

FOOD NOT BOMBS  
AND THE WORLD-CLASS  
WASTE OF GLOBAL  
CITIES.

A black and white photograph of a person lying on their back on a metal structure, possibly a train car or a large container. The person is wearing jeans and a dark shirt. The metal structure has graffiti and a "CAUTION" sign. The background is dark and industrial.

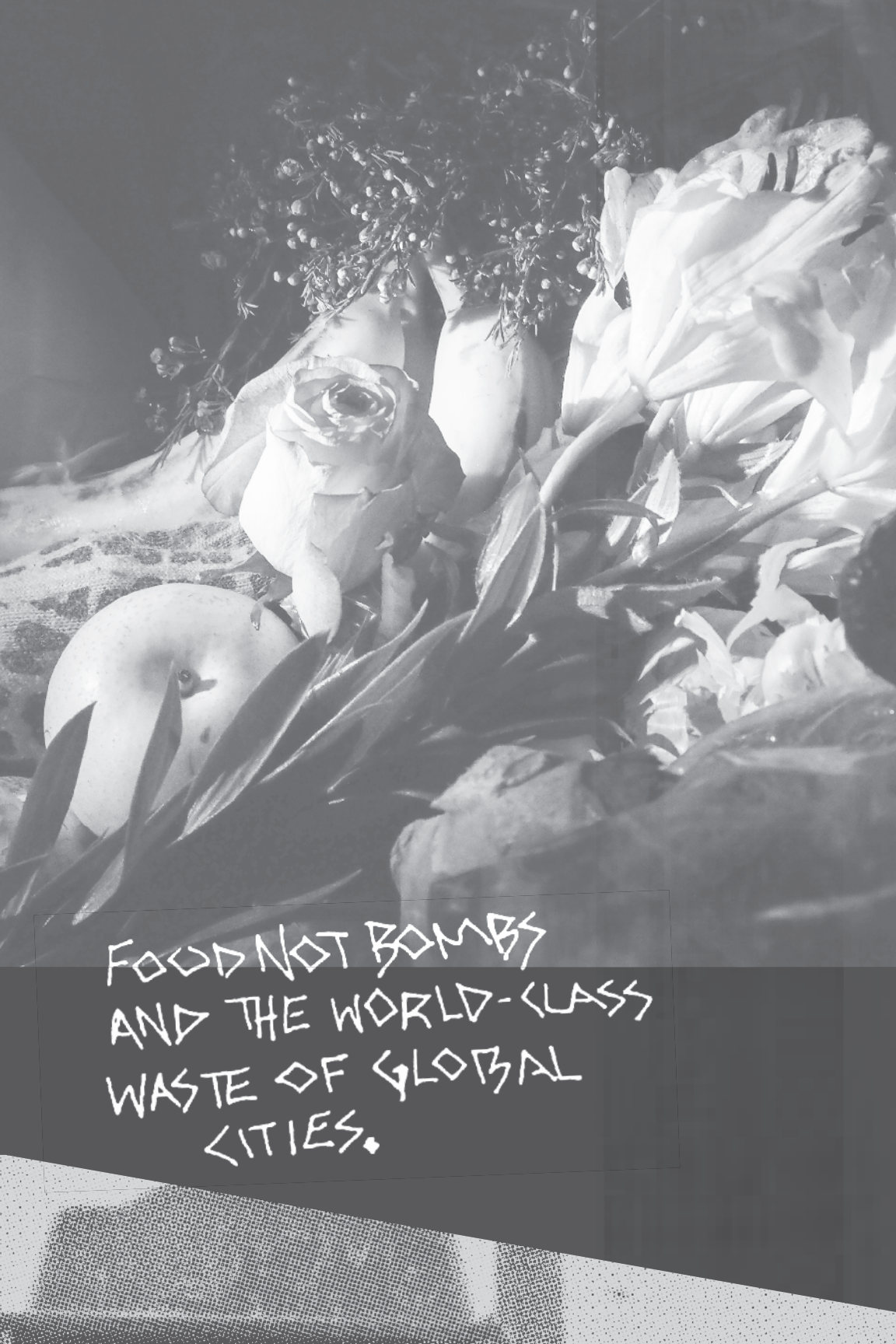
# A MASS CONSPIRACY to FEED PEOPLE

DAVID BOARDER GILES




A MASS CONSPIRACY  
TO FEED PEOPLE





FOOD NOT BOMBS  
AND THE WORLD-CLASS  
WASTE OF GLOBAL  
CITIES.



DAVID BOARDER GILES

# A MASS CONSPIRACY to FEED PEOPLE

Duke University Press  
Durham & London 2021



© 2021 Duke University Press  
All rights reserved  
Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ∞  
Designed by Aimee C. Harrison  
Typeset in Minion Pro, Univers LT Std, and Glypha  
by Copperline Book Services

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
Names: Giles, David Boarder, [date] author.  
Title: A mass conspiracy to feed people: food not bombs and the  
world-class waste of global cities / David Boarder Giles.  
Description: Durham: Duke University Press, 2021. | Includes  
bibliographical references and index.  
Identifiers: LCCN 2020057026 (print)  
LCCN 2020057027 (ebook)  
ISBN 9781478013495 (hardcover)  
ISBN 9781478014416 (paperback)  
ISBN 9781478021711 (ebook)  
Subjects: LCSH: Food Not Bombs (Organization) | Food waste. |  
Dumpster diving. | Food security. | Food supply—Social  
aspects. | Food consumption—Social aspects. | Waste  
(Economics)—Social aspects.  
Classification: LCC GN407. G55 2021 (print) |  
LCC GN407 (ebook) | DDC 306.4—dc23  
LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2020057026>  
LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2020057027>

Cover photograph by Raeanne Wiseman.

contents

preface / acknowledgments ..... vii  
xi ..... prologue : any given sunday in seattle  
introduction : of waste, cities, and conspiracies ..... 1

PART I : ABJECT CAPITAL

27 ..... scene i : it's thanksgiving in seattle  
**1 / The Anatomy of a Dumpster : Abject Capital and the  
Looking Glass of Value** ..... 31  
55 ..... scene ii : reckoning value at the market  
**2 / Market-Publics and Scavenged Counterpublics** ..... 58

PART II : WORLD-CLASS CITIES, WORLD-CLASS WASTE

91 ..... scene iii : if you build it, they will come  
**3 / Place-making and Waste-making in the Global City** .... 97  
117 ..... scene iv : like a picnic, only bigger, and with strangers  
**4 / Eating in Public : Shadow Economies  
and Forbidden Gifts** ..... 123

PART III : SLOW INSURRECTION

157 ..... scene v : "rabble" on the global street  
**5 / A Recipe for Mass Conspiracy** ..... 166  
198 ..... scene vi : when i first got to the kitchen  
**6 / Embodying Otherwise : Toward a New  
Politics of Surplus** ..... 202  
233 ..... encore : a new zeitgeist  
conclusion : an open letter to lost homes (political implications) 235  
notes ..... 255  
bibliography ..... 271  
index ..... 293

*This page intentionally left blank*



## **preface/** ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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

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

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

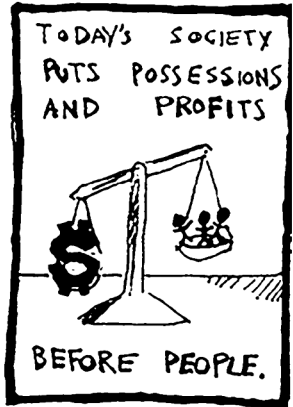
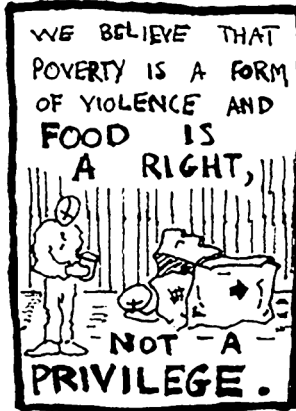
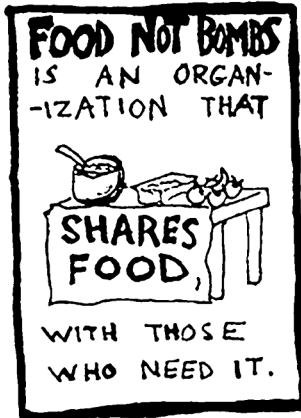
That future is singularly hazy right now, amid recession, pandemic, and political unrest unprecedented in recent memory. We cannot know how they will transform our world. Some of the world-class business districts described in this book, for example, have been evacuated for now—by those who can afford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

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

vid Spataro, Alex Vitale, Jill Friedberg, Trevor Griffey, Robertson Allen, Matt Hale, Amir Sheikh, Mariana Markova, Tim Neale, Tanya King, Victoria Stead, Roland Kapferer, Louise Johnson, Melinda Hinkson, Emma Kowal, Eben Kirksey, Bree Carlton, Jen Moore, Tamara Myers, Ryan Burt, Emily Clark, Erin Clowes, Jed Murr, Alice Pedersen, Kyle Croft, Beth Scholler, Heather Rastovac, Jessica D'Amour, Shealeigh Heindel, Ryder Richardson, Melissa Espinoza, Monica Chahary, and particularly Danny Hoffman. And my deepest gratitude is for the journey of personal becoming behind any kind of research. Thanks Laurie Penny, Jessie Kindig, Meg Murphy, Amy Peloff, Olivia Little, Noora El Shaari, Violeta Hernandez, Jill Schaffner, Taryn Dorsey, Sabrina Chap, Courtney Cecale, Risa Cromer, Lilly Frank, Lauren Lichty, Kathryn Taft, Lily So Too, Francisco Iturbide, Peter Donahue, Joe Thompson, Jake Warga, Raven Healing, Kris Edin, Kevin "Doc" Dockery, Ash Martin-Bumpus, Amalia Davalos, Cale Wilcox, David O'Bright, Paul Ohnemus, Erin Ohnemus, Elizabeth Rard, David Wallace, Nathan Shields, Shauna "Cutter" Greene, Laura Palachuk, Kawan Baxter, Mary Holly, Ani Borua, Kevin "Irish" Kelly, Koa Kaelepulu, Corri Chase, Oats Habercorn, Wilson Shook, Eric Wirkman, Ryan Bartek, Garlicana Farms, and Annabelle Crosbie, among others. And for teaching me, in their ways, to read, care, play, endure, and help, I can thank Marilyn Boarder, Neil Blacker, and Michael Giles. These people and many more have helped make this book what it is. The errors are mine alone. But whatever it may achieve belongs to all of us.



# FOOD NOT BOMBS



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

A typical Food Not Bombs flyer sums up its philosophy.

## PROLOGUE

# ANY GIVEN SUNDAY IN SEATTLE

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

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

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



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

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

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







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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



# Introduction

## Of Waste, Cities, and Conspiracies

### A Very Straightforward Blueprint

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

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

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

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

—Walter Benjamin

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

—Frank, Melbourne FNB,  
ca. 1999–2005

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

—Allan, San Francisco FNB, ca. 1990

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## The Global City

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

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

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





“Now leasing”: reflections of downtown Seattle (2017).



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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **Food Not Bombs**

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



ple please stick around to wash the dishes? (Long-term FNB collaborators may feel pangs of burnout just reading this.) Not a very romantic place for the reader to join the fray, but an inescapable one. These are the messy, quotidian details that sustain a “mass conspiracy.” We’ll visit more rhapsodized episodes later in the book. (The clashes with police. The gleeful trespasses in back alleys and overflowing dumpsters.) But the mundane moments—that never rise to the level of an “event” in Badiou’s ([1988] 2013) sense yet constitute its necessary conditions—are just as crucial. With apologies to Gil Scott-Heron, the revolution will be full of meetings.

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

Food Not Bombs, New York City (2016).



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

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

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





Passersby, Food Not Bombs, Seattle (2017).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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