments possible.

Finally, in the conclusion, I recap the book’s arguments by way of teasing out four political conclusions pitched at a broad readership, from activists and policy makers to everyday readers. These conclusions aim to complicate received political and economic wisdoms, contextualize or critique urban policies (such as the feeding restrictions described throughout the book), and suggest strategies for political organizing. In these ways, perhaps the experiences and intuitions of FNB may be put to further work.

The thesis was that if there's technology and machinery on the planet that can make a television set for every man, woman, and child on the planet, and you don't have a television because you don't have the money, the money is a way of inventing scarcity.

—Peter Coyote
(December 2008)

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Locked bin, locked restaurant dumpster. (Melbourne, 2018)

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notes

Introduction: Of Waste, Cities, and Conspiracies

Epigraph: Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 13.

1. For a partial list, see “2020 Food Not Bombs Locations,” <https://foodnotbombs.net/info/locations/>.
2. To qualify for low-income housing with the Seattle Housing Authority, a family of three must make less than 80 percent of the area median income, which at the time of her comment was \$72,250 per year.
3. This described the number of “affordable” units mandated in 2019 to be part of these current developments under the city’s Housing Affordability and Livability policy.
4. Roughly following Sassen’s model of global city development, Seattle, New York City, San Francisco, and Melbourne each had experienced a decline in manufacturing jobs by the opening of the twenty-first century; growth in information technology, producer services, and other white-collar work; and a coinciding growth in casual or low-waged service work (see, respectively, Gibson 2004; Sassen 2001; Pratt 2002; Pamuk 2004; Beer and Forster 2002; Randolph and Holloway 2005).
5. Each city except Seattle ranked in the top three tiers of the global urban hierarchy described by Derruder et al. (2003), according to their connectivity within networks of corporate service firms; Seattle ranked fourth, “rarely if ever mentioned as world cities” (883). Only three—New York, San Francisco, and Melbourne—made it into the top fifty cities in terms of their share of headquartered corporate offices and subsidiaries (Godfrey and Zhou 1999). And while Seattle trails behind according to those criteria, the greater Seattle metropolitan region outshines the relatively provincial Melbourne according to the individual financial worth of some of its “pro-

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ducer services,” including the corporate headquarters of Fortune 500 companies such as Nordstrom, Starbucks, Weyerhaeuser, Nintendo, and information technology giants Microsoft and Amazon, as well as many of their smaller competitors and contractors. In terms of the city’s concentration of economic decision-making power and its hefty share of international financial transactions, Sparke (2011) and Gibson (2004) both reckoned Seattle a “global” city; the latter explicitly compared the city’s labor market and geography to Sassen’s archetype.

6. *Many headed hydra* is a term Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker (2000) use to describe the socially and geographically diverse, transnational proletariat unified in its relationship to landowners and power brokers under the conditions of European colonialism, slavery, and agrarian capitalism during the seventeenth century.

Chapter 1 : The Anatomy of a Dumpster

An earlier draft of this chapter appeared in *Social Text* 118 32(1) (spring 2014). Epigraph: Steinbeck (1939), 348–49.

1. This figure comes from Kantor et al.’s 1997 survey of US food waste. The US Department of Agriculture tracks both “food loss,” the total amount of food thrown away, and “food waste,” foods thrown away that may have been recoverable. Much more recent estimates for food loss are available (e.g., Buzby et al. 2014); however, estimates for “food waste” across the entire food system, such as Kantor et al.’s, are much harder to come by.

2. For example, vacant housing stock in the US rose steadily from 13.677 million vacancies, or 12 percent of the total housing stock, in 2001 to 18.574 million vacancies, or 14 percent of the total housing stock, in 2011. This increase was consistent over the intervening years, piqued only slightly by the recession in 2009 (Callis and Kresin 2011).

3. During 2010, for example, according to the World Bank global food prices rose to near the levels of the 2008 food crisis, pushing an estimated 44 million people into poverty (Poverty Reduction and Equity Group 2011, 6).

4. The United Nations Environment Programme, for example, has cited inefficiencies in the global food system that result in massive food waste, directly contributing to food crises like the 2008 price hikes (Nellemann et al. 2009).

5. Between August 2008, at the outset of the crisis, and the end of the following year, December 2009, food stamp participation increased nationally from 29 million people to a record 39 million—or one in eight Americans (Food Resource and Action Center 2009). In Seattle and across King County, according to the Department of Public Health: “In 2008, the number of people visiting King County food banks increased by over 72,000 people, a 30% increase compared to 2007; the number of people visiting food banks continued to increase through 2009 and 2010” (Public Health Seattle & King County 2020).