

Growing the Insurgent Commons: Counter-mapping Alternative, Subversive and Insurgent
Food Networks in Seattle

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Abstract

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This thesis builds upon the contemporary growth of radical commoning and alternative food network (AFN) praxis to analyze the prefigurative potentials of Seattle's food-based commoning networks. Historical analysis demonstrates that enclosing the commons from the 15th century onwards – specifically the privatization of food resources – is fundamental in the economic and military expansion of capitalism throughout the world. Additionally, scholars emphasize the importance of *commoning* – the development of communal relations – in combatting land privatization through the present. However, AFN literature does not often engage with commoning studies, despite the clear tactical and theoretical overlaps. Furthermore, both fields systemically lack a political and materially based framework for analyzing the effectiveness of their tactics. Using militant research and counter-mapping methods, I mend these disconnections in AFN and commoning literature by applying lessons from past radical commoning practices to contemporary food-based projects in Seattle. By

mapping all above-ground groups involved in free food circulation, I visualize the collective capacity of Seattle's free food networks and provide Seattle residents with updated information about these services. To promote deeper engagement with revolutionary theories – such as the *shadow state* and *dual power* – I argue for the distinguishment of *insurgent* praxis from the predominant neoliberal frameworks. This thesis argues that insurgent commoning is the primary tool through which we can fortify our communities against climate and capitalist collapse.

Table of Contents

Introduction:	1
Chronic Instability of Capitalism.....	4
Building Power through the Commons.....	6
Thesis Overview	8
1. Enclosure of the Commons:	10
1.1 Importance of the Commons	10
1.2 Development of private property:.....	12
1.3 Exporting capitalism.....	14
1.4 The continuation of primitive accumulation today.....	18
2. The Battle for the Commons: Overcoming the Neoliberal Logic in Commoning Praxis	21
2.1 Substantive Commons:.....	22
2.2 Social Commoning:	24
2.3 Alternative Food Networks and Commoning:.....	28
Forging an Insurgent Food Network Classification	32
2.4 Insurgent Commoning:.....	35
Social Reproduction, the Shadow State, and Nonprofits in U.S. Counter-insurgency.....	38
Building IFNs and Insurgent Commons for Post-Capitalist Worldmaking	41
2.5 Conclusion.....	47
3. A Brief History of Seattle Food Activism:	49

4. Methodology:	55
4.1 Conceptualizing the Alternative and Subversive Food Networks:	58
4.2 Creating Seattle’s Free Food Map:	60
4.3 Measuring the Impact and Efficacy of the Free Food Network:	61
5. Seattle’s Free Food Networks:	65
6. Analysis	67
6.1 Spatial Efficacy	70
6.2 Material Output	77
6.3 Financial Independence.....	79
6.4 Analysis Conclusion	81
7. Conclusion:	83
8. Appendix:	85
8.1: Missing Data from Seattle’s Food-Based Organizations:	85
8.2: Financial Independence Non-Profit Calculations.....	86
9. Bibliography:.....	87

Introduction:

Against the gothic backdrop of University of Washington's Seattle campus, the student-led Popular University for Gaza's Liberated Zone (LZ) — established May 1st, 2024 — created a vibrant space for radical, prefigurative commoning. Through a large coalition of student groups organizing under the name "UW United Front for the Liberation of Palestine" (UF), UW students joined the international student encampment movement in demanding an end to university support for Israel's genocide of Palestinians. Walking along the LZ's main artery, I admired the tents where any visitor's needs could be met: food and water accessible in the fully-stocked "pantry" tent, warm meals provided in the "kitchen," tents and sleeping bags available in the "supplies" tent, hygiene products offered at the "mutual aid" table, medical care administered by trained street medics in the "medic" tent, and professional therapy offered in the "mental health" tent. Wandering further into the camp, I saw spaces dedicated to personal and cultural expression, such as the art tarp, the "People's Free Library" tent, the mini flower garden, and an open area for events — where speeches, dances, and prayer occurred daily.

Nestled between luscious cherry blossom trees, this community had grown a common. Through daily conversations with LZ residents on my way to and from work, I learned that resources provided in camp were collected through pre-existing networks. Most of the hygiene products, sleeping supplies, and shelf-stable foods had been supplied through coordination between local mutual aid groups and student organizers. Healthcare services were similarly organized through interpersonal networks, mainly staffed by community members whose skills far exceeded those of the student body. Warm meals came from a combination of individual donations, restaurant donations, and dumpster dived ingredients cooked on-site. Several people mentioned to me that they had not paid for food since the encampment began.

In my conversations with LZ participants, it was clear that the encampment's strength came, in large part, from the cooperation between students and community members. For example, when fascist counter-protestors threatened to tear down the camp, it was the Seattle community's robust response that successfully defended the occupation. However, the contradictory political perspectives amongst the student body broke down this collective power. Tensions between liberal and radical LZ residents eroded the channels of collective governance and community connectivity that held the space together. This ultimately enabled select students – going against popular opinion – to capitulate with university demands on May 16th, 2024, and fully dissolve the LZ by May 20th (Anonymous, 2024). Though the LZ was designed to be a short-term encampment, its concurrent existence as a commons demonstrated the power, connection, and material stability that can form through commoning projects. Simultaneously, its deterioration embodied the instability of “un-common” commoning projects (Benya, 2021), which – in their failure to maintain cohesion, disrupt hierarchy, or challenge neoliberalism – often capitulate to institutional pressure (Anonymous, 2024). This thesis project is inspired in part by the questions raised through my observation of the UW Liberated Zone: (1) *How can the U.S. radical left impede the genocidal and ecocidal policies of the state?* (2) *How can people gain the skills, connections, and resources needed to prefigure postcapitalist societies?* (3) *Through what process can we expand these practices and networks to facilitate wide-spread insurrection?*

I argue that *insurgent commoning* is central in answering these questions. Commoning was conceived as an anti-capitalist practice in the earliest fights against enclosure and has been a critical tool in struggles since. It is a complex process of de-commodifying, de-privatizing, and reassociating land, resources and social relations. It is the development of communal infrastructure, built through the unification of existing physical, emotional, and material networks (Linebaugh, 2008). However, as demonstrated above, commoning practices vary

greatly in their approaches, executions, and goals. In this thesis, I differentiate the revolutionary combination of these factors as *insurgent commoning*. Insurgent commoning practices use communal infrastructure to prefigure anti-racist and feminist social relations and nurture revolutionary worldmaking (Federici, 2019; Gutiérrez Aguilar, 2024). Through this process, insurgent commons repair the separations and ruptures that strengthen capitalism, instead developing material, communally-based interdependence (Gutiérrez Aguilar, 2024, p. 68). Though they are short-lived, spontaneous commons like the UW LZ – and the over one-hundred more pro-Palestinian encampments in the spring of 2024 – illustrate the growing desire and capacity for global, anti-capitalist revolution. By sustaining one another through existing networks, activists unearth and build up the material, political, and social capacity of the local insurgent commoning infrastructure. At the LZ, I was most inspired by the encampment’s ability to consistently supply subsistence goods. Other LZ residents expressed similar feelings and outwardly advocated that communal bonds and stability be kept after the camp inevitably fell. Though the LZ’s status as a common ended, many of the networks involved in it and created through it persisted.

Maintaining the focus on Seattle, this thesis is dedicated to visualizing the breadth of alternative, subversive, and insurgent food networks in the city. Imploring the methodological perspectives of militant research and countermapping, the intention of this research is to both strengthen dependence on and interest in insurgent commoning activism. Food is regularly considered as one of the most potent illustrations of capitalist exploitation and alienation (Edwards, 2023) and is routinely one of the first resources around which people build self-reliance (Federici, 2019; Illner, 2021; McClintock, 2014). By mapping points of food distribution and production organized through alternative, subversive, and insurgent food networks, I illustrate that a food-based subversive commoning movement already exists in

Seattle. I argue that this community infrastructure is essential to building revolutionary capacity and will only become more necessary as we face climate and capitalist collapse.

Chronic Instability of Capitalism

In the first few months of 2025 alone, there were several serious threats to the affordability of staple foods in the United States (Stiles, 2025; Swan et al., 2025). In January, the rampant spread of avian flu caused a sharp increase in egg prices and left U.S. consumers concerned about the long-term accessibility of foods they depend on (Krueger, 2025). The severity of this crisis was due in large part to the overconcentration of animals in mega-farms, the environmental degradation and increasing deregulation afforded to the meat industry, and the increased risk of pandemics that comes with climate collapse (Malm, 2020). However, U.S. legislators showed little desire to address these causal factors. Instead, the Trump administration worsened the situation by defunding the Center for Disease Control (CDC), the sole agency responsible for detecting mutations in the virus. Though the cost of eggs did decrease in March 2025, the Trump administration's imposition of exceptionally high tariffs threatened to jeopardize this short-term stability (Stiles, 2025). Amid this disastrous response to the avian flu epidemic, the Department of Government Efficiency's (D.O.G.E.) massive cuts to the federal workforce further jeopardized the safety of dairy products. Due to these cuts, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) announced a pause in the "quality control program for testing of fluid milk and other dairy products" (Deutsch, 2025). Defunding the FDA and CDC at a time when an infectious disease transmissible to humans is rampant amongst dairy-producing animals shows the extreme disregard that the state has for the general safety of the U.S. public.

In the first hundred days of his presidency, the Trump administration and D.O.G.E. provoked extreme fear amongst many in the U.S. through draconian immigration policies, illegal detainment of activists, erasure of D.E.I. and anti-discrimination protections, limiting

access to healthcare for trans youth, and conducting mass firings across the federal workforce, formerly one of the most stable employment sectors in the United States (Stanley-Becker, 2025; Swan et al., 2025). Additionally, the administration amplified the U.S. military's assault on liberation movements around the world, exacerbating geopolitical tensions by deepening allyship with genocidal governments, threatening the sovereignty of resource rich nations, and instigating a trade war that will have disastrous effects on not only the buying power of the U.S. public but also the stability of global trade (Swan et al., 2025). Though the pace at which these policies are being enacted is more extreme due to the current administration, the amplification of dispossession and a decrease in social services (i.e. the social safety net) was already underway (Gelderloos, 2022; Gilmore, 2017; Illner, 2020; Wolch, 1990) – an intrinsic market reaction to the multiple existential threats capitalism is facing (Harvey, 2003; Marx, 2018; Slobodian, 2023). With the exhaustion of natural resources, the acceleration of the climate crisis, and the growth of revolutionary politics around the world, powerful capitalist countries are driven to intensify the violent, extractivist practices that have sustain their exploitation (Gelderloos, 2022; Malm, 2020). For example, U.S. imperial desires to secure trade-routes and resources have, among other things, influenced the re-ignition of genocides in Palestine and Congo and pushed the Amazon to its ecological tipping point. Alongside this steep increase in violence, states and corporations are turning towards far-right narratives to justify these actions. For the United States and many of its historic allies (Israel, Argentina, Italy, Germany, and France to name a few) this turn is distinctly fascist, characterized by: racist, white supremacist policy and culture; the protection and empowerment of white, homicidal vigilantism; and the intensification of exploitation through increased state and corporate collaboration (Dutt, 1974).

The speed at which the Trump administration was able to enact sweeping changes reveals the immediacy with which the U.S. government can alter daily life. Attacks to the social safety net – particularly food, housing, and healthcare assistance – have historically been the

first expenditure the state cuts when capital is in crisis (Illner, 2020). This means that for many people in the U.S., there will no longer be access to these life-saving resources through the state. This situation is exacerbated by the imminent climate collapse (Malm, 2020). Over the 2024-2025 winter season, U.S. communities endured record-breaking natural disasters — most prominently, Hurricane Helene and the Los Angeles County wildfires — that devastated community infrastructure. Given the inadequate response that the federal, state, and local governments presented (Rhodehamel, 2025; Walker, 2024), it is essential that people work to build communal infrastructures of their own.

Building Power through the Commons

Many people in the U.S. have only heard a capitalist depiction of the commons — primarily one that stems from Garrett Hardin’s *Tragedy of the Commons*, which argues that holding resources in common causes devastating long-term consequences. However, the commons — or more accurately, the practice of commoning — has been at the core of our strongest societies since time immemorial (Federici, 2019). Despite the persistence of Hardin’s theory in today’s social structure, it has been widely debunked by commoning scholars and activists, particularly when looking at food access after the enclosures that established capitalism (Federici, 2014, p. 70). Under the regime of private property, commoning has continued to play a central role in human survival and remains a crucial tool of resistance to capitalism (Federici, 2019; Gelderloos, 2022; Gordon-Nembhard, 2014; Illner, 2020; Jackson, 2022; Stavrides & Travlou, 2022; Varvarousis et al., 2021).

The power of commoning networks is clearly represented by the assistance they provided to those affected by Hurricane Helene and the Palisades and Eaton Fires. While police were blocking residents’ access to the only grocery store (see figure 1) to prevent “raiding” in Black Mountain, North Carolina (Odisho, 2024), a combination of formal and informal mutual-aid

Figure 2: Police officers block a grocery entrance in Black Mountain, N.C. (9-28-2024)



Figure 1: Residents gathering supplies from community-run relief center in Cruso, North Carolina (10-3-2024)



groups were the first to provide resources to those in need (see figure 2), some even facilitating resource donations across state borders (Walker, 2024). Similarly, in Los Angeles, mutual aid groups stepped up to provide “free high-quality masks and other supplies for mitigation” when they observed the failure of local and state governments to do so (Rhodehamel, 2025). Even at the Pasadena Convention Center, “one of the major evacuation shelters in the area, police and Red Cross at the shelter had no respirators to provide.” It was the strength of existing grassroots networks that allowed community activists to meet this need and protect people from the harmful air pollution (Rhodehamel, 2025). These examples illustrate the importance of communally-operated mutual aid networks – which are notably faster than local government. One North Carolina activist, Tai Little, commented that the long-term state negligence in the area had played a role in motivating the fast community mobilization: “They know what it’s like to know that they cannot depend on the state or the government to be there as a first responder” (Walker, 2024). The only state response they can depend on is a police presence at the doors of corporate private property.

As the federal government promises to cut back on social service infrastructure, communities must build and strengthen their own. It is essential that we begin to think intensely about how to build infrastructure that is independent of the state — not just for emergency situations, but for the long haul. We can look to history for examples. As Little mentioned, it is communities who have been impacted most by systemic capitalist abandonment (often indigenous, Latin American, African, and African diasporic communities) where the strongest interdependent networks already exist (Akuno, 2015; Gordon-Nembhard, 2014; Gutiérrez Aguilar, 2024; Marcos et al., 2016). In cases when communities like these have successfully revolted from capitalism, insurgent commoning has often been a primary tactic. Past revolutions have consistently shown that focusing first on *commoning* existing resources, building *insurgent economies* to cooperatively distribute goods, and establishing insurgent infrastructure — known systemically as *dual power* — is typically a successful model (Gerassi, 1971; Gutiérrez Aguilar, 2024; Tse-tung, 2000). Drawing from this history, I argue throughout this thesis that the commons are essential for revolutionary social and material transformation.

Thesis Overview

In this thesis, I argue that insurgent commoning — the process of growing material, social, intellectual capacity for anti-capitalist revolution — is the primary tool through which we can fortify our communities and stop capitalism's death drive. I focus on food activism as a desirable place to begin commoning efforts because it is cost-effective and, in many places, a network of free food distribution already exists. By mapping and analyzing Seattle's subversive food network, I aim to raise awareness about the feasibility, accessibility, and power of this organizing approach.

In the first chapter, "Enclosure of the Commons," I discuss the social and material hierarchies embedded in the concept of private property. The enclosure and destruction of the

commons was central in the initial enforcement of the capitalist private property regime. Enclosure continues to be an important tool of counterinsurgency today. In the second chapter, “The Battle for the Commons,” I layout the prominent subtopics within commoning literature and discuss the need to forge the term insurgent commoning to distinguish the revolutionary praxis from the neoliberal. I connect the insurgent commons with its historical implications in revolutions and liberatory struggles across the globe. I then compare insurgent commoning to alternative food network literature to emphasize their compatibility and discuss how the two may be used for building revolutionary capacity. In chapter 3, “A Brief History of Seattle’s Food Activism,” I discuss the various strategies implemented across radical movements in the city. I focus here on summarizing the welfare movement in Seattle from late 1960 to early 1970s as an example of the strong history of commoning-like tactics in the area. Chapter 4, “Methodology”, explains my militant research and countermapping approaches to this thesis and the theoretical and practical implications that this had on my work. I work to embody commoning praxis by connecting this research with ongoing mutual aid efforts. More specifically, as I collect this research, I am bringing my findings into activist spaces to expand understandings of our existing free food network and advocating for further research around other free resources networks. In Chapter 5 and 6, I present my findings on “Seattle’s Free Food Network” map. I focus on spatial effectiveness, material output, and financial independence in analyzing the capacity of alternative, subversive and insurgent networks within it.

1. Enclosure of the Commons:

The commons are a cooperatively managed space of shared, non-commodified resources. Historically, the commons have been fundamental in sustaining communities and promoting ecological and egalitarian outlook within them (J. B. Foster, 2024; Gelderloos, 2022; Graeber & Wengrow, 2022). Through the forcible displacement and expropriation of the commons and those who maintained them, the private property regime built the base of its power. The process of enclosure – also referred to as “*primitive*” or “*original*” *accumulation* – cemented the foundations of capitalism in European society while simultaneously weakening the material power and social connection of the rebellious lower classes (Marx, 2018). Land privatization, driven by European merchants, entrenched and expanded racialized and gendered hierarchies as European empires moved beyond the continent. Enclosing the commons was a central military tactic in the colonization of the Global South. The unending growth of capitalism has created a perpetual crisis of primitive accumulation. I will highlight that: 1) the vision of communism was developed from historic practices of the commons; 2) The enclosure of the commons (i.e. primitive accumulation) is the primary source of social inequality and instability, and 3) The continuation of (new and existing) enclosures entrench collective instability and inability to resist.

1.1 Importance of the Commons

Before the formation of the capitalist state – entrenched through the material and social alienation that ruptured cooperative life and facilitated ecocidal environmental relations – people survived through interconnected commons. While pre-capitalist societies contained many problematic hierarchies, they were frequently more egalitarian than capitalism due to the popularity of commoning practice. Indigenous societies across the world often manage(d) resources cooperatively to ensure stability within their communities (Carlson, 2020; Daschuk,

2013; Federici, 2019; Gelderloos, 2022; Graeber & Wengrow, 2022; Gutiérrez Aguilar, 2024; Marx, 2018). Some have even linked this human tendency to the practice of symbiosis amongst plants and animals in an effort to demonstrate the centrality of mutual aid/commoning in the continuation of all life (Kimmerer, 2013). Reflecting upon these practices, many have argued that indigenous societies (particularly those in the Americas) inspired communist theory and, in this sense, are communism's original practitioners (Federici, 2019; Gelderloos, 2022; Graeber & Wengrow, 2022; Marx & Engels, 1959), though their applications of it look different from the Marxist conceptualization. As Graeber & Wengrow (2022) argue, it was the far more generous application of “baseline communism” — i.e. the “grounds of human sociability” that motivate one person to help another — which generally made non-European indigenous societies more equitable (48). For instance, amongst Indigenous communities in Turtle Island’s Northeast Woodlands, it was “inconceivable to refuse a request for food” while this was standard practice for the 17th century Frenchman living in the area — an opinion which indigenous people found abhorrent. The indigenous people who interacted with these traders and early settlers made many similar critiques of European (early capitalist) society that motivate commoning efforts today; they highlighted “the squabbling, the lack of mutual aid, the blind submission to authority [... and], the organization of private property” as central issues with their societal structure (Graeber & Wengrow, 2022, p. 52).

These examples demonstrate that the desire to communally and equitably distribute resources and labor is not just a reaction to capitalism, but a long-standing practice in human and more-than-human relations. Additionally, they underscore the increased social and material equity that comes through commoning practice. However, due to capitalism's unending drive to expand, it was essential for colonists to eradicate commons, absorb their material wealth, and capture the people and labor power that sustained them. Furthermore, the importance of

commoning in stabilizing non-capitalist relations directly contends with capitalist alienation. For this reason, the commons have been and remain central to capitalist counterinsurgency.

1.2 Development of private property:

By the time capitalism began to form in the early 16th century, the legal and social framework that inspired capitalist private property had been practiced in Europe for nearly 1800 years (Graeber & Wengrow, 2022). Inspiring European private property laws, the Romans enforced a property regime based on racial and gender oppression which sought to dismantle any existing communal practices by pushing individualism:

[...] there was a strong emphasis in ancient Roman (and modern European) law on the self-sufficiency of households; hence, true freedom meant autonomy in the [extreme] sense, not just autonomy of the will, but being *in no way dependent on other human beings* (except those under one's direct control) (Graeber & Wengrow, 2022, p. 66, emphasis added).

The ideological power of individual ownership continued to develop through the organization of feudalism in Europe and culminated in the establishment of capitalism. As the power of the King and the feudal system decreased towards the end of the 15th century, merchants and feudal lords conspired to alter property relations in a way that would facilitate the growth of large cities they controlled (Marx, 2018). To do this, feudal lords “created an incomparably larger proletariat by forcibly driving off the peasantry from the land [...] and by the usurpation of the commons” (Marx, 2018, p. 477). These unlanded workers were forced into cities to work for merchants, who had become wealthy through their monopoly on trade during the Black Death in the mid-14th century (C. J. Robinson, 1983). The process of enclosure was extremely violent and immediately endangered the lives of peasants. As their economic security became reduced to that of day-laborers, a process of “proletarianization,” their access to subsistence resources simultaneously decreased (Marx, 2018, p. 480). This led to a massive decrease in rural

populations and, by consequence, an erasure of social life in these areas (Marx, 2018, p. 477). The process of primitive accumulation was so brutal that, in its first large waves through England in the 16th century, enclosures led to the destruction of more than 2,000 rural communities – such a staggering event that the Crown called for an investigation (Federici, 2014, p. 69). However, the enclosures did not end, continuing to destroy peasant villages, and with them, the autonomy and self-reliance of the people that lived there.

Enclosures were particularly devastating for women, who, “having less title to land and less social power, were more dependent on [men] for their subsistence, autonomy, and sociality” (Federici, 2014, p. 71). Furthermore, in contrast to pre-capitalist European society, the market system valued productive and reproductive labor unequally and severed them along gendered lines. Now, only “production-for-market was defined as a value-creating activity, whereas the reproduction of the worker began to be considered as valueless and even ceased to be considered work” (Federici, 2014, p. 75). Undoubtedly due to these converging factors, anti-enclosure movements were often led by women. By the 16th and 17th centuries, the devaluation of reproductive labor capacity led to a crisis of mass starvation across Europe. Once again, women took the lead in organizing massive uprisings to demand food, colloquially called the “women’s riots” (Federici, 2014, p. 80). The means of reproduction was the final frontier of appropriation that allowed European states to entrench capitalism. Starting first in France and England, the state conservatively doled out food rations in exchange for additional labor or self-deprecating amusement (Federici, 2014, p. 85). In providing this conditional assistance, “the state began to claim ‘ownership’ of the work-force [...] enabling employers to relinquish any responsibility for the reproduction of workers, in the certainty that the state would intervene [...] to address the inevitable crisis (Federici, 2014, p. 84). Through this concession, the state – as organizer “of the possessing class for its protection against the non-possessing class” (Marx & Engels, 1959, p. 393) – legitimized the extreme exploitation of the proletariat, devaluation of reproductive labor,

and subsequent entrenchment of the “super-exploitation” of women that define capitalist labor relations. The state continued (as it does today) playing this counter-insurgent role as capitalism’s power expanded vastly due to the primitive accumulation of land and labor stolen through colonization.

1.3 Exporting capitalism

The bulk of capitalist primitive accumulations – through which capitalists amassed the power to exploit all human and more-than-human life— came through genocide, enslavement, and the seizure of Indigenous lands. The colonization of people and land beyond the continent allowed the European bourgeoisie to build an empire through which their code of law and exploitation could be enforced across the globe. As Marx writes in Capital 1:

The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of aboriginal population, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black-skins [...] are the chief momenta of primitive accumulation (Marx, 2018, p. 500).

As discussed earlier, the racist logic that legitimated colonization and enslavement had been popularized in Europe through the earliest articulations of private property and the two hundred years of violent European enclosures that predated foreign exploration (C. J. Robinson, 1983). It was this tendency towards “exaggerating regional, subcultural, and dialectical differences into ‘racial’ ones” that allowed for the social acceptance of “extermination and/or extermination of non-‘Europeans’ (including Slavs and Jews)” (C. J. Robinson, 1983, p. 26). Cedric Robinson (1983) argues that, due to the racialism intrinsic to the European formation of capitalism, it is most accurate to represent it as *racial capitalism*, in which racism is the dominant factor in establishing capitalist class divisions and maintaining alienation. Focusing on the arguments used to legitimate enslavement, Robinson shows how the homogenization and dehumanization

of Africans was central to the codification of racialized private property laws. Brenna Bhandar (2018) substantiates this argument through her extensive legal analysis, demonstrating that colonial property law “produced a racial regime of ownership that persists into the present, [...] in which justifications of private property ownership remain bound to a concept of the human that is thoroughly racial in its makeup” (4). As was shown in earlier examples of enclosure and will be demonstrated further in the following sections of this chapter, it is the combination of racism and patriarchy that ultimately shapes the capitalist hierarchies of ownership and labor. The development of colonial infrastructure and a colonial state were co-constitutive in forcing dependence on this racial and patriarchal property regime, therefore solidifying the unequal distribution of power along these lines (Bhandar, 2018; Cowen, 2020). To do this, the European bourgeois applied the same tactics as they had within their countries: mass enclosures of the commons, seizure of the land, and exploitation of the people. In addition to creating the same devastating and patriarchal effects it did for European peasants, Indigenous societies stripped of their subsistence were forced into the most exploited positions within global capitalism. The entrenchment and evolution of this colonial infrastructure is what maintains the oppression of non-European societies through the present (Bhandar, 2018; Federici, 2014), even while these communities have continuously organized powerful communal rebellions which have stopped or, on occasion, undone capitalist accumulation (Estes, 2019; Federici, 2014; Gelderloos, 2022; Gordon-Nembhard, 2014; Gutiérrez Aguilar, 2024).

Through the decimation of Indigenous populations and the commons they relied on, European colonial infrastructure mutated physical and psychological conceptions of space and land, enforcing dependence on the occupying force, solidifying its racist and patriarchal ideology as the defining social hierarchy, and reinforcing European countries' claims as empires and legitimate governing bodies (Harjo, 2014; Wolfe, 1999). A key example of colonial infrastructure's role in North American colonization is the Canadian Pacific Railroad project of

the late 1800s. The project was originally conceived of by the British to defend their imperial claims across North America from Native American attacks on settlers and the United States' rapidly growing trade infrastructure. The project became a joint effort between the settler-colonies of Canada and the United States as they realized their shared interest in suppressing indigenous insurgencies would have to be a cooperative effort. As the railway was built, the areas surrounding it were entirely reconstructed physically and monetarily in ways that solidified imperial claims:

Whole neighborhoods – Black and working class – that came to define the political and social life of the city were built around the physical infrastructures of the rail yards, tracks and stations that constitute its physical form to this day. As Montreal became the official headquarters of the railroad, it also became a key node in networks of finance that linked this city's financial institutions and London's markets. [...] The enclosure of the lands – forced transfers from Indigenous nations to the railway corporation – served as the prime asset through which the CPR was able to raise money in the London financial markets, and it provided the immediate cash influx from land sales (Cowen, 2020, p. 473).

Furthermore, in their efforts to expand, the rail line depended on and facilitated the extremely violent “clearing of the plains” (Daschuk, 2013). Indigenous resistance against the colonial railroad project was strong, particularly in the great plains, where their “ecological niche as nomadic hunters sustained by vast herds of millions of bison gave them advantages in guerrilla warfare that would be difficult to overcome” (Gelderloos, 2022, p. 19). Bison were an essential commons, providing “clothing, shelter, food, temporality and spatiality to many Indian nations on the plains” (Cowen, 2020, p. 475). To dismantle these powerful indigenous societies, railroad executives – alongside US and Canadian military generals – committed genocide against the Bison, decimating the population of 100 million to just a few 100 in less than a century. The mass extermination of Bison severed indigenous peoples' autonomy from capitalism:

imposing dependence on the reservation system, a euphemism for the concentration camps that served to subject imprisoned nations to police control, suppress indigenous languages and spiritual systems, and impose western socioeconomic order based on individualized private property, field agriculture, and the consumption of addictive commodities (Gelderloos, 2022, p. 19).

By commodifying survival, colonizers enslaved people in the capitalist system, designed to kill and exploit them for generations. This is why destruction and privatization of the commons was among the most popular and most impactful colonial tactics – the British routinely enforcing the death penalty against those who refused to stop living from and in mutual relationship with natural resources, even within their own country. As Gelderloos argues, a substantial portion of “the substance of colonization was the destruction of indigenous practices of commoning in Africa, Asia, and the Americas” (Gelderloos, 2022, p. 21).

Capitalism, with its racialized and patriarchal property laws and hierarchy, ensured that capacity to socially reproduce – that is, to carry out the necessary, unwaged labor that maintains life – was devastated for the colonized (Daschuk, 2013). Women within colonized societies, who played central roles in social reproductive labor, were and continue to be amongst those most affected by the eradication of the commons. For example, the “wise women” of the Andes who traveled between mountain communities searching for “medicinal herbs and practicing community healthcare” were forced to abandon their way of life to become a wage laborer in the mines (Gelderloos, 2022, p. 21). The depletion of women’s ability to practice their lifesaving work deprived whole societies of their autonomy and ruptured cooperative care networks to isolate colonized people. Therefore, as a component of commoning, social reproduction has been and remains crucial in forging and maintaining nourishing relationships that foster resistance.

1.4 The continuation of primitive accumulation today

The violent process of enclosure – i.e. primitive accumulation – continues today, as it is critical in fueling capitalism's incessant need to expand. Distinct from ordinary capitalist accumulation – defined as the ongoing theft of the surplus value created through wage labor – primitive accumulation is the process of commodifying previously uncommodified land, resources, and labor (Marx, 2018). The fact that primitive accumulation is ongoing indicates that capitalism is required to constantly re-intrench the racialized and gendered hierarchies created through colonialism. In another sense, the need to constantly reaffirm hierarchy through private property law shows the instability of this system, and underscores, yet again, the social and material threat that commoning poses to capitalism.

The process of continued enclosure has been facilitated by the development and expansion of fiscal and physical colonial infrastructure which hyper-exploits and structurally abandons people of color. Changes in the intensity of exploitation coincide with the shifts in governance style that occur to salvage capitalism in times of crisis. For example, to escape the capitalist crisis of the 1970s, the U.S. government adopted a neoliberal approach, which stoked a renewed ambition to accelerate primitive accumulation. This entailed a rapid scaling back of the social safety net and increase in exploitative practices – such as weakened labor protections, privatization, indebting the global south, and deepening commitments to global corporate interests – that initially targeted domestic policy but quickly became central to foreign diplomacy. As Harvey (2003) explains:

[...] the effect was to make a new round of 'enclosure of the commons' into an objective of state policies. Assets held by the state or in common were released into the market where over accumulating capital could invest in them, upgrade them, and speculate in them. New terrains for profitable activity were opened up, and [...] this movement

created pressures to find more and more arenas, either at home or abroad, where privatization might be achieved (Harvey, 2003, p. 158)

This new economy based around finance – now also including data collection – has essentially created new frontiers for capitalist expansion and therefore brought significantly more wealth and power to the elite. However, the immateriality of these markets is exacerbating the intrinsic cycles of capitalist crisis and inducing an intensification of accumulation. The characteristic shift in governance that often goes alongside this process can be seen in the deepening commitment to fascism within the U.S. and other powerful nations (Slobodian, 2023).

However, resistance movements across time have demonstrated the powerful capacity of commoning practices in combatting increased alienation and exploitation. Throughout the robust U.S. radical activist movements of the 1960s and '70s that arose from BIPOC communities, commoning appeared across nearly all of them -- with poignant examples arising from Black (Chiles, 2015; Illner, 2021), Indigenous (da Cruz Alves, 2025), and Chicano (Nabokov, 1970) activism. Several of these projects brought significant wins in welfare and social reproductive capacity, not only to their communities, but to the entire U.S. population. This is most notably seen in the inclusion of Free Breakfast Programs in schools across the country after the Black Panther Party began providing this service to hungry elementary school children (Chiles, 2015). The structural abandonment – i.e. systemic exclusion from access to safety and security – that people of color face under capitalism (Bhandar, 2018; C. J. Robinson, 1983), particularly Black people, is part of the reason why commoning is so important for these communities to use in their liberatory organizing (Gordon-Nembhard, 2014; Roy, 2021). Structural abandonment is particularly observable through the crisis of gentrification in cities, which some have likened to colonialism, due to its disproportionate displacement of people of color to accommodate

influxes of new, wealthy residents (Maharawal, 2022). With the increasing domination of neo-colonial relations in cities and the heightened risks of survival that the instability of capitalist markets and climate collapse bring, it is urgent that commoning movements organize to resist increasing accumulation of all kinds – particularly amongst communities of color.

In summation, capitalist private property – i.e. the violent enclosure of the commons – has played a central role in eviscerating colonized peoples’ autonomy and establishing racialized and gendered hierarchies amongst them. As is demonstrated through historical analysis, commoning is the core of anti-capitalist resistance and revolutionary capacity. It is central in providing the material and social care that is systemically not provided, particularly to people of color. Therefore, as conditions worsen in capitalism and crises accelerate and converge, there is an urgent need for commoning-based resistance. In efforts to build a world beyond capitalism, it is important to reflect on the success of historic applications of commoning, while understanding that they were imperfect and must be adapted to current conditions. In the following sections, I evaluate existing commoning praxis to analyze how it can be effectively applied today.

2. The Battle for the Commons: Overcoming the Neoliberal Logic in

Commoning Praxis

Outside of the United States, commoning continues to be a popular tactic for building communal infrastructure (Apostolopoulou & Kotsila, 2022; Gutiérrez Aguilar, 2024; Stavrides & Travlou, 2022). As I will demonstrate towards the end of this chapter, many of these projects explicitly counter colonial, racialized, and patriarchal hierarchies. In the US, however, this is not the case. While many mutual aid networks exist in major U.S. cities, there is an immense lack of large-scale community infrastructure.

Neoliberal ideology dominates U.S. commoning practice. Across the country, the distribution of resources – an essential component of commoning – is mainly operated through nonprofit organizations. Academic discussion of the commons is similarly dominated by neoliberal perspectives. Despite being published from an array of social science disciplines (such as economics, political science, sociology, and human geography), scholars have largely produced over-systematized understanding of commoning (Partelow & Manlosa, 2023). Such an approach re-entrenches colonial sensibilities and power dynamics in commoning praxis, within and outside of academia. These power dynamics are made clear by the fact that scholarship on the commons is dominated by white men in the global north. In a study conducted by the leading commoning journal, *International Journal of the Commons* (IJC), they showed that between 2007-2020, about 71% of authors publishing in the IJC were based in U.S. or European universities (van Laerhoven et al., 2020). Of these scholars, the ten most prolific authors are all white and nine of them were men. The state of the academic field presents a clear disparity from the decolonial and anti-patriarchal ethic central to commoning movements historically. Despite the state of the field, there are scholars in the academy working to preserve and continue the radical history of commoning movements. In recognizing the commons as a politically and materially salient space for social change, these scholars developed the framework of

commoning, not just viewing the commons as a static space whose origins are obfuscated and forgotten, but one that can and must be created.

In this chapter I discuss the central trends in commoning and alternative food network (AFN) literature. First, I describe the two broad subfields within commons literature: *substantive commons* and *social commoning* (Partelow & Manlosa, 2023); then, I argue that further distinctions need to be made between social commoning and *insurgent commoning*. Second, I connect these commoning subfields with similar trends in AFN literature and argue that the same distinctions are needed. Third, I incorporate the analytic of the *shadow state* to demonstrate its usefulness in devising effective commoning theory and practice (praxis). This section further argues that existing food-based commoning resistance in the U.S. has been largely co-opted by affluent, white communities. Finally, I will describe the dominant theories in insurgent commoning and connect them with contemporary examples of this resistance practice.

2.1 Substantive Commons:

Substantive commons literature is the oldest branch of commoning studies, emerging in the early 1990s with Elinor Ostrom's book *Governing the Commons*. Ostrom's book was a rejection of Mancur Olson's (1965) *The Logic of Collective Action* and Garrett Hardin's (1968) *Tragedy of the Commons* (Göttl & Penker, 2020; van Laerhoven et al., 2020). Both Olson and Hardin argued that commons (i.e. collectively managed spaces) were bound to bring about the depletion of natural resources "unless managed by governments or through private property rights" (Poteete et al., 2010; van Laerhoven et al., 2020, p. 208). In contrast, Ostrom argued that a hybrid governance style, in which community stakeholders and state officials could co-maintain resources, would be the most effective strategy (Ostrom, 1990). She devised a set of eight design principles around which to manage the commons, or more specifically "common

pool resources,” that remain fundamental to substantive commons literature. Common pool resources are defined as the life-sustaining materials that humans require for survival and must collectively sustain. Scholars who discuss common pool resources generally focus on the “*Big Five*,” which include “forests, fisheries’, irrigation systems, rangeland, and water resources” (van Laerhoven et al., 2020, p. 1). Scholars in the substantive commons subfield continue to draw heavily from Ostrom, advocating for hybrid governance and theorizing methods for its application in different contexts.

Despite the popularity of this strand in commoning literature, it has come under scrutiny for its inability to contend with power dynamics and the false separation between society and nature (Bollier & Helfrich, 2019; Cleaver & de Koning, 2015; Nightingale, 2019; Partelow et al., 2019). Substantive commons approaches frequently fail to address the Indigenous history of the commons and subsequently leave out Indigenous sustainability practices. Furthermore, this subfield has severed itself from the reality of cooperative resource management in that it does not build from practical attempts to build and sustain the commons. Not only is the subfield therefore limited in its ability to address the practical difficulties of commons management, but it fails to evaluate the racialized and gendered histories of resource management and appropriation. Scholars critical of the subfield argue that failing to contend with these issues leads to a re-entrenchment of the problematic dynamics that currently dominate land and resource management under the private property regime (Bollier & Helfrich, 2019; Cleaver & de Koning, 2015; Nightingale, 2019; Partelow et al., 2019). Furthermore, substantive commons’ hyperfocus on common pool resources sidelines the need for social commons that prefigure post-capitalist societies. Viewing the commons as more than static areas or resources, scholars looking to mobilize the commons in radical directions developed new trends in the literature that called for a practical approach to creating commons.

2.2 Social Commoning:

To de-emphasize the false stasis that substantive commons literature presents, the emerging social commoning scholars stressed the significance of collective action in forging these spaces (Partelow & Manlosa, 2023). Linebaugh (2008) popularized an active use of the term commons, referring to it instead as *commoning*, to highlight the iterative nature of creating, maintaining, and improving the commons. He explains:

“To speak of the commons as if it were a natural resource is misleading at best and dangerous at worst—the commons is an activity and, if anything, it expresses relationships in society that are inseparable from relations to nature. It might be better to keep the word as a verb, an activity, rather than as a noun, a substantive,” (as cited in Partelow & Manlosa, 2023, p. 268).

Commoning’s theoretical intersection with human geography and political ecology motivated scholars to contemplate place, interconnection, and community in their work (Nikolaeva et al., 2019; Partelow & Manlosa, 2023). Marxist feminist theory became particularly influential because of its emphasis on dismantling capitalism and patriarchal labor relations through cooperative living, resource distribution, and re-valuation of reproductive labor (Federici, 2019; Ghandy, 2012). This advanced understandings of commoning as an activist method of forging centers for material-, culture-, and knowledge-production that could be used to fight for alternative societies (Gibson-Graham, 2006; Nightingale, 2019; Singh, 2017; Stavrides & Travlou, 2022). This focus on activist-commoning resulted in a deeper understanding, particularly amongst radical scholars who engaged with revolutionary history, of commoning as a network and infrastructure (Berlant, 2016; Chatterton, 2016; Federici, 2019; Gelderloos, 2022; Gibson-Graham, 2006; Gutiérrez Aguilar, 2024; Noterman, 2016; Paris et al., 2023; Stavrides & Travlou, 2022). These scholars highlight commoning’s ability to counteract neoliberal ideology, private property, and capitalism as a whole through its emphasis on cooperation, communal

ownership, and building *dual power* (Gelderloos, 2022; Gutiérrez Aguilar, 2024; Illner, 2021; Upadhyaya, 2015). They argue, therefore, that commoning is a favorable tactic in forging new social relations that disperse and decentralize power amongst commoners and communities (Stavrides, 2016).

However, radical and liberal scholars have widely differing interpretations of the tactics and alliances that commoning projects should utilize. This tension ultimately lies in their diverging goals for these projects, with radical commoners organizing for revolution while liberals aim for capitalist reforms. But there remains a lively debate, even amongst radical scholars, around the efficacy of commoning projects that work with institutions or institutionalize (Gilmore, 2017). As discussed below, I argue that incorporating the *shadow state* framework is the best way to understand this. Broadly speaking, radicals argue that these relationships risk the integrity of communal efforts, while liberals argue that relationships with the state stabilize and strengthen commoning efforts. However, the escalating exploitation of the lower classes has made working outside the state and capitalism increasingly difficult. In the desire to start making material changes, commoners with radical aims are increasingly collaborating with the state to establish commoning projects. Particularly in North America, stringent property laws limit the success of grassroots commoning tactics (such as squatting and guerrilla gardening) popular in other parts of the world. Therefore, it has become increasingly common for North American commoning projects — even those with radical goals — to try and avoid the destruction of their commons through institutionalization: becoming non-profits, community land trust, or receiving funding from the state (Akuno & Nangwaya, 2017; Angotti, 2007; Keating, 2020; Loh, 2023; McClintock, 2014; Ramirez, 2024; Spenser, 2023).

Institutionalization of North American commoning projects has created several issues for commoning praxis. The justification of state-cooperation has resulted in an over-emphasis on cultural rather than material change. For one, there is a growing focus on urban commoning.

Social movement theory generally sees urban space as a desirable nexus for activist movements due to the bounty of people and resources to organize. However, as contemporary Marxist movements often emphasize, people residing in rural areas tend to be lower-income and have less access to social services than those in cities. Furthermore, land is far cheaper and less surveilled in rural areas, meaning that purchasing land or squatting could be far more successful there than doing the same in cities. Relatedly, commoning literature has become dominated by papers focused on describing temporary commons within cities (After Echo Park Lake Research Collective, 2022; Hou, 2023, 2010; Swyngedouw, 2014). These papers tend to focus on individual case-studies and rarely attempt to make theoretical arguments based on analysis of the broader movement (van Laerhoven et al., 2020). While there is a place for symbolic protest in the process of building communal societies, there is also an urgent need to build physical and economic independence from capitalism. Furthermore, if not connected within a network of other similar commoning projects, one temporary common will not be able to sustain material change and build insurgent infrastructure. Excessively focusing on these ephemeral commons and emphasizing cultural impacts over material impacts has depoliticized commoning praxis. This depoliticization has popularized the idea of communing as a subculture, particularly amongst affluent white communities, failing to contend with systemic inequality or engage the oppressed groups who originated the practice.

These issues are most evident within literature on Do-it-Yourself (DIY) and Tactical urbanism. Both DIY and Tactical urbanism are described as methods of facilitating direct democracy and creating justice-oriented urban planning. However, they differ in their legacy and approach. DIY urbanism — which encourages practices such as guerilla gardening — gained popularity as a culture and a tactic in the 1990s, growing out of anarchist theory, the “right to the city” (Lefebvre, 2008), and anti-globalization movements (Shepard, 2014; Shepard et al., 2002). DIY continues to be influential for left-leaning activists and scholars in commoning, city

planning, alternative food network, and social movement literature (Charboneau, 2016; Day, 2017; Douglas, 2018; Finn, 2014; N. Foster, 2020; Hou, 2010; Kinder, 2016, 2017; Newman, 2014; Volont, 2019). However, its gradual de-politicization has steered others towards viewing DIY through a neoliberal ontology, understanding it to mean that individual community building practices are sufficient tactics for creating systemic change. More importantly, the apolitical aestheticization of DIY has inspired the development of new, already-coopted iterations, such as tactical urbanism (Alisdairi, 2014; Spataro, 2016; Webb, 2018). Tactical urbanism emphasizes the need to focus on implementing low-cost solutions to planning issues through cooperation between citizens, nonprofits and NGOs, government institutions, and private corporations (Lydon, 2015). Instead of using DIY to counteract the state and capital, tactical urbanism facilitates the neoliberalization of the city. Merging a formerly anti-capitalist practice with corporate and city planning initiatives renders the activism entirely ineffective (Webb, 2018). As I describe in section 2.4, if an activist group is reliant on funding or legal approval from the state or private sector, it has effectively been incorporated into the state apparatus. Communist and anarchist insurrectionary movements, as discussed throughout this thesis, have repeatedly shown commoning to be a pivotal element in building self-reliance. Therefore, the de-politicization and coopting of commoning has distorted and endangered one of the most powerful liberatory strategies and practices.

In this thesis, I aim to counteract the central issues in social commoning literature and re-politicize commoning by engaging revolutionary praxis, maintaining a critical perspective on state-commons relationships, and focusing on material changes that radical commons are creating. To re-politicize the field, I join other scholars in arguing for further distinctions between liberal and radical praxis, proposing the term *insurgent commoning* to describe the latter. In the following sections, I delve into existing insurgent commoning praxes with an emphasis on food. While engaging with alternative food network (AFN) literature, I make a

parallel distinction between liberal and radical praxis, arguing for the division of common AFN frameworks into three categories: alternative, *subversive*, and *insurgent* food networks. I highlight the overlapping literature on insurgent commoning and AFNs to argue that these tactics are highly compatible and provide an easy place to begin forming dual power.

2.3 Alternative Food Networks and Commoning:

Parallel to commoning literature, academic discussions of food-based resistance reflect similar limitations in counteracting neoliberal logics and capitalist power structures. In this section, I focus on alternative food networks (AFNs) and their connection to commoning practice. Food is not only a low-cost resource to provide, it can also rapidly become very impactful (both materially and culturally), particularly in the wake of major crises (Apostolopoulou & Kotsila, 2022; Okvat & Zautra, 2011; Popay, 2022; Rut & Davies, 2024). Though AFN literature features a wide variety of political opinions, scholars struggle to break from neoliberal frameworks and often fail to devise AFN tactics that counteract gentrification and urban crisis. However, the long history of radical movements using AFNs, just as is the case with commoning, has inspired a subset of the field to push against this neoliberal perspective and incorporate radical thought and experience into their analysis.

AFNs are generally defined as methods of counteracting the harmful effects of the capitalist food system through the creation of more equitable and ecological food networks (Goodman et al., 2011). This definition has been used to describe a wide variety of tactics — ranging from eco-friendly farms (De Bernardi et al., 2021), farmers markets (De Bernardi et al., 2020; J. M. Robinson & Śpiewak, 2023), community sourced agriculture (CSA) (Leitheiser & Vezzoni, 2024), and buying groups (Moragues-Faus, 2017; Moreira & Fuster Morell, 2020), to community gardens (Charboneau, 2016; Ghose & Pettygrove, 2014; Glennie, 2020; Göttl & Penker, 2020; Hou, 2014; Jackson, 2022; Kanosvamhira et al., 2024; Mudu & Marini, 2018),

backyard gardens (Blake & Cloutier-Fisher, 2009; Hanson & Marty, 2012; Krajewski, 2022), guerrilla gardening (Bach & McClintock, 2021; Hou, 2023, 2010), dumpster diving (Giles, 2021; Parson, 2019), and guerrilla food distribution (Giles, 2021; Parson, 2019; Spataro, 2016) — reflecting the broad spectrum of political perspectives within the literature. Notably, AFN praxis differs dramatically between the northern and southern hemispheres due to differing legacies, legal apparatuses, and applications of the tactic (Edwards, 2023).

The emergence of AFNs in the Global North began in North America in the late 1960s and 1970s, used first as a radical tactic in the civil rights, Black power, anti-war, and environmental movements (Edwards, 2023, p. 5). However, by the 1990s, the tactic and the culture surrounding AFNs had been largely co-opted by white suburban neoliberals. The influence of the “back-to-the-land” movement — centered more on constructing a white subculture than building the material bases for liberation — alongside the brutal repression of radical movements in the 1970s, effectively de-radicalized AFN movements in the Global North (Edwards, 2023). At this time, AFN praxis began to focus on critiquing large supply chains and argued for the consumption of “quality” foods, which were “local” and “organic.” This movement was quickly institutionalized — a prime example being the development of the “corporate-organic foodscape” (Johnston et al. (2009) in Edwards, 2023) — and that which remained grassroots was dominated by affluent white communities. Relatedly, when European activists began using AFNs in the anti-globalization movement, their implementation was noticeably less radical than in the Global South (Edwards, 2023, p. 5).

The development of AFN activism in the Global South has looked very different from the Global North, primarily because colonially induced poverty elicits a focus on self-reliance and community interdependence. In contrast to their northern counterparts, the focus of southern AFNs “was not a celebration of (alternative) consumption (Goss, 2004), ‘a lifestyle statement’ (Abrahams 2006: 5), or a ‘romanticised return to the local’ (ibid.: 20); but instead, centered

their motivations around survival, cultural diversity, food poverty and insecurity” (Edwards, 2023, p. 11). For many years, Southern AFNs were overlooked and deemed illegitimate amongst Northern scholars, presumably due to a combination of racism and the Southern AFNs informal status in relation to the state. Consequently, Northern AFN literature lacks thorough engagement with southern praxis, even though Southern AFNs have proven effective in building community resilience. For example, one survey found that 70% of residents in low-income neighborhoods across 11 African cities regularly buy food from informal markets or vendors (Frayne et al., 2010). Southern AFNs were central in expanding northern AFN theory, influencing the redefinition of AFN to include “grassroots-led urban and peri-urban agriculture, local and cultural food provisioning networks that catered for the urban poor, and cultural and religious modes of provisioning” (Abrahams (2006) in Edwards, 2023, p. 11). Overall, the need for self-sustenance in Southern AFNs demonstrates the importance of material independence when state assistance is lacking. This is particularly relevant in moments of crisis, as discussed in the following sections (Illner, 2020).

Today, the central trends and debates in Northern AFN scholarship mirror those within commoning. Scholars frequently measure the effectiveness of AFNs through their ability to: (1) challenge power dynamics through improved social and labor relations (Gavaldà & Cattaneo, 2022), (2) prioritize ecological perspectives (Beacham, 2018), and (3) prefigure alternatives to capitalism through the embodiment of “food justice” (Cadieux & Slocum, 2015; Coles, 2016; Ghose & Pettygrove, 2014; Jackson, 2022). AFNs, like commons, are often imagined as activist infrastructure. Similarly, radical activists highlight that AFN infrastructure is capable of facilitating the cultural and material change necessary to build independence from capitalism (Popay, 2022; Rossi, 2017). In the United States, growing food has been shown to be an essential tool for individuals and families trying to alleviate food insecurity and economic hardship (McClintock, 2014). A national study of households conducted in 2008 shows that “36

million households in the USA (or roughly a third of all households) practiced food gardening,” a figure expected to increase to 43 million the following year. Of those surveyed, “more than half (54%) noted that they practice gardening to save money on groceries and a third (34%) responded that the current economic recession motivated them “very much” or “a fair amount” (McClintock, 2014, p. 151). However, just as is seen in commoning literature, there is an intense debate around the effectiveness of AFN practices. AFN practice, particularly the development of community gardens, has been repeatedly linked to gentrification (McClintock, 2014). The process of establishing urban green spaces raises surrounding property values and increases the likelihood of affluent white communities gentrifying a neighborhood, particularly in high-foreclosure areas (Alkon et al., 2020; Kern, 2015; McClintock, 2014). Gentrification has become particularly harmful to low-income Black neighborhoods, and occasionally, the implementation of radical horticulture practices through community gardens leads to the destruction of their communities and existing food infrastructure (Jackson, 2022; Reese, 2019). To maintain their progress, many AFNs choose to institutionalize; but in so doing, eliminate their capacity to act as liberatory infrastructure (Gilmore, 2017).

Through case-study analysis, AFN scholars have made many overtures to commoning literature by highlighting how interconnections between resource distribution networks of different kinds strengthen provision-capacity and longevity (Gavaldà & Cattaneo, 2022; Stavrides, 2022). Despite these strong connections, however, there is surprisingly little English-language scholarship that articulates the benefits of connecting social commoning and AFN literature (Vivero-Pol, 2017). Vivero-Pol’s (2017) systematic literature review revealed that only about 180 results were found with the search terms “food + commons” compared to roughly 50,000 references found by searching “food + commodity” (Vivero-Pol, 2017, p. 197). While literature on food as *commodity* soared in eras of capitalist stability – primarily through the 1980s and 1990s – scholarship on food as *commons* peaked around the 2008 financial crisis

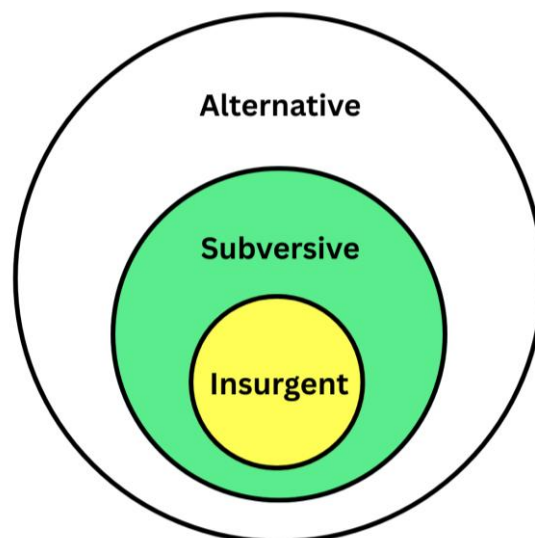
(Vivero-Pol, 2017, p. 197). Not only do these trends demonstrate the dominance of neoliberal ideology in AFN literature, but they also illustrate the historical precedent for focusing on collectivizing food in moments of crisis. Scholars have already begun to highlight that radical commoning praxis is rapidly growing (van Laerhoven et al., 2020), but it is also important to highlight the recent growth of literature that connects commoning and food (Morrow, 2019; Morrow & Martin, 2019; Rut & Davies, 2024; Slavuj Borčić, 2022; Zhang & Barr, 2019). Rising alongside global resistance movements in the 2010s and 2020s and in conjunction with the covid-19 pandemic, the production of more radical literature around the commons and food systems could indicate that, even in the global north, there is a growing desire for liberation from an increasingly violent capitalist system and an understanding that food may be an important component of this process. In fact, some scholars have already highlighted exactly how impactful food has been to commoning movements in the early 2000s (Apostolopoulou & Kotsila, 2022; Varvarousis et al., 2021) and in providing provisions during the Covid-19 pandemic (Rut & Davies, 2024). This dramatic shift towards radicalism and interconnection within these fields, likely bringing improvements in the efficacy, inclusivity, and liberatory focus of AFN practice, warrants its own distinction from the dominant neoliberal praxis.

Forging an Insurgent Food Network Classification

The broad definition of an AFN has been criticized for its imprecise language and messy attempt to engulf such a diverging and often contradictory set of tactics (Edwards, 2023, p. 8; Leitheiser & Vezzoni, 2024; Wilson, 2013). Similar critiques have been made within commoning scholarship, such as Federici's four distinction between common spaces: (1) "commons from the public (which re-inscribes and legitimizes the private), (2) "'gated commons', [...] enclosures such as the university," (3) commons with 'uncommon' aims, and (4) commodity producing commons which are tightly linked to (international) markets and reproduce the capitalist logic

of accumulation” (Benya, 2021, p. 459). As has been highlighted repeatedly throughout this chapter, the neoliberalization of commoning tactics jeopardizes the integrity of critical insurgent infrastructure. Therefore, I advocate for the use of three classifications in food network literature: alternative food networks, subversive food networks, and insurgent food networks (see figure 3). These networks are overlapping and often collaborate with one another; however, they have distinct goals, praxis, and relations to the state. Alternative food networks are the broadest category, operating from a reformist perspective and generally advocating for incremental change through partial or complete collaboration with the state. Subversive food networks (SFNs) are those that emphasize independence from the state, however, remain deeply influenced by neoliberal epistemology and/or lack a broader vision for societal change. The final and currently smallest networks are the insurgent food networks (IFNs). IFNs also emphasize the need for self-reliance from the state but do so in conjunction with a broader goal of revolutionary change. Unlike the previous two networks, they involve a combination of advertised (i.e. above-ground) and non-advertised (i.e. underground) organizations and affinity groups. Additionally, they are more critical of neoliberal epistemology internally and externally. If successful, IFNs will help produce revolutionary culture, knowledge, and material power that

Figure 3: Diagram of Overlap Between Food Networks



can be put towards developing dual power. There will undoubtedly be outliers and flexibility to these general definitions, however, they are useful in discussing the dominant combinations of food network theory and practice.

By emphasizing the distinctions between neoliberal and revolutionary praxis in specifying insurgent commoning and IFNs, I aim to address many overlapping issues across the two fields. For one, my choice to distinctly specify insurgent literature is meant to emphasize the connection between these tactics and their application in revolutionary movements and anti-colonial resistance. As discussed in chapter one, commoning — particularly food commons — has been central to resisting capitalism and building community-reliance since the earliest instances of primitive accumulation. The exclusion of this rich radical history within dominant commoning and food network literature reveals the extreme lack of thorough analyses of effective commoning practice. This is exemplified by the overly technical descriptions of commoning and food network governance that Ostrom (1990) inspired which fail to mention the terminology or concepts devised through historic implementations of the tactic. Additionally, failure to include these histories further exacerbates the domination of affluent white people in commoning and AFN movements by disconnecting racial minorities from some of their greatest resistance methods. Through emphasizing insurgent history and tactics, I also stress the importance of materiality and theory in effective analysis, both of which are lacking within commoning and AFN studies.

Radical food network scholars have shown the strengths in engaging with radical commoning perspectives — particularly for increasing politicization and efficacy in the movement. For example, Mudu and Marini (2018) — who advocate for utilizing food-based activism to build revolutionary change — draw connections to commoning practice. They frame insurgent food networks, or “autonomous food configurations,” as a “social economy of production, distribution and consumption of food [...] [that] aims to blur the borders between

producers, distributors and consumers, and [...] poses retaking the city as its main objective.” (Mudu & Marini, 2018, p. 551). As Mudu and Marini highlight, the role that food networks and commons play in building anti-capitalist infrastructures make them highly compatible theories and practices to combine.

2.4 Insurgent Commoning:

As detailed in the conclusion of the social commoning section, there are many reasons why insurgent commoning is necessary to distinguish from general commoning praxis. Most importantly, academic literature on the commons systematically excludes its revolutionary applications. This omission creates serious deficiencies in our general understanding of commoning tactic efficacy and divorces scholarship from important theoretical understandings.

One critical deficiency this has created is the lack of engagement with the Marxist-feminist social reproduction theory. Social reproductive labor refers to the unpaid labor required to sustain and reproduce life (including activities such as cooking, cleaning, sex, birth, and child rearing). Marxist-feminists within commoning studies have long highlighted the correlation between enclosures and a lack of social reproductive capacity independent of capitalism or the state (Federici, 2014; Gutiérrez Aguilar, 2024). Additionally, they show that the devaluation of social reproductive labor under capitalism has left women – particularly women of color and those in the global south – systematically hyper-exploited. To accurately analyze power dynamics, as the majority of commoning literature dedicates itself to doing, commoning scholars must incorporate social reproductive theory. In so doing, scholars would also need to engage with critical Marxism more broadly – notably Cedric Robinson’s (1983) concept of racial capitalism – and contend with the need to develop new societies through the destruction of capitalism. This would provide commoning scholars a strong framework with which to analyze the intricacies of racism in capitalist society and its presence in organizing

techniques. Here, I argue that a framework of insurgent commoning, which I define as commoning praxis that explicitly works to expand revolutionary consciousness and capacity, can serve this purpose. Insurgent commoning is currently growing, and while there are still significant improvements to be made in the literature, particularly around the routine failure to engage with race in their analysis, insurgent commoners are already showing the benefits of revolutionary analysis and tactics.

Insurgent commoners fill many of the gaps in mainstream commoning literature. For one, there is a concerted effort to move away from the single case-study approach towards a focus on thematic analyses of commoning activism that stretches beyond the current movement. Through their engagement with revolutionary theory, insurgent commoners also stress the need to maintain engagements with radical theory while building material power and acknowledging the increased challenges of this under neoliberal governance. Looking back to the dramatic shifts that occurred in radical organizing spaces in the late 1970s, scholars highlight that it was the growth of a non-profit industrial complex which substantially weakened and de-radicalized U.S. activism by increasing its material dependence on the state and capital. These scholars therefore describe institutionalization (such as becoming a non-profit) as incorporation into the “shadow state” (Gilmore, 2020). Forming in the 1970s, the shadow state consists of institutionalized organizations, such as non-profits, which legitimize the state by providing the social reproductive care that federal, state, and local governments refuse to (Gilmore, 2020; Wolch, 1990). By arguing that change can be made through the system — by complying with state regulations and relying on private foundations, think tanks, and donors for funding — nonprofits undercut insurgent organizing, systemically reproduce a neoliberal logic, and ultimately preserve the capitalist system. Therefore, there is a profound contradiction in commoning and food network praxis which posits the non-profit model as a sustainable and effective method of creating systemic change.

As global crises accelerate and more radical actions are being taken in response, the non-profit contradiction is coming to a head. To silence the growing support for Palestinian resistance, the U.S. House of Representatives successfully passed H.R. 9495, the so-called “non-profit killer bill,” in November 2024, potentially granting the Treasury Department the power to revoke tax-exemption status for nonprofits it claims have “terrorist” ties (Herman, 2024). This bill highlights the in-effectiveness of nonprofits on two critical fronts: 1) nonprofit dependence on state approval makes them wildly unstable, and 2) most nonprofits are more interested in their self-preservation than in maintaining radical integrity. The second front is highlighted by anonymous nonprofit workers sharing that there is growing pressure within their organizations to keep a low profile and practice self-censorship, avoiding words “such as ‘environmental racism’ in written communications;” another employee mentioning they may have to start “shying away from their missions” to continue their service work (Leingang & Noor, 2025). If H.R. 9495 passes in the Senate, capitulation would proliferate and could eviscerate the existence of radical, left-wing non-profits entirely. At this moment, it is crucial that leftists in the U.S. prioritize theorizing and building infrastructure for material independence from the state.

In the following sections, I explain the key elements of insurgent commoning praxis and describe the importance of social reproduction in U.S. counterinsurgency, particularly in destroying revolutionary movements. Connecting this history with the rise of the shadow state, I accentuate the importance of nonprofits in creating the illusion of reliable social reproductive care throughout U.S. society today. However, as I demonstrate in the example above, the mirage of non-profits is not ever lasting, and as authoritarianism increases the precarity of non-profits, it continues to be further questioned. I accentuate this risk below and discuss the ways in which insurgent commoning can be used to build self-reliance, social change, and revolutionary capacity.

Social Reproduction, the Shadow State, and Nonprofits in U.S. Counter-insurgency

As discussed in chapter one, the illusion of state-supplied social reproduction has been foundational in maintaining capitalism since its inception. Specifically, the capitalist state's supplementation of low wages with social services was meant to quell insurrectionary urges amongst the dispossessed and deepen their dependence on the capitalist system (Federici, 2014). This technique has also been central to North American settler colonialism (Daschuk, 2013; Gelderloos, 2022). Neoliberalism has further obfuscated the counterinsurgent process through the development of the shadow state and the expansion of the nonprofit industrial complex. The prevalence of nonprofits in U.S. organizing must be fought and called out for what it is: state cooptation. To build and fortify insurgent infrastructure, activists must discredit and systematically move away from the validity of organizing that derives funding and legitimacy from the state

State and external-actor collaboration existed long before the establishment of the shadow state (Smith, 2017; Wolch, 1990). Until the 1950s, charities and foundations, ran exclusively by the elite, were mostly unregulated and used to evade taxes for individuals and the inheritance passed on to their descendants (Smith, 2017, p. 4). The shadow state, however, is defined by Wolch as a new iteration of the collaboration that has become increasingly significant in maintaining state legitimacy under neoliberal governance. The shadow state emerged as the “resolution of two historical waves: the unprecedented expansion of government agencies and services (1933-1973), followed by an equally wide-scale attempt to undo many of those programs at all levels --- federal, state, county, local” (Gilmore, 2017). The decision to bolster social services (i.e. social reproductive capacity) in the 1930s was a counterinsurgent move implored to stop communist organizing (Illner, 2020, p. 35). To subdue the wide-spread revolutionary fervor ignited by the great depression crisis, the legislative and executive branch built an image

of the state as the arbiter of jobs and welfare. Most importantly, the “New Dealers” framed the increase in poverty as a “natural disaster” rather than a result of systemic capitalist crisis, arguing it could only be mediated through an increase in federal social reproduction expenditure (Illner, 2020, p. 38). From the 1930s on, the federal government obfuscated and bolstered its counterinsurgent politics through deepening collaboration with charities, such as the Ford Foundation. Founded in 1936, the Ford Foundation became one in an arsenal of powerful institutions used to “engineer social change and shape the development of social justice movements,” playing a role in steering the civil rights movement in more right-wing directions (Smith, 2017, p. 5). Unlike liberal foundations, right wing foundations invested money into altering public consciousness through “think tanks, research projects, journals, [etc.]” (Smith, 2017, p. 6) Together, these bipartisan foundations de-radicalized public consciousness, popularizing the idea of social democracy through the illusion of planned social reproductive stability under capitalism. Following a 1969 ruling, increased restrictions placed on foundations incentivized them to start non-profits (a practice dating back to 1913), through which they could make tax-deductible donations. Between 1953 and 1978, the number of U.S. nonprofits skyrocketed from 50,000 to 730,000 (Smith, 2017, p. 7). The rapid proliferation of non-profits – cited as the creation of the non-profit industrial complex – incited a wave of cooptation across leftist organizing spaces that persists through the present (Gilmore, 2017).

The non-profit industrial complex (NPIC) is defined by Dylan Rodriguez “as a set of symbiotic relationships that link political and financial technologies of state and owning class control with surveillance over public political ideology, including and especially emergent progressive and leftist social movements” (Rodríguez, 2017) Through the NPIC’s overlaps with other neoliberal governance constructs, such as the prison industrial complex (PIC), it systematically retrenches and legitimizes the racist and settler colonial logics that preside over U.S. society. For example, nonprofits’ barriers to service (such as requiring proof of income,

address verification, or IDs) enforces compliance with state biometrics and reinforces capitalist constructs around who is “deserving” of care. As mechanisms of the shadow state, nonprofits reiterate the neoliberal ideology – divorcing poverty from ceaseless capitalist crisis and instead framing it as an isolated issue mediated through state or philanthropically funded social reproductive care (i.e. a social safety net).

Federally funded “disaster relief” also rose and fell with the investments in social reproductive care (Illner, 2020). Building from the success of anti-poverty initiatives, the U.S. began its first overtures into federally operated disaster relief and established the Federal Emergency Relief Act (FERA), using this agency to extend charitable support beyond just “children, the disabled, and widows to the unemployed in general” (Illner, 2020, p. 38). However, increasing natural disasters in the 1960s brought forward the cracks in state capacity and willingness to maintain the social services required under Keynesian governance. With the stagflation crisis in the 1970s, state funding for social reproduction was reallocated towards the development of fictitious capitol and the U.S. public was left without assistance (Illner, 2020, p. 45). This crisis brought on a “generalized ‘non-reproduction,’ meaning a depreciation of labour power, so intense that no new reproductive institutions (schools, hospitals, relief infrastructure) are built for current and future workers” (Illner, 2020, p. 45). Most importantly, this underinvestment in social reproductive capacity shifted the responsibility onto the U.S. public, the market, and the shadow state. This shift severely weakened the reliability of the artificially created social safety net. The 2005 Hurricane Katrina clearly revealed these failures, with the systemic under maintenance of anti-flood infrastructure, particularly in low-income Black communities, creating a far more disastrous and deadly crisis than was necessary. Despite these clear risks and the annual increase in natural disasters, bipartisan efforts to cut FEMA have steadily continued (Illner, 2020, p. 6). As mentioned in the introduction of this thesis, the lack of rapid federal assistance has continued to limit resource access for those impacted by climate

catastrophes in the 2024-2025 winter season. In both Hurricane Helene and the LA fires, community members were able to more rapidly provide needed care than local, state, or federal agencies. Therefore, there is a dire need for social reproductive care to be organized outside of the state due to the precarity of institutionalized organizing methods in doing so.

Building IFNs and Insurgent Commons for Post-Capitalist Worldmaking

Today, the domination of the NPIC has significantly diminished social reproductive capacity beyond the market, the state, and the shadow state. The destruction and subsequent cooptation of U.S. radical movements since the 1970s has allowed for the NPIC's anti-revolutionary epistemology to become commonplace (Rodríguez, 2017, p. 31). Leftist groups have cautioned against the general bureaucratization and co-optation of social change that arises through collaboration with or formalization into the NPIC. This process manifests in the shifts towards the prioritization of funding and project expansion over quality care, problematic class collaborations, adherence to anti-revolutionary state regulations, and the legitimization of the state's monopoly on violence (Rodríguez, 2017; Smith, 2017). The popularity of the nonprofit model has allowed the NPIC to reorient leftist activism away from forming liberatory power and towards making incremental state reforms.

In understanding this, a significant portion of radical commoning and food-based organizing systematically works against revolutionary capacity through their involvement in the NPIC. Federici (2019) argues that these artificial commons can be imagined as "safety valves," used to channel and, as needed, ease the tension of capitalism's permanent crisis – brought on by the unrelenting exploitation of (re)production across all lifeforms and resources (Benya, 2021, p. 459). Federici argues that instead, radical movements must create commons, "radical experiments," aimed at destroying capitalism. This is a popular opinion within insurgent commoning studies, with others, such as John Bellamy Foster, emphasizing the urgency and

primacy of commoning in the effort to survive and counter-act climate collapse. Foster (2024) argues:

Self-mobilization of populations in order to protect lives, communities, and local and national environments, while carrying out revolutionary changes at all level of existence as part of completely reorganizing production, consumption, and energy usage, now constitutes the pathway to ecological survival. [...] A broad revolutionary ecological and socialist strategy has to be articulated that transcends the dominant liberal refrains of individual “adaptation’ and ‘resilience,’ which largely deny the realities of class, race, gender, and imperialism – along with metabolic rift between capitalism and the environment (202).

Foster names the potential future in which these tactics are applied “the *Communian Age*, standing for *community, communal, and the commons*” (J. B. Foster, 2024, p. 203). As Foster and Federici articulate, the commons must be a radical and anti-capitalist project rooted in communally operated networks that exist outside of the market, state, or shadow state. They illustrate a growing motivation within commoning studies and practice at destabilizing the NPIC and advocating for the use of commons as revolutionary tools – i.e. insurgent commoning.

Insurgent commoning is the ideal method for bringing about a *Communian Age*. Going beyond the neoliberal “resilience” framework – which individualizes crisis and leaves capitalism unchallenged – insurgent commoning is an anti-capitalist revolutionary process that develops through iterative cycles of application and analyses across time (Evans, 2014). Latin American activist and scholar Raquel Guitierrez-Aguilar highlights this praxis in her work. Drawing from Marxist feminist theory and her experiences in several revolutionary struggles across Latin America— including the Tupac Katari Guerrilla Army, the Bolivian Water Wars, and the feminist uprisings of 2015 – she lays out the importance of the

insurgent commons in combatting alienation (Gutiérrez Aguilar, 2024). Guitierrez-Aguilar argues that commoning begins by strengthening existing systems of communal interdependence and is, therefore, best understood as a network of cooperative social relation “*capable of enabling on a daily basis the social production and enjoyment of concrete wealth* as use values; that is, as material and immaterial goods that are necessary for the defense and satisfactory reproduction of life (Gutierrez Aguilar, 2024, p. 68). Since women are regularly obliged to perform the labor of reproducing life unassisted, there is a distinctly “sexed characteristics of *making the commons*” that can explain why women continuously take central roles in creating the commons and argue for their liberatory potential (Gutierrez Aguilar, 2024, p. 72; Gelderloos, 2022; Federici, 2019). By emphasizing the stability and power of interdependence, commoning can restructure the vital links that capitalism's “*chain of separations*” that reinforce dependence on capitalism:

“[1] the separation between society and nature and the subsequent exploitation of the land and its resources,” [...2] “the separation of the dispossessed from their means of existence and their subsequent exploitation of formally-free workers”, [...and 3] “the separation of women from men and the subsequent appropriation — rendered invisible and almost automatic — of a significant part of their work for the reproduction of capital.” (Gutierrez Aguilar, 2024, p. 72)

Insurgent food networks play a central role in this process. Through the affordable and accessible practice of gardening, people grow their capacity for mutual self-reliance daily while repairing the destructive chain of separations.

Guitierrez-Aguilar highlights that across Latin America, liberation movements today are increasingly engaging in communal practices, “allowing for the reappropriation of social wealth, as occurred previously during the most intense years for the Russian Revolution,

during the Chinese Revolution and various others” (Gutierrez Aguilar, 2024, p. 48). Through this reference, Gutierrez-Aguilar is connecting (insurgent) commoning with the communist practice of dual power. Theorized first by Russian revolutionary leader Vladimir Lenin (1917), and expanded significantly by Mao Zedong (1940) in the Chinese revolution, dual power is an advanced stage of revolution in which the insurgency has built communally operated infrastructure that is independent of the state. Dual power, commonly taking the form of “bases” or “communes” built through the appropriation of land and resources, sustains revolutionary capacity. I join Gutierrez-Aguilar in arguing that dual power and insurgent commoning are stages of the same revolutionary process. Because of this, the practice of insurgent commoning is inherently intertwined with revolutionary history, particularly movements that created dual power. Therefore, engagement with revolutionary history is essential in understanding what is possible and forging successful insurgent commoning projects today.

Dual power, and thereby also insurgent commoning, was central to decolonial, revolutionary praxis globally from the 1950s-1970s (Gerassi, 1980). Though many of these projects were systematically dismantled through U.S. militarism and economic domination, insurgent commoning continued. The 1999 Zapatista Liberation Army (EZLN) uprising is viewed as one of the most successful commoning projects in the past three decades (Gutiérrez Aguilar, 2024; Stavrides, 2022). Through their extensive agricultural knowledge, the largely indigenous population of Chiapas, Mexico independently sustained themselves throughout their militant struggle with the Mexican government that successfully prevented the enclosure of their land (Marcos et al., 2016). Food was not just grown for nutrition, but also for medicinal purposes, as it was strategically important to avoid dependence on outside doctors (Marcos et al., 2016, p. 133).

In Mexico City, the growing insurgent commoning movement to create “autonomous neighborhoods” cites EZLN and the Mexican Revolution as central influences in their efforts towards revolutionary inter-dependence (Stavrides, 2022, p. 135). Motivated in part by extreme necessity, these neighborhoods provide an array of commoned resources to their communities, such as food, healthcare, and education. They have also learned to construct buildings, make clothing, and even construct autonomous sewage systems. During the Covid-19 pandemic, these neighborhoods were the only source of masks and emergency food services for their community due to structural abandonment (Stavrides, 2022).

The continued use of insurgent commoning in global revolutionary movements proves its continued success as a method of building insurgent infrastructure and revolutionary capacity. However, as of the 1970s, the influence of the NPIC has nearly eviscerated the existence of large-scale, sustained insurgent commoning projects in the United States. Before this point, commoning was becoming a serious threat to the stability of the U.S. empire, particularly by the powerful organizing of the Black Panther Party. Throughout the history of African American resistance, commoning has been central to survival and liberation efforts. Collaborative networks of all kinds were essential in efforts to survive and escape the conditions of slavery, such as communal agriculture, pooling money to buy each other’s freedom, establishing militant maroon communities, and the colossal insurgent infrastructural project of the underground railroad (Gordon Nembhard, 2014). During the early 20th century, commoning was important to much of the radical organizing that occurred amongst Black communities across the United States (Kelley, 2015; Roane, 2023). Starting in 1966, the Black Panther Party brought a renewed emphasis on insurgent commoning to the broader revolutionary movement of the time. Beyond their radical politics and militant aesthetic, it was the Free Breakfast Program that popularized their method amongst radicals and the public. Today, several have framed the Free Breakfast Program as

an early establishment of dual power (Smolarek, 2020; Illner, 2021), drawing the connection once again to the revolutionary capacity of insurgent (IFN) commoning. However, through systematic targeting by the state – particularly of those advocating Black self-determination (Burden-Stelly, 2023) – these revolutionary projects were dismantled using counterinsurgency techniques that were explicit (raids, arrests, and executions) and underhanded methods (surveillance, NPIC) (Rodríguez, 2017, p. 23).

The scars of this counterinsurgent campaign remain imprinted on the commoning movement. Through engagement with the historical and current insurgent commoning projects, the strategic importance of independent insurgent commons is proven to be fundamental in forming revolutionary capacity. While there are still radical and inspirational projects that exist in the U.S., they are largely formalized into the NPIC. For example, there are several community land trusts in the U.S. – such as Cooperation Jackson in Jackson, MI – that have been established with decolonial and radical intention and act as significant inspirations to the broader movement. They should be celebrated for the prefigurative relations that they demonstrate, but it is important to know that formalization will prohibit an organization from sustaining revolutionary action. Therefore, it is essential and increasingly urgent that there is a momentous shift away from the NPIC and its pervasive ideology in the coming years. This is particularly important within food network literature, which remains quite apolitical and, as practiced, dangerous to the stability of low-income urban residents. Some argue that gentrification caused by AFNs today cannot be avoided (McClintock, 2014), however, I argue that there are many ways to diminish and possibly avoid mass displacement through insurgent food networks.

To avoid the neoliberal turn towards institutionalization that many in commoning and AFN spaces are pressured into due to high property values, I argue for an obscured and decentralized commoning approach. Today, many of those working independently of the

NPIC have already left the “public” (i.e. institutional) sphere and dispersed into “places unheard, unseen, and untouched by presumed audience of the non-profit industry” (Rodríguez, 2017, p. 31) Rodriguez (2017) argues that these movements – routinely emerging from populations that are not easily incorporated into the NPIC – “may well embody the beginnings of an alternative US-based praxis that displaces the NPIC’s apparent domination of political discourse and possibility” (31). Building on these ideas, I argue that by obscuring the basis of production and distribution, it will be far more difficult for the NPIC and the state to co-opt community commoning efforts, therefore facilitating the development of revolutionary capacity. The application of a decentralized approach to commoning would vary drastically by context, and therefore, would require an abundance of creativity and flexibility in its application. Some potential locations for nodes in a decentralized food-based commons network/infrastructure could be gardening in the backyards of volunteers, guerilla gardening in public parks. To remain intentional about the development of this infrastructure, it would be best to focus on basing these centers of production in areas with high need or in the backyards of homeowners in need of support (such as low-income, elderly, disabled people, etc.). A decentralized commoning network could potentially do more to build a radical commoning ethic than large-scale projects by encouraging more decentralized decision making and autonomy than is possible in large, centralized projects. Overall, there is much to be explored about the idea of decentralized commons; however, with increased creativity, there are methods through which gentrification can be avoided and revolutionary capacity can be developed.

2.5 Conclusion

It is critical that the commons are re-politicized, and praxis moves away from neoliberal ideologies and applications. It is also important to note that there are many people organizing in

institutionalized projects – like non-profits or community land trusts – who are critical of these structures yet see them as the only way to immediately make change. However, as the confounding crises of capitalism accelerate, this gap that exists between the ease of non-profit organizing and the ideal form of radical organizing will have to be reconciled. I argue for a dynamic and creative application of commoning – i.e. *decentralized commoning* – that remains steadfast in its rejection of the shadow state and rooted in a radical ethic. The commons are much more than a static location and only viewing it as such severely limits its revolutionary potential. The commons are flexible and iterative, often cycling through phases of materiality – plans on a page, nodes in a network, recuperation from state-destruction, and back again – in attempts to solidify it into a physical form. I argue that leaning into the decentralized, networked framing of the commons is critical in efforts to build revolutionary capacity. To embody militant research and commoning ethics, in the following sections, I connect these theoretical arguments to an investigation of Seattle’s food-based commoning network.

3. A Brief History of Seattle Food Activism:

Seattle remains an important nexus of radical leftist activism in the United States. It gained its international activist reputation from the 1999 “Battle of Seattle” – a prolonged demonstration against the World Trade Organization (WTO). Drawing an international crowd and incorporating a wide diversity of leftist political thought, this event was amongst the earliest and most significant to the anti-globalization movement. The unprecedented violent police response set the tone for the coming decades and popularized the “black bloc” tactic – when protestors conceal their identities with black clothing, remaining unidentifiable and amorphous within the crowd. Roughly twenty years later, during the 2020 Black Lives Matter uprisings against police murder, Seattle reaffirmed its radical capacity through the establishment of the Capitol Hill Occupied Protest, or CHOP. This month-long occupation was one of the largest direct actions taken during the international movement. These notable moments of rebellion underscore Seattle’s radical culture and spontaneity. However, it is important to highlight that mutual aid organizations provide the services and provisions that sustain ephemeral commons and large-scale movements. Scholars frequently fail to emphasize such networks in their descriptions of Seattle, but I argue that these networks are central to the existing revolutionary capacity. As demonstrated by the UW Liberated Zone (see Introduction), ephemeral commons would not be possible without the efforts of existing networks of commoners. Maintaining a focus on food, below I highlight the significance of food-based organizing in Seattle’s radical development, as well as its connection to cooptation strategies.

During World War II, federal investments in the Seattle-based aerospace company Boeing exponentially grew the area into a major metropolitan area. Boeing’s rapid expansion inspired many to move to the Seattle area, which gained a total of 1.9 million residents over the course of the 1960s (Hedden, 2023, p. 46). This massive influx in people substantially grew the Asian and African American communities in the city. Seattle had long enforced racial residential codes,

first used to prevent Native Americans from living within the city, and then Asian immigrants. However, after the 1965 immigration reform act, the number of Asian residents grew to 29,000 in five years (Hedden, 2023, p. 52). The African American population, also grew dramatically, forging the city's first majority-Black neighborhood in the Central District. At its peak in 1967, Boeing provided "61% of the areas manufacturing jobs" (Hedden, 2023, p. 46) and employed 1 in 3 Black people in the city (Hedden, 2023, p. 52). The racism imbedded in Boeing and Seattle's unions left Asian and African Americans with far lower wages and fewer job opportunities compared to their white counterparts. Therefore, when Boeing was forced to conduct a mass layoff of 60,000 workers between 1969 and 1971, Black people were amongst the most effected by the economic crisis. The Boeing layoff created the most rapid and extreme economic crisis in a U.S. metropolitan area "since the days of the Great Depression" (Hedden, 2023, p. 43). In the Central District, roughly 35 percent of adults were unemployed. Sudden poverty forced families to increase their reliance on state services, with the number of people on welfare statewide rising by 45 percent and food stamp signups increasing by 185 percent from 1969 to 1971.

Public outrage around the crisis inspired a massive wave of anti-poverty activism in Seattle, predominantly organized by Black women and communities of color. These efforts focused on combatting poverty by strengthening existing community networks and directly providing people with services. Organizations like the Central Area Motivation Project (CAMP) used a diversity of tactics to do this, "including tenants organizing, voter registration, jobs training, educational programming, family counseling, neighborhood clean-ups, and more" (Taylor, 1994, p. 65). The founding of Seattle's Black Panther Party (BPP) in 1968 brought a more radical and militant approach to these efforts (Taylor, 1994, p. 220). Shortly after its establishment, Huey P. Newton's theory of "revolutionary intercommunalism" shifted the focus of BPP organizing nationally towards growing revolutionary capacity. Revolutionary intercommunalism

emphasized the need to develop “survival programs” in Black communities to alleviate subsistence needs and build confidence in the idea of providing care beyond the state. This approach was particularly well-suited to Seattle’s political context. Despite Seattle being named the food stamp capital of the country, all levels of government refused to provide relief, instead forcing residents to address a growing hunger crisis themselves. This inspired the development of many community-led free food programs, one of which, “Neighbors in Need,” routinely “feeding thousands of families a week” (Hedden, 2023, p. 108).

The extreme scarcity of social reproductive capacity inspired broad collaboration across ethnic groups. For example, in December 1969 the Seattle Black Panther Party joined with the “Skidroaders” [...], the city’s ADC Motivated Mothers groups, [...] and Native Americans activists to form the Committee for Human Survival, a self-described ‘interracial coalition of the poor and angry,’ and marched on the state capitol of Olympia to demand the restoration of funding for welfare programs” (Hedden, 2023, p. 82). These multi-racial alliances were also used for more radical tactics, such as the United Indian People’s Council’s occupation of Seattle’s Fort Lawton in 1970, which was assisted by radical activists across ethnic communities such as “Black student organizer Larry Gossett, Filipino community organizer Bob Santos, and Chicano school teacher Roberto Maestas” (Hedden, 2023, p. 68). These efforts inspired further radical efforts geared towards providing long-term community services in Seattle, such as the establishment of the Latino social service organization “El Centro” through another sustained occupation (Hedden, 2023), and the BPP’s creation of a medical clinic, which eventually became home to the nation’s leading sickle cell research program (Smolarek, 2020).

These momentous efforts emphasize the importance of collaboration between communities and demonstrate that communities are capable of building material power beyond the state, particularly in pronounced moments of capitalist crisis and state neglect. By 1970, the welfare movement was successful in increasing federally-funded welfare assistance, with the *Oregonian*

newspaper referring to it as “one of the biggest federal feedouts in history to one area” (Hedden, 2023, p. 153). However, this assistance was doled out in such a way that favored unemployed elites in professional sectors, systemically abandoning Seattle’s communities of color and slowly displacing them through the erasure of their jobs. In other words, the reintroduction of federal assistance allowed the state and local government to encourage gentrification in the name of “diversifying the economy” (Hedden, 2023). Though the people’s welfare movement was successful in establishing material centers of support, they were unable to resolve the poverty and displacement crisis. This is largely due to their failure to construct sites of autonomous production like those seen in the Global South, through which communities could lessen poverty and increase social reproductive capacity without any assistance from the state or capital. Seattle’s extreme reliance on food stamps during the crisis of the late ‘60s shows that food is one of the most urgent resources to produce, glean, and distribute intercommunally. Additionally, Seattle’s temperate climate and frequent rain makes gardening a relatively feasible and low-maintenance tactic. However, the high cost of land in Seattle and unfortunate connection between “greening” spaces and gentrification has made this tactic more challenging and easily cooptable.

The Seattle P-Patch community gardens are one example of the de-radicalized and pro-capitalist approach to gardening that prevails in the city, detached from the legacy of the 1960s anti-poverty movement. Unlike most community gardening initiatives around the country, Seattle’s P-Patches have been extremely stable over their existence. Since 1973, the City of Seattle has funded the program through investment in staff salaries, garden infrastructure, and sometimes by purchasing land for new gardens (Glennie, 2020, p. 156). This is largely because P-Patches are seen as desirable amenities to the “creative class” who fill the cities professional sector and increase property values (Glennie, 2020, p. 167). In fact, the leaders instrumental to expanding the P-Patch program (primarily upper-class white women) had cited increases in

both use value and exchange value as primary benefits to developing gardens on vacant lots (Glennie, 2020, p. 168). In other words, the P-Patches were always intended, at least in part, to act as vehicles of green gentrification. While these community gardens do increase food access – with gardeners being majority medium- to low-income and disproportionately diverse – the organizational leadership remains mostly white middle-class professionals (Glennie, 2020, p. 157). When compared to the revolutionary activist history in the city, at one point being the “bomb[ing] capitol” of the U.S. (Hedden, 2023, p. 64), P-Patches seem a suspiciously convenient counter-insurgent tool. By allowing people the opportunity to grow their own food in state-owned soil, they are given the illusion of independent social reproductive capacity without the insurgent potential. Furthermore, the lack of representative leadership at the gardens encapsulates the non-revolutionary and “uncommon” commoning practices applied in the space.

The high cost of land coupled with the success of the P-Patch program has led a significant amount of Seattle’s grassroots urban food production toward institutionalization – either receiving state funding or working with the shadow state in various capacities. These AFN organizations play an essential role in legitimating the state, as most clearly represented in Seattle’s Food Action Plan. The Food Action Plan is a report created by the City of Seattle to ostensibly create a more “equitable, sustainable, and resilient local food systems” (City of Seattle Food Action Plan Update, 2022). The plan boasts diverse community engagement – with “a total of 197 people participating representing 83 organizations or entities” – however, there is a complete exclusion of SFN and IFN groups (Food Action Plan Update, 2022). By only incorporating feedback from non-profits or private organizations into the report, the City of Seattle clearly defines respectable sources of “public opinion” to be those that legitimate the system and not those that organize beyond it. Though some argue that these initiatives come from genuine concern (McClintock & Simpson 2016), the obfuscation of SFN and IFN groups

highlights instead the ways in which the report is a counterinsurgent technique. As was discussed in the first chapter, food-based services are amongst the first that the state invests in to subdue unruly populations. Given that food was a prime source of anger amongst Seattle's population, it makes sense as a focus of counterinsurgent strategy. Despite the illusion of increased material independence, collaboration with the (shadow) state and private property regime intensifies the violent process of gentrification, ironically which mobilized people to organize in the first place. Most importantly, the de-radicalization of the AFN movement since the 1970s has taken power away from communities of color and weakened the subversive and insurgent networks that were building revolutionary capacity.

Despite attempts at cooptation, Seattle's subversive and insurgent food networks have persisted outside the (shadow) state, often serving the communities left "unheard, unseen, and untouched" by nonprofits (Giles, 2021; Rodríguez, 2017, p. 31). These organizations often go unaccounted in academic research due to their relatively diminished online presence in comparison with their AFN counterparts. By combining AFNs, SFNs, and IFNs, onto a broader map of Seattle's free food networks, I highlight the overlooked influence of organizations beyond the (shadow) state and corporate nexus. In so doing, I also aim to re-politicize Seattle food network activism and encourage an increased urgency towards developing revolutionary capacity through insurgent infrastructure.

4. Methodology:

To analyze the effectiveness of Seattle's free food networks, I utilize a combination of militant research and counter-mapping methods. Militant research is a term used to describe work created by militant activists with the purpose of advancing radical political struggles (Halvorsen, 2015; Herrera, 2018). The term was created to establish a third space within the dichotomy of "activist" and "academic," offering a way to critically engage with concepts and techniques produced in both spaces. As my goal with this project was to advance the effectiveness of food-based commoning struggle in the U.S., with particular emphasis on Seattle, militant research was a fitting framework. Additionally, to goals of militant research maps onto the embodied research framework that commoning scholars also call for (Stavrides & Travlou, 2022). Furthermore, the framing of this as militant research underscores the importance of politicizing commoning and AFN projects and framing them as strategies for building revolutionary capacity. I also incorporate Marxist historical materialist analysis to draw lessons from militant, revolutionary projects of the past.

Seeking to further embody the principles of militant research, I pair my theoretical arguments about the commons with the material practice of counter-mapping. Like militant research, counter-mapping is inherently tied to subversive political action and to dismantling oppressive hierarchies (Dávila & Onomatopée, 2019; kollektiv orangotango+, 2018). In opposition to the colonial history of European cartography and geography, counter-cartography works to uplift subaltern perspectives and emphasize the importance of oppressed communities authoring their own spatial visualizations. In this vein, counter-mapping encourages a creative approach to map-making that expands the limitations of what traditional cartography conveys; for example, using fabric or weavings to make a story physical or including interactive oral histories. At its core, counter-mapping provides a practical method for making both the physical and psychological interventions in the perception of space.

In this sense, I see counter-maps playing an important role in legitimating insurgent infrastructures (e.g., commons) and popularizing commoning as a revolutionary tactic. Drawing from Deborah Cowen’s analysis of China Mieville’s novel *The City in The City*, I understand capitalist infrastructure as central in constructing false divisions between the layered worlds that exist in all spaces, particularly in urban areas, which seek to maintain Eurocentricity and suppresses the influence of oppositional worlds formed by oppressed communities (Cowen, 2017). I am particularly interested in the novel’s concept of *breach* — “unsanctioned crossings between” these spaces/worlds — as utilized by Cowen to demonstrate the epistemological and material importance of breach as “unsanctioned disruptions to the circulation of racial capitalism and colonialism” (Cowen, 2017). As a method of unregulated spatial construction, counter-maps can be a powerful tool in encouraging breach, not only by visualizing the existence of suppressed worlds, but also the insurgent infrastructures they have created. Through these anti-capitalist illustrations, counter-maps can also force an aesthetic breach from the white-supremacy embedded in urban planning and renewal, which are violently destroying Black and Brown communities (Summers, 2022). By highlighting the under-discussed facets of subaltern life, counter-maps produce new imaginaries about what exists and what is possible.

The communally produced infrastructure that allows for the circulation of free food in Seattle constitutes a breach in the capitalist commodification of food. While it is a common practice to share food interpersonally, the public is not nearly as aware of the expansive community-run efforts to circulate free food. Visualizing the nodes of a de-commodifying food network in Seattle is essential in building belief in insurgent infrastructures’ potential. To make this map viewable to a mass audience, I chose to format it on an interactive mapping platform called CARTO. In doing so, those looking to use free food resources in Seattle can utilize a host of assisting features – such as the ability to measure distance between points and from specific address and the ability to sort the spatial data by days of operation, type of service, and type of

organization. These tools can also be useful to activists looking to understand the effectiveness of the networks as they currently operate. The digital map provides an activists to see as a way of reflecting on the scope of the existing network, understanding their role in it, connecting with similar efforts across the city, and envisioning ways of expanding into a self-sufficient, insurgent infrastructure. To facilitate this process, and in line with my militant research method, I have brought my findings on Seattle's free food network to activist spaces and am working with others to expand this research into other types of activism. As of 2025, the data created for this counter-map is being incorporated into a state-wide push to centralize information on above-ground resource distribution and production organizations. By bringing this work to activist spaces, I hope to quickly disseminate this information to those who need it and strengthen local activist networks.

In trying to make this free food counter-map practical for activist struggles in Seattle, I also considered mapping's potential security risks. Mapping nodes of a free food network could make vital distribution and production points more vulnerable to right wing attacks. Similarly, the inclusion of grassroots groups – which operate outside the scope of the shadow state – may provoke the city government and/or local police to take a counterinsurgent response. The risk of state-suppression on activism would increase if food prices continued to soar in coming years and the legitimacy of the government and capitalism dwindles. To minimize these risks, I chose to include only above-ground groups, meaning that they are not secretive about their existence or location. All groups included in this map have a documented online presence and routinely advertise their events. Because these events are not advertised in a centralized location, this map will make it easier to find groups, which could pose security risks. However, by amplifying their distribution or production activity, the ease of accessing these resources will undoubtedly increase and those that would like to help in these efforts will know where to go to get involved.

As capitalist crises accelerate, I see substantially more benefits in amplifying the reach of these already-public activities and bolstering organizing capacity.

4.1 Conceptualizing the Alternative and Subversive Food Networks:

When conceptualizing how to map radical food activism in Seattle, I grappled with the need to, on one hand, provide essential resource information around food, and on the other, make a conceptual intervention into how people think generally about community care – and by extension – social reproduction. It was important to me to make a distinction between nonprofits – which systematically reinforce capitalist inequality and counter-insurgency in their role as the “shadow state” (Gilmore, 2020)— and grassroots initiatives, while still disseminating information on the free-food-related efforts of both. This desire to distinguish grassroots from nonprofit stems from my conceptualization of these two categories existing in different types of food networks. Drawing from food activist literature, I imagine non-profits as components of *alternative food networks* (AFNs), generally defined as practices that differ in any way from standard capitalist food networks, such as farmers markets or Community Source Agriculture (CSAs). However, AFNs have drawn criticism from revolutionaries due to their failure to challenge capitalist commodification. Nonprofits fit in this category because, though there is significant variation in the ideologies of nonprofits, they all rely on the state to some degree and therefore help in legitimating capitalism. Most significantly, nonprofits enforce boundaries to accessing resources, such as requiring documentation that verifies one's income, legal status, or primary address. Though they are subverting the logic of food commodification through free food distribution, their barriers to access reaffirm dehumanizing logics about who has the right to life saving services.

Grassroots organizations, on the other hand, are harder to classify as one type of network because, while they operate outside the shadow state, there is a wide range of political

motivations and various relationships to private property amongst them. Grassroots groups dedicated to ending dependence on capitalism I would classify as components of an *insurgent food network* (IFN) because they would be crucial centers of social reproductive infrastructure in the instance of a revolutionary insurrection. Grassroots groups that are not as critical of capitalism or motivated to move beyond mutual aid I would classify as nodes in a *subversive food network* (SFN). Though these groups may be similar to nonprofits in their ideology, they are still acting autonomously from the state and rarely have any of the barriers to services that nonprofits enforce. Furthermore, these grassroots organizations would likely still provide critical social reproductive care if the state were to cease providing any social services. Making these distinctions between grassroots groups would require an ethnographic study of their ideology and behavior, which is outside the scope of this project. Furthermore, publicly clarifying the distinction between subversive and insurgent grassroots groups would create a tremendous security risk to the insurgent organizations. Therefore, if this information were to be collected, it would be best to keep it confidential and only spread within trusted activist networks.

With these qualifications in mind, I decided that the best way to label this network would be to acknowledge the multiple food networks operating throughout it. Though the phrase alternative food networks does, in a sense, encompass all types of de-commodified food distribution (see figure 3), I feel it is essential to emphasize the independent power of autonomous movements, particularly in free food circulation. The label of AFN has dominated food-related literature, playing an influential role in watering down and liberalizing the idea of food-based activism. I seek to disrupt this erasure of food sovereignty by emphasizing the work of autonomous, non-state organizations. As I have mentioned through this paper, to break the illusion that capitalist dependence is necessary for survival, it is crucial that people visualize the success of community-driven actions that provide community care — communal social

reproduction — to conceptualize how these forms of interdependence can increase. Furthering my attempts at psychological reorientation, I utilize the traditional Coast Salish spatial understanding of Seattle which follows the flow of water from the Cascades to the Pacific Ocean (east-up). I was inspired to use this orientation because of the Burke Museum’s Waterlines project, which highlighted the colonial mutilation of the Duwamish River by remapping the original flow of the river.

4.2 Creating Seattle’s Free Food Map:

In order to create a map of all free food distribution and production that included both institutionalized and non-institutionalized groups, I consulted existing databases and conducted social media research. Finding non-profits was relatively simple because they are well documented on existing databases. I began drawing from the [Emergency Food and Meals Seattle and King County](#) (2025) dataset created by the City of Seattle and listed on their open-data website. While investigating these non-profits and conducting further research, I found several more search engines geared towards finding non-profit organizations. Most of the information between search engines was redundant, however, occasionally they would include one or two organizations previously unaccounted for. These search engines are: Seattle’s [211](#), [The Care Map](#), the [Food Access Network](#), [Food Lifeline](#), [Findhelp](#), [Mutual Aid Groups](#) linktree, the [Little Free Pantries](#) map, and [Salvage Exchange](#), [Seattle Food Committee](#). I also consulted the City of Seattle’s updated Food Action Plan (2024), but this mainly consisted of nonprofit, for-profit businesses, and development groups. Generally, the search engines did not seem to be frequently updated and routinely had inconsistencies with organizational websites. When deciding how to collect data, I chose to prioritize information from organization websites

Most organizations I found in these databases were nonprofits — with the exception of Food Not Bombs — so I had to conduct social media research to find grassroots groups. For this

research, I primarily used Instagram as this has become the most popularly used platform to advertise activist events. I began by visiting the social media accounts of groups I was already familiar with and looking through who they were following. Out of all the grassroots groups I found, I looked through about a third of their following lists, choosing to stop when I stopped finding new organizations amongst the list of groups they were following. When I found new organizations, I first looked at their bio for a link to their website, a description of their main activities, and to see if they listed their distribution dates and times. In most cases, this information was not listed there, so I looked through each of their posts to find these details. To ensure that the groups listed on this map were still operating, I decided to only include those that had posted on their social media pages within 6 months of January 2025 (when I began this research). I also took into consideration the frequency at which the group posted prior to the posting hiatus when making the decision to include them or not. In a few cases this meant I included groups that had last posted from 6-months to a year from January 2025. Since there was rarely information listed from grassroots groups about their finances, I was not able to include them in the financial independence assessment. Through my social media research, it was apparent that most distribution groups operate from either in-kind donations or grassroots fundraising.

4.3 Measuring the Impact and Efficacy of the Free Food Network:

I created additional maps and graphs to depict the impact and efficacy of free food distribution efforts. I focused on understanding the spatial distribution of service in relation to need, the material outputs of these services, and their financial (in)dependence of state or private funding. In contrast to the neoliberal emphasis on quantifying change, I understand that these quantitative metrics will never be able to encompass all the facets of impact, particularly affective impacts, that activist projects have on their communities. Counter-mapping praxis

discusses this as well, underscoring the dangers of over-informing outside communities about the undocumented networks and knowledges that fortify communities against capitalist encroachment (kollektiv orangotango+, 2018). Therefore, I highlight quantitative analysis here specifically to investigate the material capacity for revolutionary activism. I measure spatial distribution, material output, and financial independence because together they succinctly depict the material scale and stability of commoning efforts. In so doing, I emphasize that through material analysis, commoners can focus on repairing or improving specific parts of the networks that are less effective.

To offer a basic understanding of Seattle, I include two demographic maps at the start of the 6.1 Efficacy and Impacts section. Both maps, entitled “Total Population and Racial Distribution in Seattle” and “Racial Distribution and Per Capita Income in Seattle” were created using data from the 2020 Census (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). In both maps, data was distributed into seven classifications using the Jenks Natural Breaks algorithm. To understand how effective the free food network is at addressing spatial inequality, I overlay it with the “The Racial and Social Equity Index” (2024) map created by the City of Seattle (refer to figure 8). This index incorporates demographic data such as ethnicity, race, socioeconomic status, and health disadvantages to identify where poverty and inequality are concentrated. Of the 193 services in the free food network, about 15% (20) of services are missing locational data and are therefore unmapped (see table 4 in Appendix 8.1). However, the map reflecting the remaining 85% of services is still helpful in depicting overarching trends in spatial distribution. To further understand how this issue varies between alternative and subversive food networks, I created two additional maps using the “Racial and Social Equity” data. To measure the alternative food networks, I filtered the free food services by nonprofit status. I did not include other types of classification that may have applied, such as religious organization, because the only way to identify which networks these services fall into this through ethnographic research. The

subversive food network was measured by filtering the free food service data by the grassroots classification.

To measure temporal distribution, I recorded the days and times that organizations indicated their services were available. In the digital version of the map hosted on CARTO, the user can filter by day to see what services are indicated at that time. Additionally, then can overlay sub filters to filter for a particular type of service or group classification.

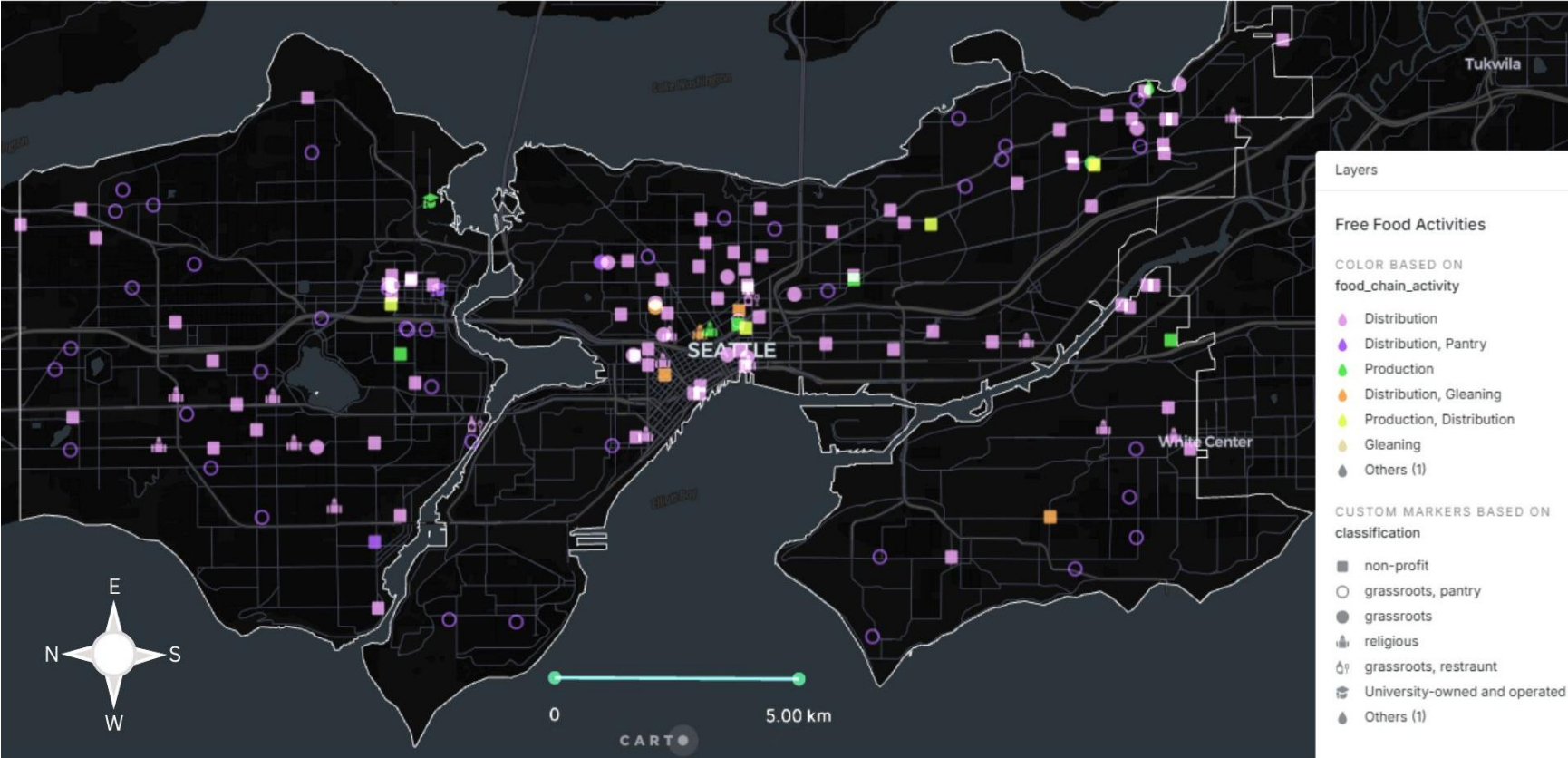
To understand material output, I collected data on the pounds of food produced and/or distributed annually based on the organization's most recent self-reported data. It is important to note that while these categories are not entirely overlapping, the pounds of food produced are generally included in the pounds distributed. Additionally, there may be errors in the reported pounds produced from the P-patch garden because of their open-pick policy for select garden plots. Given the relatively high rates of non-profit reporting, I was able to extrapolate the material outputs of non-profits to create an estimated total production and distribution for non-profit services. To do this, I took the mean pounds of annual production and distribution from reporting non-profits and multiplied this by the remaining non-profits. I applied U.S. statistical information to estimate how many people could be served annually by the food circulating through the free food networks. I did this by dividing the average U.S. citizens annual diet of 2000 pounds by the pounds produced and distributed annually (Aubrey, 2011). As much of the information on distribution was collected differently – some measuring in pounds and others in meals – I also used national data to convert meals into pounds. According to the USDA, the average U.S. meal is 1.2 pounds (O'Donnell and Katz, 2016), so I multiplied this value by the number of meals to standardize the information.

To understand the financial independence of organizations in the network (and thereby the stability of provided services), I sought out any financial information they provided. Unfortunately, there was no financial information offered for classifications other than

nonprofit. Since nonprofits make up To assess the financial independence of nonprofits, I used the website Candid (formerly known as GuideStar), which provides a simplified version of their tax information. Using this website, I was able to find information on when they became nonprofits, who their primary funding sources were, and occasionally, more detailed information about their distribution and production accomplishments. Unfortunately, as of early March 2025, Candid has created a paywall for their financial insights data and requires every user to make an account to view any details on the nonprofits. Fortunately, the research for this project was completed before this information was privatized.

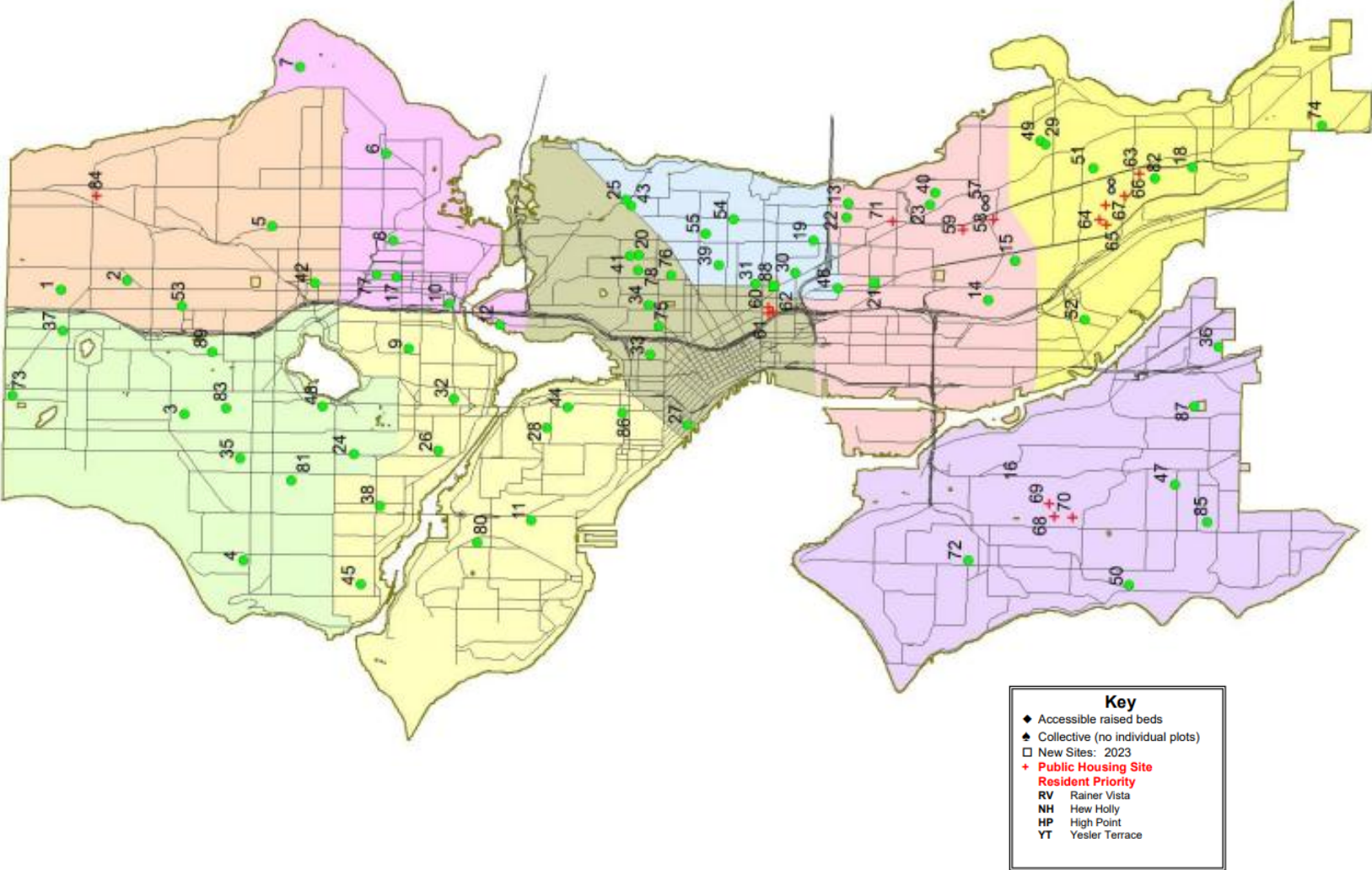
5. Seattle's Free Food Networks:

Figure 4: Seattle's Free Food Networks



Seattle's P-Patch Community Gardens

Figure 5: Seattle's P-Patch Community Gardens



6. Analysis

This research uncovered 102 unique above-ground organizations across Seattle’s alternative, subversive, and insurgent free food networks (see table 1). Together, these organizations operate 193 distinct distribution, production, and gleaning services – 90% of which are represented on the “Seattle’s Free Food Network” map. There are six classifications for free food organizations operating in Seattle, listed here in order of prevalence: non-profits, grassroots, religious, restaurant, university-owned and operated, and city-owned organizations. Nonprofits are the clear majority in this network, operating 54% (105) of the services. Grassroots operations are the second most

Organization Classification	Organizations		Services	
	Count	% of Total	Count	% of Total
Non-profit	64	62.7	105	54.4
Grassroots (non-pantry)	21	20.6	26	13.5
Grassroots (pantry only)*	1	0.1	43	22.3
Religious	13	12.7	15	7.8
City-Owned	1	0.1	2	1
Univ.-Owned	2	1.9	2	1
TOTAL	102	--	193	--

Table 1: Breakdown of Organizations

prevalent, providing 34% (66) of services across networks. A significant portion of these grassroots operations are little free pantries, making up 64% of these services, and independently constituting 27% of Seattle’s above-ground free food network. I did not include P-Patch gardens in the free food network map because the space is not dedicated to the communal consumption of free food. Instead, P-Patch community gardens are organized into individual plots and are geared towards personal use. However, they are also a major source of in-kind

donations for the free food network (Cateo, 2025). Therefore, it is important to loosely include them in the free foodscape as an opaque area of production. If P-Patches are considered in the analysis of Seattle’s free food network, there could potentially be 91 additional production centers and a potential total of 284 distinct services. Accounting for P-Patches would also depict a far greater proportion of “city-owned” organizations that would outnumber the grassroots.

Type of Service	Breakdown	Total
Distribution	122	175
+ Gleaning	5	
(as open-access pantry)	47	
(funding)	1	
Gleaning	3	3
Production	11	15
+ Distribution	4	
TOTAL	193	

Table 2: Breakdown of Services

In terms of the types of services provided, roughly 90% of activities across networks are exclusively distribution based, with another 3% (5) that distribute and glean, and about 2% (3) that distribute and produce (see table 2). Only 5% (11) of services in the network exclusively produce food that is circulated for free. Of the 193 activities within this free food network, 15% (i.e. 30 activities) do not specify their days of operation (see table 4 in Appendix 8.1). Of the 85% that do provide this information (including open-access services), Wednesdays are the most active, with 107 services open at some point in the day, while Sundays are the least active, with 66 services operating. Nonprofits mirror this trend; however, grassroots groups are most active on Sundays, providing 53 services. Sunday is the only day where more grassroots groups are operating than nonprofits.

In the following sections, I will analyze the efficacy and impact of Seattle’s free food network through several visual and statistical techniques. Using these methods, I measure spatial distribution, material output, and financial independence. Spatial distribution highlights how the networks respond to need. Therefore, it is primarily analyzed by comparing the free

food network to demographic data (see figures 6 and 7) and the “Seattle’s Free Food Network in Relation to Racial and Social Equity” map (see figure 8). Material output depicts the current capacity of free food networks through an analysis of annual distribution and production rates. Finally, the financial independence analysis highlights the amount to which this network is reliant on capital, the state, and the shadow state. Together, the analysis of these factors demonstrates the current status of the free food networks capacity for self-sufficiency and begins to show the prefigurative politics that exist in the space.

6.1 Spatial Efficacy

Figure 6: Population Density and Racial Distribution in Seattle

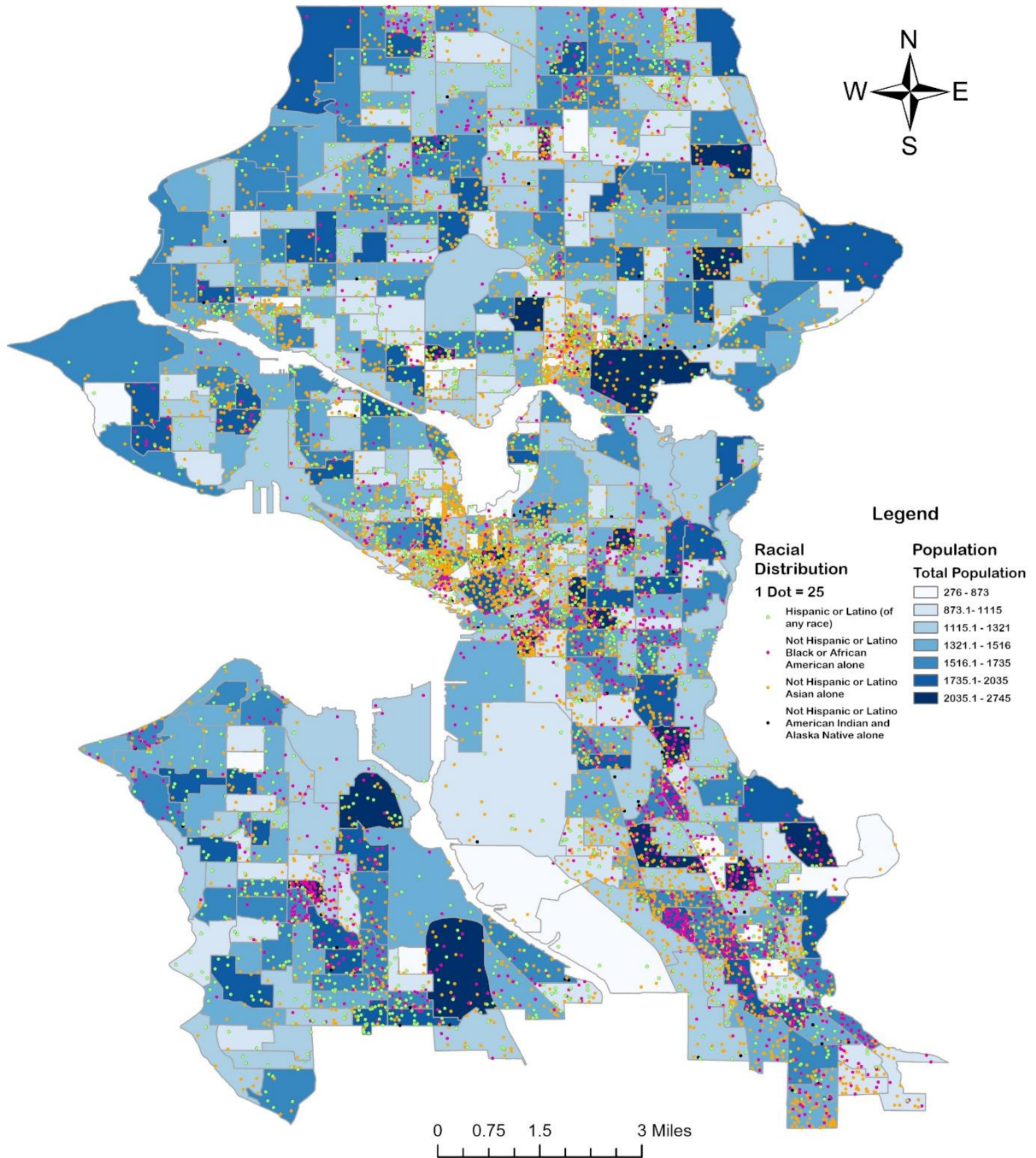


Figure 7: Racial Distribution and Per Capita Income in Seattle

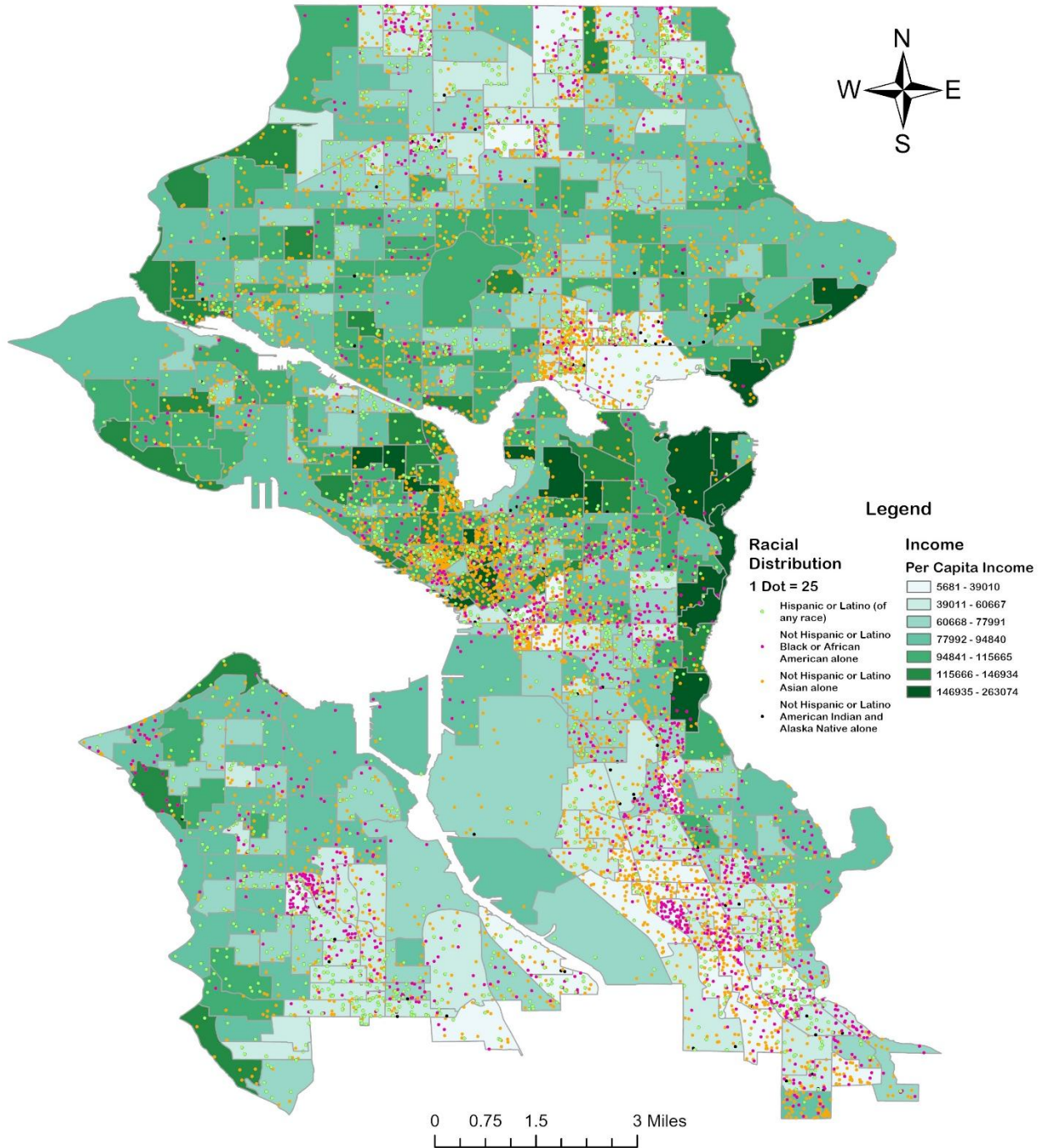
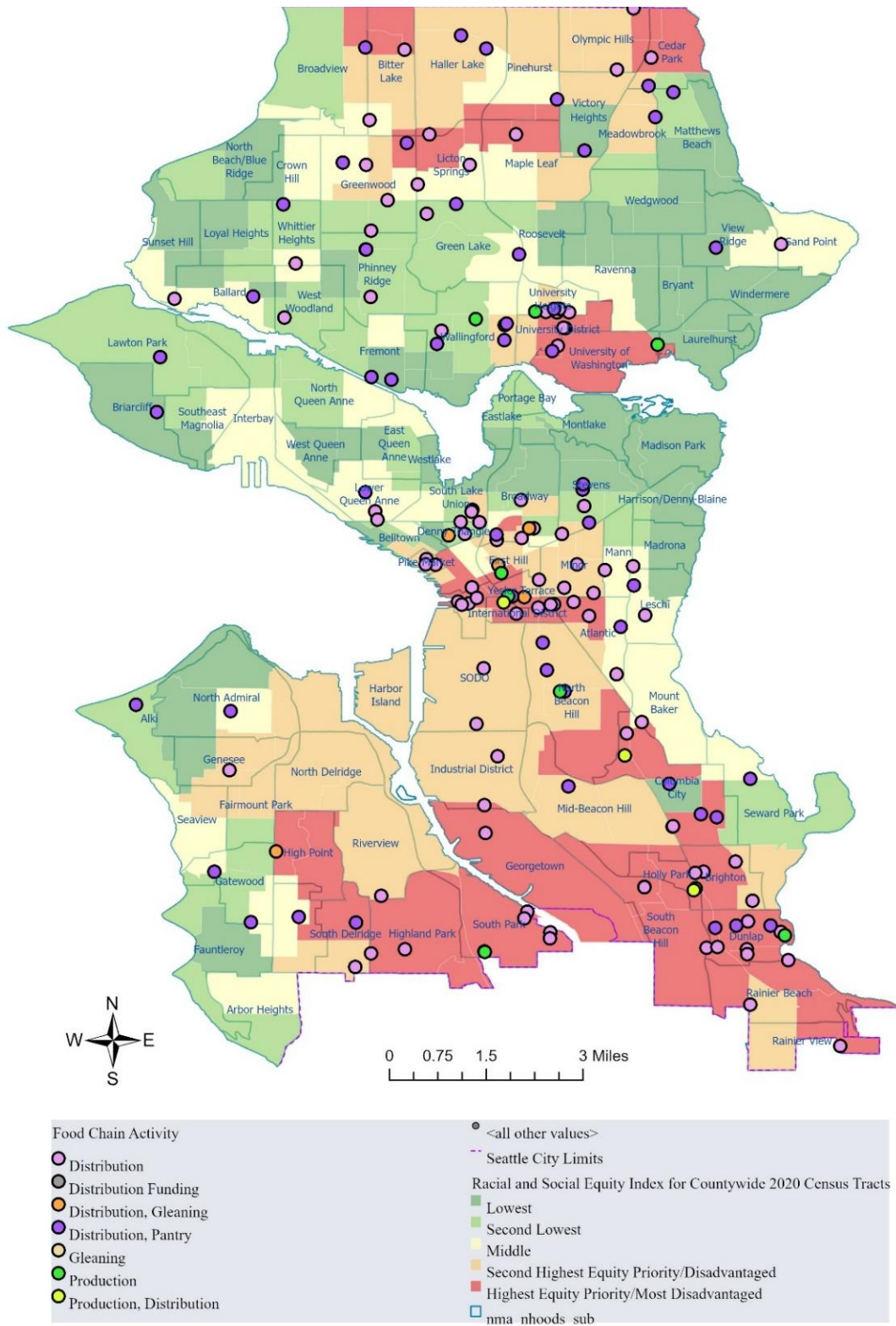


Figure 8: Seattle's Free Food Networks in Relation to Racial and Social Equity



To accurately analyze Seattle’s free food networks, it is essential to understand the demographic distribution of Seattle’s residents. The first two maps in this section depict population density and per capita income in relation to racial distribution. Both population density and per capita income are essential in understanding where people are the most likely to need free food services. Racial distribution is crucial to this analysis because systemic inequality increases precarity amongst people of color. Furthermore, as previously mentioned, there is a long history of food-based activism arising from communities of color across the U.S. and in Seattle. Therefore, this variable must be accounted for to accurately investigate correlations between demographic data and Seattle’s free food network. The first map compares population density and ethnic distribution to demonstrate the size and prevalence of communities of color in relation to the total population (see figure 6). This map reveals the ongoing segregation of Seattle, with most people of color residing in the southern half of the city. It also indicates where the largest and most diverse neighborhoods in the city are located, with a clear concentration in South Seattle. The second map compares ethnic to per capita income distribution, underscoring the systemically low-wages that people of color receive – particularly Black residents. Together, these maps clearly demonstrate the economic and racial inequality of Seattle.

To understand these factors and more, I compare Seattle’s free food network with a racial and social equity index made by the City of Seattle (see figure 8). The combined map demonstrates that the free food network is generally responding to the areas with greatest need. Yet, there are quite a few services provided in low-risk areas while there are some high-risk areas that remain unassisted. It is important to note that 20 services are unaccounted for on this map due to a lack of information. However, of the 90% accounted for, there are already clear inefficiencies in the spatial distribution of free food services. For example, there is at least one service in eight of the “lowest risk” census tracts, while there are eight “highest risk” areas in which only one service is available. Moreover, there are several “second highest risk” areas that

Figure 9: Seattle's Subversive Food Networks in Relation to Equity

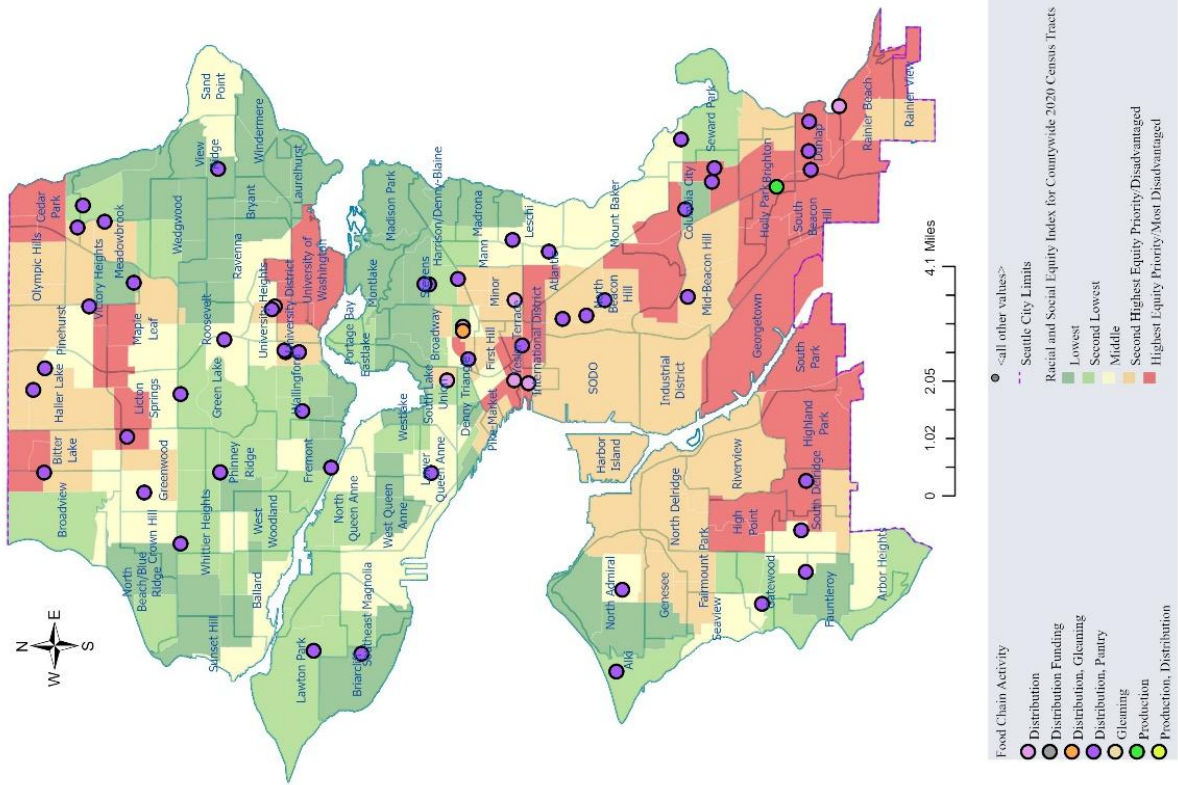
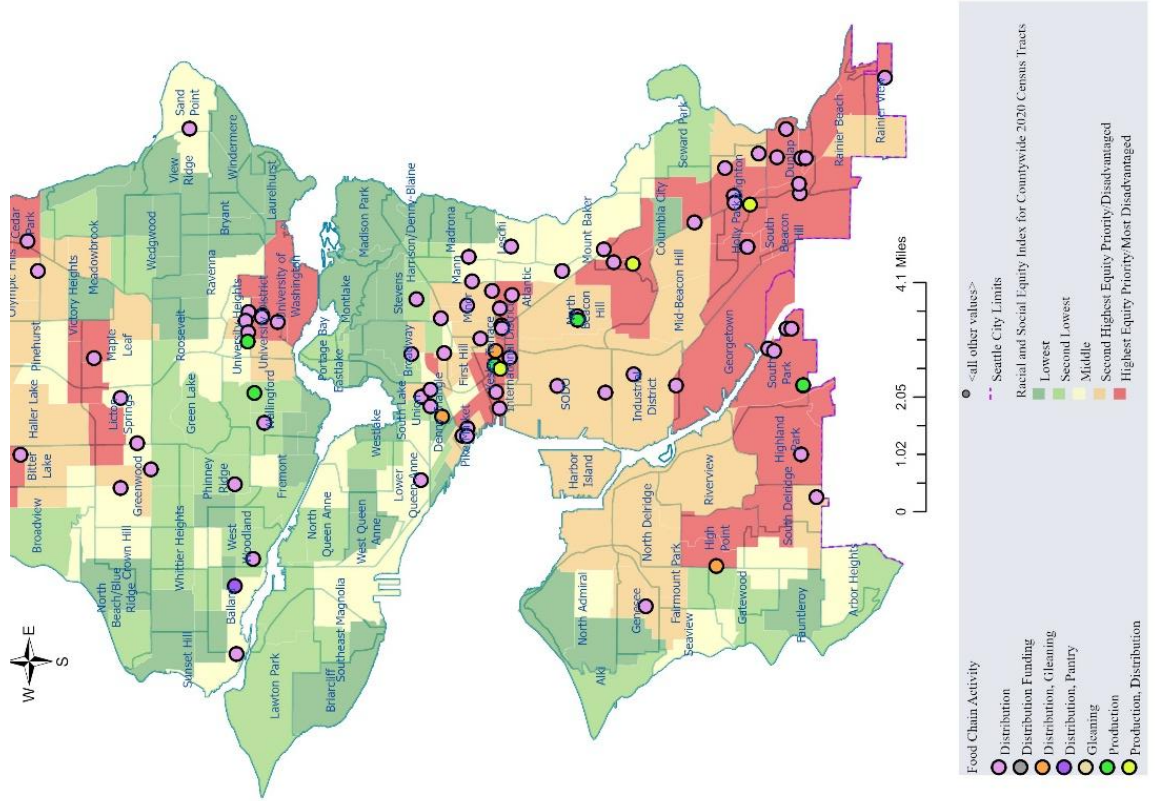


Figure 10: Seattle's Alternative Food Networks in Relation to Equity



addresses – Long Haul Kitchen and the West Seattle Mutual Aid Party – specify that they operate in SODO and Delridge respectively. This indicates that this map is not comprehensive of all organizations serving Seattle; however, the map is still helpful in highlighting the general trends in the spatial distribution of free food services.

Comparing Seattle’s demographic data to free food networks illustrates salient trends in service clustering and service types. Firstly, there is a clear overlap between the clustering of services and the concentration of racial minorities – visualizable across all three maps in the “S” shape that the points create. This correlation appears more significant than that between services and low-income census tracts. There are many potential causes for the strong correlation between services and racial minorities – such as rapid changes in economic or racial makeup and/or variations in communal infrastructure across the city – so it is not possible to understand what this represents without more data or ethnographic research. However, its potential indication that people of color are playing fundamental roles in sustaining the free food networks could be very important in understanding their prefigurative influence. Secondly, there is a higher correlation of distribution pantries than any other type of service in wealthy neighborhoods. This could be the result of many factors which cannot be accounted for here without ethnographic research; however, the correlation does demonstrate that pantries alone are not a good indicator of need.

I include two additional maps using the racial and social equity index to understand the differences between the subversive and alternative food networks response to spatial inequality (see figures 9 and 10). The two networks generally follow the same distributional “S” shape mentioned above, however there are notable differences in clustering and the placement of specific service types. Firstly, the maps indicate that the alternative food network’s services are more tightly clustered in areas of need than those of the subversive food network. It is important to note that these results are exaggerated as the alternative food network is substantially more

accurately represented than the subversive. Almost 50% (9 /21) of the subversive network's services are not represented in this map due to insufficient data, while, of nonprofit services, only 24% (25) are missing. Therefore, these maps do not offer a comprehensive view of the data and are most reliable for making general assessments – particularly regarding the subversive and insurgent food networks. Additionally, the distinction between alternative and subversive network distribution is exaggerated by the location of pantries in wealthy neighborhoods. The prevalence of pantries here clearly shows a lack of capacity within the subversive food network.

All this considered, there is a strong likelihood that the alternative free food network has a more effective spatial distribution than the subversive. This could be due to a host of factors that are difficult to calculate without further research, however speculating potential causes can be helpful in inspiring further avenues for research. One possibility could be that nonprofits have the resources (time, money, skill set) to acquire properties wherever they wish. Another could be that their higher visibility amongst the public puts added pressure on them to be cognizant of statistical poverty rates when setting up an operating location. They could also be clustered together in high-risk areas because, as capitalist enterprises focused on growth, they are competing over the provision of services. Either way, the fact that services are more equitably distributed amongst the alternative food networks rather than the subversive is problematic for the legitimacy and capacity of current insurgent infrastructure around food. To remedy this issue, it would help to include more information about operating locations, or at the very least operating neighborhoods, so there can be internal assessments of movement capacity. Additionally, including more locational data would allow those in need of free food to better connect with local, grassroots services.

6.2 Material Output

Organization Classification	Reported Material Output Annually (lbs.)		Organization Output Report Rate (reported/total)		Median Material Output Annually (lbs.)		Extrapolated Total Material Output Annually (lbs.)	
	<i>Prod.</i>	<i>Distro.</i>	<i>Prod.</i>	<i>Distro.</i>	<i>Med. Prod.</i>	<i>Med. Distro.</i>	<i>Prod.</i>	<i>Distro.</i>
Non-profit	27,820	26,480,138	4/8	29/59	2,475	517,561	37,720	42,006,968
Grassroots (non-pantry)	--	7,488	--	1/21	--	--	--	--
Religious	720	534,253	1/1	2/13	--	--	--	--
City-owned	42,031	--	1/1	--	--	--	--	--
Univ.-owned	8,803	46,800	1/1	0/1	--	--	--	--
TOTAL	79,374	27,686,679	7/12	32/94	--	--	--	--

Table 3: Material Output by Category and Organization Type

To understand the efficacy and capacity of the free food networks, it is crucial to calculate the amounts of material production, circulation, and distribution moving through them. In figure 10, I have organized a chart depicting the total pounds of production and distribution annually in relation to organization classification to observe how effectively these networks provide revolutionary capacity. In the chart, I show that of the reported data, there is a total of 79,374 lbs. produced, and 27,686,679 lbs. of food distributed annually. Additionally, with 66% (2/3) of gleaning groups reporting, there is a total of 465,000 lbs. annually. Of this reported data, the state and shadow state (made up of the city-owned, non-profit, and university-owned organizations) make up nearly *all* the free food production and 98% of distribution in the city. In the subversive and insurgent networks (grassroots (non-pantry)) there is *no production* and, of reported data, make up only 2% of the distribution. These ratios are undoubtedly exaggerated due to the extreme differences in data collection rates between grassroots and nonprofit groups.

Grassroots groups had the lowest ratio of reporting at less than 0.5% percent while 50% of non-profits reported. Based on the high reporting rates of nonprofits, I was able to extrapolate for the unreported 50%. With this extrapolation, I estimate that there are an additional 9900 pounds of food being produced and an additional 15,526,830 pounds of food being circulated annually by the nonprofit organizations alone. It is also important to note that a lot of production occurs beyond Seattle's city limits where land is cheaper. In the process of creating this map, I came across several mutli-acre farms – such as Small Axe Farm and Elk Run Farm – that are located just beyond city limits and explicitly bring food to Seattle to be distributed for free.

To measure the current capacity of the alternative and subversive (and insurgent) networks, I compared the data in Figure 10 to average consumption rates in the U.S. to see how well the free food networks could provide for people. Additionally, I wanted to see how well the networks could hypothetically meet the needs of Seattle residents using SNAP benefits. Based on the total value of reported data, about 40 people would be able to eat for a year from the food produced and about 13,843 people (including the 40) would be able to eat for a year from what is distributed. In relation to the countywide total of 189,993 SNAP benefit users – of which Seattle's population makes up 32.6% – Seattle's proportionate quantity of 61,938 SNAP benefit users could indicate that the existing free food networks jointly distribute enough to feed 15% of this population. If the estimated value for non-reporting nonprofit distribution is considered, there are potentially 7,763 more people that could be assisted through distribution, bringing the total distribution up to 21,606 people, and increasing the rate to 35% of SNAP benefit users that could potentially be assisted.

Though there is a substantial effort put towards material output across networks, the data analysis depicts very low efficacy and capacity in the subversive and insurgent networks. Most importantly, the preponderance of nonprofits in the free food networks endangers

resource stability and limits the capacity for sustained revolutionary organizing. The proliferation of the shadow state is partly to blame for the abundance of nonprofits; however, the capacity of grassroots organizations also appears severely diminished. Further ethnographic research is needed to understand what elements of capacity (time, economics, knowledge, connections, etc.) are limiting the formation and expansion of new grassroots groups. However, it is important to recognize that the current size of the free food networks demonstrates the enormous capabilities of people to provide for themselves without massive state infrastructure and people's desire to do this work.

6.3 Financial Independence

As discussed in the Insurgent Commoning section, a revolutionary movement is unable to build infrastructural power if it is reliant on the state or engulfed within the shadow state. For this reason, it is important to investigate how each classification is funded. Eight of the 23 grassroots groups specify that they primarily operate using individual donations. However, only nonprofits share detailed information on their annual funding, so the financial independence analysis will be focused on them. This focus also makes sense given that non-profits are the most at risk of being highly dependent on the state financially.

About half of the non-profits in the free food network share their estimated financial information. This means that the analysis of these values will be highly reliable and can be used to estimate the funding independence for those who did not report. In total, about 35% of reporting non-profits received state funding and 21.5 % of nonprofits were more than 50% funded by the state. Of those that listed government grants and contracts as a source of income (see table 5 in Appendix 8.2), the mean was 60 percent. The prevalence of state-dependent nonprofits is troubling for free food networks, particularly at this political moment when all service funding is at risk. Furthermore, building financial dependence on the city builds the

legitimacy of the state and the capitalist system. Participating in the bureaucratic processes of the shadow state are designed to distract from the system-changing parts of activism to a de-radicalized, slow, and institutional process of reform.

6.4 Analysis Conclusion

Analyzing Seattle's free food networks for efficacy across spatial distribution, material output, and financial independence revealed that the networks have very little revolutionary capacity. Additionally, in terms of both spatial distribution and material output, the alternative food networks appear better positioned to efficiently provide care than the subversive and insurgent networks. However, there was very little data provided by Seattle's SFN and IFN on the factors I measured, so there are significant limitations in these maps' ability to accurately depict effectiveness. Despite these issues with the network, there were still notable signs that people are practicing insurgent commoning practices through their involvement across the free food networks. Building from this discussion, I offer a few directions for future research.

As mentioned in the previous sections, the lack of information provided by grassroots groups – and all those other than non-profits – is detrimental to the process of making insurgent infrastructure. To best meet community needs consistently, insurgent infrastructures must know who requires assistance, how much assistance they require, and where these resources will come from. By not providing data on spatial distribution, material output, and financial stability, grassroots groups are restraining their ability to forge insurgent infrastructure from subversive and insurgent food networks. Of course, there are safety concerns with providing data on location, material output, and potentially in providing financial information. These safety concerns vary widely depending on location and political climate. However, there are methods of providing this information without providing specific details that may result in security risks (such as naming a neighborhood instead of an address as the spatial data). Most importantly, by providing some information about operating location: (1) activists in the free food network will know where others are, which is important in minimizing redundancy and making connections; (2) people looking to get involved in Seattle's free food network will know

where to plug in, and; (3) those looking for these services will have a simpler time finding the information.

Despite its failures, there are ways in which this free food network is building up insurgent commoning tactics and organization. Even with the minimal data provided, Seattle's free food networks reportedly feed thousands of people annually independent of the state. As stated earlier, this signifies an important material and aesthetic breach from the dominant capitalist food network. Furthermore, it highlights that the labor and resource capacity to meet this scale of need exists, even if not fully isolated from the state in the current moment. Improvements to the material independence of the subversive and insurgent free food networks (i.e. more grassroots-funded production and distribution) would mean that some of this existing capacity – primarily the labor – could be repurposed towards strengthening revolutionary struggles.

7. Conclusion:

I began this thesis by asking several framing questions – focused on finding the best method for building revolutionary power– and investigated them through a militant research framework. Overarchingly, I re-politicized the commons by demonstrating their importance in revolutionary history, Marxist feminist theory, and contemporary activism. I distinguished between the different types of food-based commoning praxis – the alternative, subversive, and insurgent – to nurture the field’s nascent, radical literature. Ultimately, this thesis calls for further interrogation of the gap between the methods activists presume necessary in creating radical, food-based commons and those that build revolutionary capacity. I argued that a more imaginative and urgency-informed approach to commoning challenges institutional organizations as the primary vehicles for revolutionary change. I emphasized the need to consider relationality in commoning praxis by discussing the potential of decentralized commoning. This approach frames commoning networks as early evolutions in the creation of insurgent infrastructure, in which the physical form is secondary to interpersonal connections. In focusing on relationality, I highlighted the ongoing commoning efforts which sustain ephemeral occupations and carry on after their dissolution. To emphasize the political and relational nature of the commons, I utilized countermapping methods to illustrate the existence of Seattle’s free food networks and their insurgent potential. Spatial and material analysis of these mapped networks revealed their high material output and effective spatial distribution. The analysis of these networks also revealed several concerning trends, primarily the lack of material power amongst subversive and insurgent networks. This is exacerbated by the absence of data around material output (distribution, production, and gleaning) and funding sources, which prevents deeper analysis of these radical networks. To make effective commons in the future, there must be a greater capacity to analyze movement strength and stability, allowing for

the movement to sufficiently plan the spatial distribution, scale, and resource-stability of the network.

I recommend future research on this topic incorporates ethnography to understand the affective dimensions of commoning that are incomprehensible through numerical data analysis. This additional methodology allows for a deeper understanding of relationality in commoning praxis, such as: the interaction between organizations in networks (i.e. grassroots, non-profits, etc.) and their separate/combined relationships to state; the connections and interactions between individuals across these spaces; and the capacity of organizations to form, dissolve, and reform through shared labor. Beyond this, ethnography would also illuminate variation of approaches in organizations, for example non-enforcement of institutional regulations. Other research could prioritize expanding productive capacity, potentially by utilizing a decentralized commoning approach focused on backyard- and guerilla-gardening.

8. Appendix:

8.1: Missing Data from Seattle’s Food-Based Organizations:

Role in Food Network			Organization	Missing Data		
Dist.	Prod.	Glean.	Organization	Class.	Address	Hours
X			Backpack Brigade	NP	X	X
X			Beacon Hill Mutual Aid (North)	G	X	
X			Beacon Hill Mutual Aid (South)	G	X	X
	X		Black Farmers Collective	NP		X
	X		Black Star Farmers	NP		X
		X	Cascade Bicycle Club	NP	X	X
		X	Cascadia Urban Rural Coalition	G	X	X
		X	City Fruit	NP	X	X
X			Dumplings for Mutual Aid	G	X	X
	X		El Centro de la Raza Garden	NP		X
X			Eritrean Association of Greater Seattle	NP	X	
X		X	FareStart	NP		X
			Food Lifeline of WA	NP		X
(funding)			Good Food Kitchen	NP	X	X
X			Homies Helping Homies	G	X	X
X			Hunger Intervention Program	NP		X
X			Lifelong	NP	X	
X			Little Free Pantry Green Lake	G	X	
			New Roots	NP		
			North Helpline	NP		
X			Nourished Neighborhood: Community Meals	NP		X
	X		P-Patch Community Gardens	S	X	X
X			Pipsqueak Community Dinners	G		X
X			Plants Based Food Share	NP	X	X
X			Single Spark (North Seattle)	G	X	X
X	X		Solid Ground	NP		X
	X		St. James Cathedral	R		X
	X		Tilth Alliance – Rainier Beach Urban Farm & Wetlands and Good Shephard Center	S & NP		X
	X		Tilth Alliance – Giving Grove Community Orchards	NP	X	X
X			University District Food Bank – Packs 4 Kids	NP	X	X
X			University District Food Bank – Home Delivery	NP	X	X
X	X		University District Food Bank – Rooftop Roots	NP		X
	X		UW Farm	U		X
X		X	West Seattle Mutual Aid Party	G	X	
X			YMCA – University Family	NP		X
X			Young Women Empowered – Free Farm Stand	NP	X	X
	X		Young Women Empowered – Know Your Roots Garden @ Mara Farms	NP		X
TOTAL:					20	30

Table 4: Missing Data from Organizations

8.2: Financial Independence Non-Profit Calculations

Organization Name	% of Annual Funding from Government Grants
Asian Counseling and Referral Service (ACRS)	42
Aurora Commons	70
Beacon Food Forest	70
Byrd Barr Place	64
Chief Seattle Club Day Center	83
El Centro de la Raza	41
Eritrean Association of Greater Seattle	56
FamilyWorks	28
Filipino Community of Seattle	41
Hunger Intervention Program	49
International Drop-in Center (IDIC) Filipino Senior & Family Services	69
Lifelong	91
Phinney Neighborhood Association	27
Rainier Beach Action Coalition	72
Seattle Indian Center	64
Sound Generations	31
Tilth Alliance	54
YWCA	70

Table 5: Financial Independence of Non-Profits

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