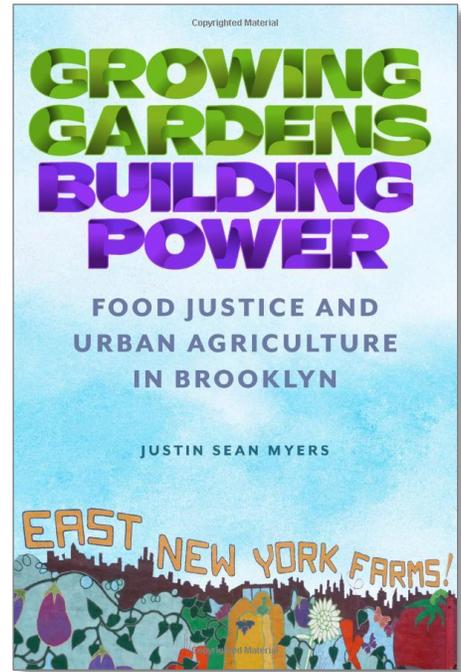


Finding justice in the food movements

Book review by
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Review of *Growing Gardens, Building Power: Food Justice and Urban Agriculture in Brooklyn*, by Justin Sean Myers. (2022). Published by Rutgers University Press. Available as cloth, paperback, EPUB, and PDF; 250 pages. Publisher’s website: <https://www.rutgersuniversitypress.org/growing-gardens-building-power/9780813589008>



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Justin Sean Myers’ *Growing Gardens, Building Power: Food Justice and Urban Agriculture in Brooklyn* documents the emergence and development of urban agriculture in East New York. Using food as a lens, the book presents a detailed account of a community’s collective effort to confront its racialized history of segregation and disinvestment and simultaneously fight for food sovereignty and social justice.

The first chapter provides an overview of the landscape in East New York, setting the tone for the rest of the book by pointing out the white,

affluent, and exclusive status quo of the current food movement—one that fails to recognize the assets and needs of marginalized communities. The chapter advocates for a new discourse that not only addresses the intersectionality between the food movement and the “broader social, political, and economic structures and institutions” (p. 14), but also integrates a narrative of procedural, substantive, and distributive justice (p. 16). Building on these notions, chapter 2 examines the social, political, and economic roots of food inequities in East New York, detailing the institutional practices over the past century that have limited working-class communities of color through the systemic underdevelopment of housing, education, employment, and the discriminatory enforcement of criminal justice.

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In direct response to some of these policies and programs, the emergence of community gardens and, consequently, farmers markets in East New York are documented in chapters 3 and 4 as bottom-up initiatives that bring fresh produce to the local community at affordable prices. In exploring the role of food assistance programs in the farmers markets, Myers again stresses the urgency of establishing a counternarrative that prevents the stigmatization of such programs, calling for collective responsibility to achieve a social equity politics.

Looking specifically at East New York Farms! (ENYF!), a local organization that has long played a role in developing urban agriculture and youth programs in the area, chapter 5 discusses the limitation of the current funding streams in the food justice movement, which could be improved through a shift toward tax-based public funding to give local organizations more agency and, ultimately, to reshape the philanthropic funding landscape. Drawing on Walmart's failed attempt to expand to East New York, chapter 6 explains the importance of demand-side politics in addressing food inequities, especially the focus on creating high-road jobs in the local community while providing healthy food access. This leads us to the last chapter, in which Myers summarizes the six major issues previously touched upon in the case of East New York that shape the broader food justice movement: the conceptualization of food inequities, right to the land, social and economic welfare, work ethics, affirmative practices, and labor politics.

Growing up and living in affluent, predominantly white communities (p. 157), Myers never shies away from his positioning as an outsider to East New York. The book begins with Myers leaving his apartment adjacent to Prospect Park,

a location that grants him convenient access to the “the flagship Brooklyn farmers market” (p. 2), an epitome of the white, affluent, and exclusive food movement that he sets out to criticize. We then follow him along the 3 train, going all the way to the end of the line to East New York where there is another farmers market—or rather an entire foodscape—that differentiates itself from the above and is simultaneously marginalized by it.

This short journey provides a geographical understanding of where East New York is within New York City as much as a sense of distance from it, not only to Myers, “a nonlocal white male” (p. 159), but also a potentially privileged readership, including myself. To avoid imposing an othering gaze and reproducing power inequalities, Myers volunteered at ENYF!, working on “building relations with the gardeners and staff members” (p. 159) for approximately a year before formally conducting interviews with them. Although the book targets an audience of academics and policy-makers, *Growing Gardens, Building Power* draws on a considerable number of direct quotes from residents and ENYF! staff members, allowing the people to speak for themselves. This methodological approach shows remarkable congruence with Myers' aim to include the residents, particularly those in working-class communities of color, in the structure of decision-making and to secure their rights to food and the city. In this sense, the book's opening has another connotation, that is, the possibility and necessity for us all to come closer, one step at a time, to underserved and under-represented neighborhoods—a move that marks the beginning of the joint effort of academics, grassroots organizations, and local communities as we work toward more inclusive and just food systems.

