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Grub for Body and Soul

An interview with food activists Anna Lappé and Bryant Terry.

by MOLLY MARSH

Every movement needs its revolutionaries and spokespersons, and in the growing crusade for a healthy, ethical, and “fair” food system, Bryant Terry and Anna Lappé happen to be both. Terry is a chef and founder of b-healthy! (Build Healthy Eating and Lifestyles to Help Youth)—a nonprofit group in New York that teaches low-income kids not only about nutrition, but also how to prepare healthy food themselves. Lappé is a writer, speaker, and co-founder (with her mother, Frances Moore Lappé) of the Small Planet Institute and Small Planet Fund. The latter supports grassroots efforts around the world that address the causes of hunger and poverty.

The two packed their passion and experience into *Grub: Ideas for an Urban Organic Kitchen*, a practical book that explains why our food system is the way it is, but also what we can do to change it. And don't be surprised if, along the way, you pick up a few tips about cooking (pepper grinders are key) and music (Césaria Évora is nice accompaniment to cinnamon-dusted sweet potato fries). Associate editor Molly Marsh spoke recently with the author-activists.

Sojourners: So why the name *Grub*? What is grub?

Bryant Terry: When Anna and I started working on this project, we had so many people tell us that healthy organic food is for wealthy baby boomers. That's a common misconception. We wanted people to understand that grub—healthy, local, sustainable food—is food that's accessible to everyone. It's something all people have a right to.

Anna Lappé: For us, it's not just about food that is organic or local. It's about making the connections between what we eat and whether it's produced in a sustainable and just way.

Sojourners: How did you meet, and when did the idea for the book emerge?

Lappé: I had just moved to Brooklyn and was reading *Future 500*, a book that describes youth-led organizations around the country. I saw the description of Bryant and b-healthy! and thought, “I have to meet him.” I found out Bryant was only six blocks away. We had coffee and started talking—we hit it off at that first meeting.

Sojourners: The book is structured very creatively, with information on food systems, menus, and music pairings. How did you decide on the different elements?

Lappé: It happened organically. We thought about what we would want in a book—what we like and what our friends would like. We liked the idea of adding music. Among his other talents, Bryant is a DJ. I'm always asking him for music ideas. So it made sense to include them.

SPECIAL ISSUE ON
FOOD



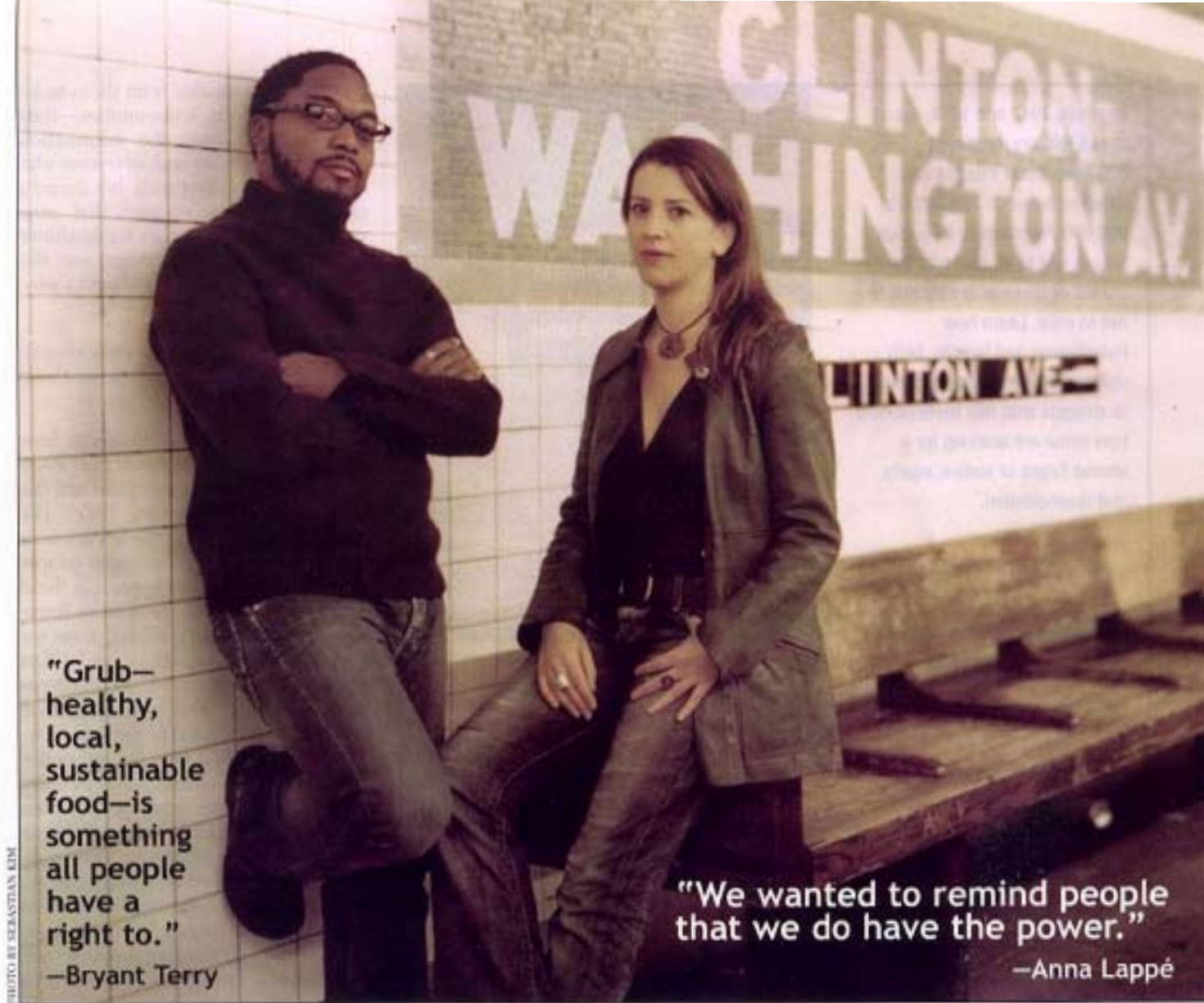


PHOTO BY SEBASTIAN KIM

"Grub—healthy, local, sustainable food—is something all people have a right to."

—Bryant Terry

"We wanted to remind people that we do have the power."

—Anna Lappé

Terry: The cookbook section came out of the grub parties—we've had four grub parties in New York and two in the Oakland, California, area. Activists, educators, and intellectuals came together to see how they could be more active as consumers and citizens to make changes. Music was a huge element to the parties. People also asked for cooking tips, so we thought it was important to include those.

The grub Web site (www.eatgrub.org) will include tips for people to host their own grub parties, links to other groups doing this work, and ways to let us know about people's grub parties.

Sojourners: *Grub* describes the forces that actively keep us from eating healthy and in a sustainable way. How can we keep from being overwhelmed by what's happened to our food systems?

Lappé: That's why we have all the elements in *Grub*. We wanted to tell people what's happened to our food, but in the same book give people these really tangible things to do—to remind people that we do have the power. We can turn things around. Look back at when the organic movement was starting: If it hadn't been for citizen activists, there would be genetically modified food, irradiation, and

sewage sludge going under the "organic" label. Things aren't great now, but they could be worse. So yes, there are these forces, but we also have the power. What's so wonderful is that food is a choice we make every day, multiple times a day.


Terry: We want people to leave the book with a sense of hope. Looking at the resources in the book, there are lots of organizations out there working toward change. We wanted to recognize them as well as show people how they can be part of that movement.

Sojourners: How do the students in b-healthy! react to what they're learning?

Terry: Initially there was a lot of resistance; we're fighting billions of dollars in advertising. We work with about 10 young people throughout the academic year—this year we have two groups. We have a two-pronged approach: discussion groups to talk about macro issues, and then practical cooking workshops. It's one thing to talk about these ideas in a theoretical sense, but we're allowing them to not only learn about the food, but to handle and prepare it. It's made a world of difference.

The goal is personal transformation in the way these young people think about food and their own consumption

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patterns. But we also train them to be activists in their communities—they go back and share the information with their families and everyone else they come in contact with. It's always a challenge, but we've seen that once you give them an option for healthier food and they take into account the way their bodies feel, it's always a win-win situation.

Sojourners: Have you seen a change in the way people are thinking about food in the last five to 10 years?

Lappé: Definitely. Think about how many people read the book *Fast Food Nation* [by Eric Schlosser] and saw the documentary *Supersize Me* [by Morgan Spurlock]. There has been an incredible jump in how many people are interested in and supporting these issues. In the 1970s, there were fewer than 100 farmers' markets; now we have 3,700 and counting. And CSAs [community-supported agriculture programs] have been increasing since they were introduced in the mid-'80s.

Also, there's a new federal policy that requires a wellness policy in every school district. Not many people even know about this. I know a lot of people who are involved in shaping those policies. And in my own experience speaking around the country, I've met so many people who are learning about these issues and figuring out how they can make a difference in their own lives.

Terry: Tragedy has also contributed to increased awareness—the rise in obesity and type 2 diabetes in young people, which are preventable and strictly related to diet. From my experience, so many people want to make a shift because they've seen so many suffer. As we see the effects of this failed American diet experiment, it's going to push people to seek other ways of thinking about food.

Lappé: We want to be sure to speak to as many people as possible [on the *Grub* book tour], and at each of the spots connect to local groups that are working on these issues—and make it a celebration of what people are doing around the country. ■

Molly Marsh is an associate editor of *Sojourners*. Visit www.eatgrub.org, www.b-healthy.org, and www.smallplanetinstitute.org.