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*Featuring commentaries on  
Race and Ethnicity in  
Food Systems Work*



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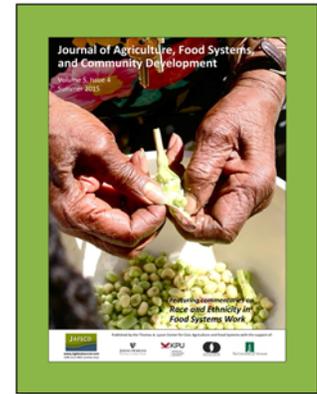
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**On the cover:** The hands of the Freedom Farmers Market’s elder, Ms. Mattie, as she participates in the market’s pea-shelling contest in Oakland, California. See *Decolonizing a Food System: Freedom Farmers Market as a Place for Resistance and Analysis* in this issue. (Photo by Adrionna Fike; used with permission)



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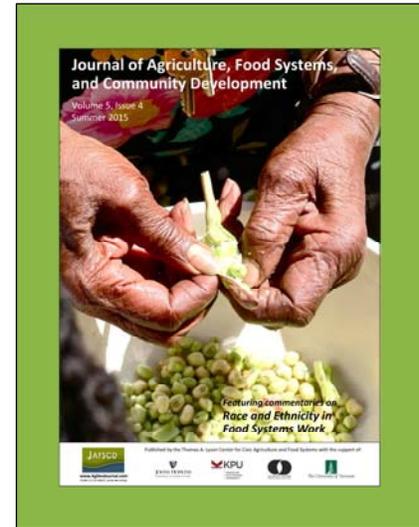
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**IN THIS ISSUE**  
**DUNCAN HILCHEY**

**Race and ethnicity in food systems work**

*Excerpted from the complete editorial*



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**I**t is no secret that despite the best intentions of many, the food movement manifests levels of whiteness and privilege that tend to exclude significant parts of society, and thus does not address the needs of those who are excluded. To be effective in addressing issues like food insecurity, urban agriculture, food policy, small and new farmer expansion, and access to farmland, markets, and capital, organizations need to address lack of racial equity and lack of diversity in organizational leadership. They need to more intentionally embrace diverse leadership and ownership of the food movement by having formal conversations with those currently excluded. It is not just the right thing to do; it is a practical thing to do, since the food movement will not flourish without this diversity and organizations seem unlikely to succeed in their missions without formal anti-racist policies in place.

To advance research and practice in the context of race and ethnicity in food systems work, JAFSCD sought commentaries this summer from activists of color, leaders, consultants, white advocates and project partners, nonprofit organization staff and board members, public agency staff, and academics (scholars, students, and program staff). In this issue we offer 24 thoughtful and challenging commentaries spanning a wide range of communities: Native peoples, migrant workers, African Americans, and exploited ethnic groups, to name a few. The authors speak of the misperceptions, stereotypes, and misunderstandings that happen when well-meaning folks arrive in their communities with ready-made tools, strategies, and programs—many under the guise of empowerment. This is an uncomfortable topic for all concerned.

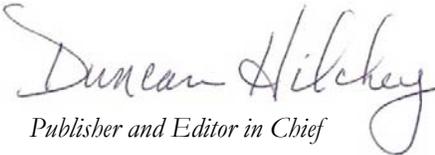
We hope this issue stimulates both scholars' and practitioners' thinking about how we move forward during a time of renewed interest in civil rights. For me the bottom line after reading these was that while advocacy and service by white allies is generally appreciated and helpful in meeting immediate and short-term needs for food security, this *outside* support can also be frustrating and disempowering to those on the *inside*. We've known for some time that it is not enough to provide handouts, and we must now acknowledge that teaching people to eat better or produce their own food is also not enough. From my perspective the collective call of these commentaries is for transformation, including training trainers and cultivating leaders by supporting people of color to *be* the community nutritionists, the dietitians, the garden developers, the small farm specialists, the food co-op director, the food hub managers, the extension agents, the land-use planners,

the researchers, the land-grant college deans, and the elected officials. Only when the food movement deliberately fosters and embraces the leadership of underrepresented peoples as service and information generators and providers— not just service and information recipients in the ghetto, the barrio, and on the reservation and other isolated rural areas—will the goals of food justice and food sovereignty in some of our most troubled communities be appropriately addressed. JAFSCD looks forward to seeing this leadership arise and take the reins.

The issue begins with a guest editorial by **Kent Mullinix**, professor and director of the Institute for Sustainable Food Systems at Kwantlen Polytechnic University, entitled *Working with Indigenous Peoples to Foster Sustainable Food Systems* that discusses his program's approaches to moving Native interests to the center of their programming.

In his Economic Pamphleteer column, *Ethnicity and the War on Big Food*, **John Ikerd** argues that our food systems cannot be transformed without the rich cultural contributions of people of color, who tend to place higher value on community and social relationships than on achievement and monetary gain.

And in his final column for JAFSCD, entitled *Allowing Ethnic Heritage To Emerge in Farm and Food Policy*, **Ken Meter** similarly points out that food policy is increasingly being formulated and implemented by those who are out of touch with the realities of intended beneficiaries. 

  
*Publisher and Editor in Chief*



## Working with Indigenous Peoples to foster sustainable food systems

**GUEST EDITORIAL BY KENT MULLINIX  
INSTITUTE FOR SUSTAINABLE FOOD SYSTEMS  
KWANTLEN POLYTECHNIC UNIVERSITY**

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In order for sustainable, regional food systems to be so they must embody the vision and aspirations of all people and communities therein. In Canada, Indigenous Peoples and First Nations are an important, though often marginalized, element of our communities and society (Gray, 2011). Therefore I proffer that sustainable, regional food system planning, advocacy, and action in Canada (and elsewhere) should include the perspectives and support the predilections of Indigenous Peoples and communities. Though there are important, examples of effective efforts to do so (Food Matters Manitoba, 2015; Tu’wusht Project [Vancouver Native Health Society, 2014] in Vancouver; Food Secure Canada, 2015), in my experience working in Western Canada and elsewhere North American, sustainable food system researchers, activists, and others have been substantially remiss in this regard, with a resultant impoverishment of the movement in terms of perspective, inclusivity, and strategy. At the Institute for Sustainable Food Systems (ISFS) at Kwantlen Polytechnic University, an applied research institute that works to advance regionalized food systems by delineating their economic, food self-reliance, environmental stewardship, and community development potentials, we are trying to do otherwise.

To begin the ISFS journey to better understand Indigenous food system perspectives and predilections we recruited Dawn Morrison of the Secwepemc Nation (Interior Salish) to join our research team. A horticulturist and long-time Indigenous food system advocate, Morrison is the founder and current chair of the British Columbia Food System Network Working Group on Indigenous Food Sovereignty (Morrison, 2008). For the past two years she has worked directly with the rest of the ISFS team to advance our understanding of what it might mean to bring together Indigenous food systems thinking with sustainable farming and food systems thinking, as well as the challenges inherent in this pursuit.

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Soon after joining the ISFS team Morrison recruited members for and convened an Indigenous Research Advisory Committee (IRAC). The IRAC is made up of individuals representing areas of focus important to Indigenous Peoples in our region, as opposed to representing organizational, political, or governmental entities. The IRAC has provided guidance and feedback on our work. It is an understatement to say that we have found it critical and enlightening to obtain direct input and feedback from Indigenous Peoples. For example, we have been challenged to think of farming as a colonialist enterprise, as well as to better understand the deep cultural significance of certain foods and traditional foodways.

The ISFS has focused on soil-based agriculture as the foundation of a regionalized, sustainable food systems. We describe our focus generally as small-scale, human-intensive, decommoditized, diversified, focused on community and alternate markets, environmentally and economically sound, reflective of and responsive to diverse cultural predilections, and with commensurately scaled and operated ancillary pre- and postproduction businesses. Working with IRAC however, we were compelled to acknowledge that our focus neglected to include salmon, the “keystone” and iconic food of British Columbia’s Coastal Salish Peoples. Despite this acknowledgment we still struggle to incorporate marine elements into our southwest British Columbia bioregional food system design and planning work, due to the political sensitivity and scientific complexity of doing so. The closest we have come, at this juncture, is elucidating some of the potential of incorporating habitat improvement to salmon-bearing waterways in agro-ecosystems and the region’s agriculture landscape.

To more fully inform our efforts to include Indigenous perspectives and predilections in our food systems work, Morrison, with the IRAC and others, has focused on assessing and delineating food system predilection and aspirations of Indigenous Peoples in southwest British Columbia (BC). She reminds us that this is no simple endeavor as the Indigenous Nations and Peoples of our region are many and diverse, and that generalizing and speaking for other Peoples is not appropriate. Based on this we are working to develop a framework or matrix whereby food system planning and action in southwest BC can be evaluated based on the food system attributes and outcomes desired by Indigenous Peoples here. We hope this framework might motivate and inform similar food system assessment in other regions.

The ISFS has also been working with the Tsawwassen First Nation (TFN), whose traditional (and now treaty) lands are located on the rich delta of the Fraser River, one of BC’s most productive agriculture areas. Last year, at the behest of and in full partnership with the TFN government, we began developing a farm school to be implemented in spring 2015 (Kwantlen Polytechnic University, n.d.). The Tsawwassen First Nation–Kwantlen Polytechnic University (TFN–KPU) Farm School, modeled after our first farm school in neighboring Richmond, BC, is designed and intended to expediently and effectively train TFN citizens (and others) in the art and science of small-scale, alternate market farming. The program, which is conducted over a nine-month period, is composed of approximately 350 hours of classroom teaching and learning complemented by at least 350 hours of experiential teaching and learning on a small, human-intensive, organic market crop, tree fruit and small animal farm. The program culminates with a farm business planning course in which students develop a business plan of their own. Successful completion of the program and business plan qualifies students to access a half-acre (0.2 hectare) incubator farm plot and shared equipment for up to four years. During those four years incubator farmers, with the support of TFN–KPU Farm School teachers and staff, have the opportunity to hone their farming and farm business management acumen in a low risk-environment, in preparation for eventually securing their own land for farming independently over the longer term. TFN has about 640 acres (260 hectares) of agricultural land that potentially could be farmed by TFN citizens for their community and the larger Metro Vancouver market.

To initiate the program, TFN matched ISFS’s start-up funding and provided 20 acres (8 hectares) for the teaching and incubator farm parcels. ISFS developed the curriculum, the teaching and incubator farms and facilities, and oversees the farm school. In addition to production and agricultural science classes, the curriculum also includes a class on Indigenous foods and food systems. Working with TFN we also anticipate developing additional courses and programming that are especially relevant to the Tsawwassen First Nation

community (for example, traditional food preservation, medicinal plant identification and cultivation, and a children's pumpkin patch). Ultimately we (TFN and ISFS) envision the teaching and incubator farms becoming a community gathering place in addition to an educational facility—the true integration of agriculture, education and community.

The TFN–KPU Farm School operates on a cost recovery basis with a target enrollment of 12 students. Preference is afforded first to TFN citizens and then to other Indigenous individuals. Our inaugural class was over-subscribed with 16 students coming from six Coast Salish Nations (Coast Salish peoples are a group of Indigenous peoples of the Pacific Northwest coast). We view this level of interest as a great success.

In working with TFN I have come to learn that my perspective of sustainable farming as inherently positive may or may not be shared by Indigenous Canadians. It has been communicated to me that for some, agriculture is regarded as a mechanism of colonization. A Tsawwassen Nation Elder told me that when agriculture in their traditional territories was being concertedly developed in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the provincial government purposefully excluded Tsawwassen First Nation citizens from receiving support that others were afforded to develop farming expertise and to be part of the nascent agriculture sector. Animosity toward farming and farmers resulted and persists to some extent today. What is more, the pain and destructive impact of Residential Schools (as recent as the 1990's) reverberates through Indigenous and Canadian society (Anishinabek Nation, n.d.; Gray, 2011). Residential schools were a network of boarding schools for First Nations, Métis and Inuit children, funded by the Canadian government and administered predominantly by the Catholic and Anglican churches. The objective was to remove children from the influence of their families and culture and assimilate them into the dominant Canadian culture. I have been told that working in the vegetable gardens at residential schools was one form of punishment some experienced, and therefore for some agriculture is a source of on-going pain and is held in disdain. It has also been expressed to me by Indigenous people that sincere efforts to include Indigenous communities' perspectives and predilections in conceptualization and development of a sustainable regional agriculture and food system may be one means of contributing toward reconciliation (revealing and resolving past wrongdoings) and healing (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015).

In addition to our partnership with TFN we have also begun discussion with the Lil'wat Nation, whose traditional and treaty lands are north of Vancouver, regarding a partnership to establish and operate a farm school on their lands for their people. Additionally we are now working with the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'n First Nation in Dawson City, Yukon, to develop a business and operations plan for their nascent community farm and farm school. Both of these First Nations, like the Tsawwassen First Nation, see enormous potential for food self-reliance, food security, economic (monetary or other) and community development in engaging in small-scale, alternate-market, and community-focused farming on their lands. Equally important to Tr'ondëk Hwëch'n citizens is the potential of a community farm to offer a safe, healthful environment, respectful of wellness, that provides opportunity for working on their traditional and settlement lands and for a traditional and cultural experience. During an ISFS project working with Carcross Tagish First Nation (CTFN), in the southern Yukon, citizens of that self-governing First Nation also expressed their trepidations and aspirations regarding their food system (Dorward, Kassi, Chiu, & Mullinix, 2014). They are concerned with food insecurity and the sustainability of their food system going forward. A dominant concern is the loss of traditional knowledge and ways (hunting, fishing, preserving, and gathering) that they want to remain an important part of their food system, and which they wish to pass on to their youth. CTFN citizens also recognize the vulnerability of communities, especially those in the far north, that are highly dependent upon costly, imported foods. As such, CTFN members are looking for ways to become more food self-reliant, create job and income opportunities, and contribute to community health via the production of nutritious, healthy food by the community, for the community. CTFN citizens also envision community food system infrastructure for preservation, processing, and storage. Finally there is recognition that some young CTFN members are interested in community-focused food production.

Community and environmental health and well-being has been central to all sustainable food system

discourse I have had with Indigenous people, including leaders and Elders. Not once has interest in conventional, commodity agriculture been expressed.

My perception is that most Indigenous people with whom I have interacted regarding farming and food systems, as well as those representing their interests (e.g., planners, resource managers), embrace a perspective akin to “deep sustainability.” They operate from the perspective that our health and well-being is entirely interdependent with the health and well-being of Creation and therefore that we, notably inclusive of our food system, must nurture and respect Mother Earth. I see this perspective very much aligned with the sustainable agriculture and food system paradigm and this strengthens my conviction that Indigenous perspectives, communities, and governments can and should play a leading, powerful role in the sustainable agriculture and food system movement. Moreover, if the sustainable food systems we envision are to truly embrace the concept of social equality and justness, then it is absolutely imperative that Indigenous peoples be integral to it. To do otherwise is to perpetuate the imposition of a food system upon this segment of our communities and marginalization of their preferences. We must find a mutual way forward with our food system; it is incumbent on us to foster the circumstance in which this can occur. 

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**THE ECONOMIC PAMPHLETEER**  
**JOHN IKERD**

**Ethnicity and the war on big food**

Published online July 17, 2015

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A recent *Fortune* magazine story, “Special Report: The war on big food” begins, “Major packaged-food companies lost [US]\$4 billion in market share alone last year, as shoppers swerved to fresh and organic alternatives. Can the supermarket giants win you back?” (Kowitt, 2015, para. 1). The story describes how a wide range of consumer concerns is eroding the market power of

the large corporate food companies. The consumer concerns include artificial colors and flavors, pesticides, preservatives, high-fructose corn syrup, growth hormones, antibiotics, gluten, and genetically modified organisms. All of these concerns stem directly or indirectly from the industrial paradigm of food production and distribution, including industrial agriculture.

*John Ikerd is professor emeritus of agricultural economics, University of Missouri, Columbia. He was raised on a small dairy farm in southwest Missouri and received his BS, MS, and Ph.D. degrees in agricultural economics from the University of Missouri. He worked in private industry for a time and spent 30 years in various professorial positions at North Carolina State University, Oklahoma State University, the University of Georgia, and the University of Missouri before retiring in 2000. Since retiring, he spends most of his time writing and speaking on issues related to sustainability, with an emphasis on economics and agriculture. He is author of Sustainable Capitalism; A Return to Common Sense; Small Farms Are Real Farms; Crisis and Opportunity: Sustainability in American Agriculture; A Revolution of the Middle; and The Essentials of Economic Sustainability. More background and selected writings are at <http://johnikerd.com> and <http://web.missouri.edu/~ikerdj>*

*Why did I name my column “The Economic Pamphleteer”? Pamphlets historically were short, thoughtfully written opinion pieces and were at the center of every revolution in western history. Current ways of economic thinking aren’t working and aren’t going to work in the future. Nowhere are the negative consequences more apparent than in foods, farms, and communities. I know where today’s economists are coming from; I have been there. I spent the first half of my 30-year academic career as a very conventional free-market, bottom-line agricultural economist. I eventually became convinced that the economics I had been taught and was teaching wasn’t good for farmers, wasn’t good for rural communities, and didn’t even produce food that was good for people. I have spent the 25 years since learning and teaching the principles of a new economics of sustainability. Hopefully my “pamphlets” will help spark a revolution in economic thinking.*

No one has more at stake in the outcome of this war than America's ethnic minorities. Today's industrial food system has failed in its fundamental purpose of providing food security, leaving many Americans without adequate quantities or qualities of foods to support active, healthy lifestyles. In 2012, nearly 15% of all Americans were classified as food insecure (RTI International, 2014, p. 1-6), and more than 20% of American children lived in food-insecure homes (RTI International, 2014, p. 1-7). Ethnic minorities experience significantly higher levels of food insecurity than the U.S. population as a whole. In 2012, 25% of African American and 23% of Hispanic households experienced food insecurity (RTI International, 2014, p. 1-7). One study found that 40% of American Indians lived in food insecure households (RTI International, 2014, p. 1-7). This level of insecurity is far higher today than during the 1960s—the early years of “big food” and “big farms.”

Furthermore, the industrial food system is linked to a new kind of food insecurity: unhealthy foods. There is growing evidence that America's diet-related health problems are not limited to unhealthy lifestyles or food choices but begin with a lack of nutrient density in food crops produced on industrial farms (Ikerd, 2013). A recent global report by 500 scientists from 50 countries suggested that “obesity is [now] a bigger health crisis than hunger” (Dellorto, 2012). Obesity rates in the U.S. for 2011–2012 indicated that about 35% of all adults were classified as obese (Trust for America's Health [TFAH], 2014; TFAH & Robert Wood Johnson Foundation [RWJF], n.d.). The overall childhood obesity rate was just under 17% (TFAH & Robert Wood Johnson Foundation [RWJF], n.d.). Again, ethnic minorities fare far worse than average. Nearly 48% of Blacks and 42% of Latinos were obese, compared with less than 33% of all Whites (TFAH & RWJF, n.d.). For minority women, the differences were even more glaring, with 57% of Black women and 44% of Latino

women classified as obese compared with 32% of White women (TFAH & RWJF, n.d.). More than 20% of Black children and 22% of Latino children were obese, compared with 14% of White children (TFAH & RWJF, n.d.). Limited studies show that obesity rates for American Indians are even higher than for other ethnic minorities (RTI International, 2014, p. 1-7).

Ethnic minorities have much to lose in the big food war, but they also have much to contribute to an ultimate victory. The post-industrial paradigm of food production and distribution must be fundamentally different from the industrial paradigm of today. The traditional cultural values of ethnic minorities could be of tremendous value in developing a new paradigm for sustainable food production. Unfortunately, ethnic minorities have been scarce on the front lines of the sustainable food movement. As Duncan Hilchey pointed out in his call for papers for this issue of JAFSCD, “It is really no secret that the food movement has a level of whiteness that,

even with the best of intentions, can still be exclusionary” (JAFSCD, 2015, para. 1).

One reason for the scarcity may be that relatively fewer ethnic minorities are farmers, although their numbers are growing. In the 2012 Census of Agriculture, 95.4% of principal operators reported being White (USDA, ERS, 2014a). Hispanic farmers made up the largest percentage of non-White farmers with 3.2%, African Americans made up 1.6%, American Indians or Alaska Natives, 1.8%, and Asians, 0.6% (USDA, ERS, 2014a). Admittedly, about half of all hired farmworkers in the U.S. are Hispanic or Latino, but most are laborers in industrial farming operations (USDA, ERS, 2014b, “Demographic characteristics”).

The greatest contributions by ethnic minorities to creating a new food system are likely to be cultural rather than economic. This conclusion and my perspectives regarding cultural diversity reflect seven years of service on the Diversity in Extension task force at the University of Missouri during

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**The traditional cultural values of ethnic minorities could be of tremendous value in developing a new paradigm for sustainable food production.**

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the 1990s. The task force was ethnically diverse, with equal representation from the faculties of the University of Missouri and Lincoln University—Missouri’s historically Black or 1890 Land-Grant University. Over time, we became an effective team by going through the essential processes of forming, storming, norming, and performing. None had more to learn than the “persons of privilege”—including the “token old White man,” as I jokingly called myself.

One important lesson was the difference between diversity and discrimination. Cultural diversity refers to cultural differences among groups identifiable by features such as gender, age, social status, and ethnicity. Discrimination occurs when individual members of such groups are indiscriminately treated as if they possess the stereotypical characteristics of their specific group. Individual members of an ethnic minority may or may not possess the cultural differences associated with their particular ethnicity. To create new sustainable farms and food systems, we must understand that the value of gender, age, social status, and ethnic diversity can be realized only in the absence of discrimination.

The industrial food system, and industrialization in general, fits the stereotypical culture of the White, European male. Specialization, standardization, and control through domination are characteristics associated with “old White men.” White boys are taught to be ambitious, assertive, competitive, and aggressive if they expect to succeed. Success is measured in terms of wealth, power, or fame. It should not be surprising that today’s business, politics, food industry, and farming are dominated by men who have these stereotypical characteristics. Women and minorities also find it far easier to “succeed” if they learn to think and act like old White men.

Like most other people, I know far less about the cultures of other ethnic groups than I know about my own. However, I know that African

American and other traditional tribal cultures tend to place far higher priorities on social relationships than do European cultures. American Indian and other indigenous cultures place far higher values on relationships with nature than do European cultures. Females tend to be conciliatory or nurturing rather than competitive or dominating, and among ethnic minorities, women traditionally provided and continue to provide most of the farm labor. Somehow, we must create a new sustainable food and farming culture that balances the economic efficiency of the dominant culture with the social and ecological integrity of minority cultures. Such values will be essential in

winning the war on big food and ensuring that everyone, globally, has enough good food to sustain active, healthy lifestyles—including both current and future generations.

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**To create new sustainable farms and food systems, we must understand that the value of gender, age, social status, and ethnic diversity can be realized only in the absence of discrimination.**

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## METRICS FROM THE FIELD

*Blending insights from research with insights from practice*

**KEN METER**

## Allowing ethnic heritage to emerge in farm and food policy

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Many people who work at the grassroots building community-based food systems aim to create local food networks that build health, wealth, connection, and capacity (Meter, 2010). This vision implies that stronger cultural connections, including vibrant ethnic identity and heritage,

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must be among the outcomes of food policy.

Yet our policy discourse frequently suggests that economic efficiency constitutes the primary measure of success. This is clearly a narrow view. As long as one's viewpoint is limited to ways of squeezing production costs to the lowest possible levels, or raising prices as high as the market will bear, the basic humanity of food will dissipate and the transformative potential of local foods will be lost. From a systems perspective, measuring success solely using any one indicator, such as efficiency, amidst a complex and rapidly changing system will distort one's understanding of that system, leading to skewed outcomes.

The economics-centered view is also debilitating because it suggests that the only role consumers should play is to passively accept options that are defined by others and to remain content to accept a limited voice—to decide whether they are willing to pay for a certain good or service. This view suggests that consumers should let go of the

notion that they can help create the menu of options available to them.

Yet culture is something that is *produced*, not the outcome of *consumption*. I claim a certain privilege when I purchase produce that was harvested 1,800 miles distant by farmworkers bending to sun-scalded fields for minimum wage. I advance a heritage if I put up food following my ancestors' recipes.

The fabric of my life is thin when compared to what my ancestors enjoyed. Poor people who worked the land, my forebears would have rejected as inferior many foods now prized as fresh at the grocery, because they knew tastier, more nutritionally dense foods, harvested with their own labor. Though many were challenged in their attitudes about race, they did recognize that food is an essential foundation of culture. They understood that all cultures need access to the resources that allow them to determine food choices for themselves.

As one example, my father's ancestors dwelled in Alsace (currently eastern France) for over a century. As Alsace constructed a regional identity, it elevated specific costumes, lace designs, wines, and foods. One such food was sauerkraut. This was not selected because of its status or gourmet appeal; it was chosen because cabbage grew easily in the temperate climate of Alsace with few energy inputs, and stored well as sauerkraut. Almost any farmer could grow cabbage and then ferment it for safekeeping. So you could count on sauerkraut being available to everyone year-round.

Moreover, the dish could be adapted to serve as a vehicle for very local identity: perhaps imbued with juniper berries in one village, fortified with Riesling wine in another, or accompanied by the special sausages or pork cures that local butchers created. Certain cooks preferred goose or chicken preparations. Various dumplings or shredded potatoes added flavor and body. The dish might be slanted toward either French or German preparation in a region with mixed heritage. Preparing and serving this dish was to express an identity: "We belong to this particular place, where our people

have built a heritage."

Unfortunately, it appears that the health insight that also made sauerkraut attractive as a cultural icon became lost in the commercialization of place and identity. Fermented cabbage provides essential bacteria, folklore says, which ease digestion of meat and outcompete undesirable biota. Now I am rediscovering these insights.

A century after my great-grandfather abandoned Alsace, I grew up in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Cabbages had become a commodity. Though easy to grow in this climate, cabbages were primarily shipped in from California, or shredded and salt-packed into a tin can. Many of the distinctive tangy flavors, and likely many of the health benefits, were now tempered by commercial convenience.

My family ate sauerkraut almost as a covert gesture, mindful of neighbors who pursued an American identity that aspired to whiteness that was correlated with leaving the land. Similarly, my mother Margaret, an exceptional cook, was bound strictly to her German-Bohemian roots. She invented a new tradition that would express her family's new life in America. To do so, significantly, she had to look back to her own childhood, rather than integrating her current life. Her decision was to create a deeply ritualized Christmas Eve meal, centered around oxtail soup. By so doing, she gave herself a vehicle for reminding her sons of a critical juncture in her past.

When she was 16, Margaret's father had died suddenly after a massive heart attack. Her Uncle Louis, who ran a butcher shop in her Michigan hometown, would swing by her house late on a typical Saturday afternoon, bringing the meats that had not sold at his shop that day. He did this to lift the family's spirits, and also to make sure they had enough protein. Among the items that his customers often overlooked were oxtails. Though unpopular, they made exceptional soup stock.

Thus my mother created a holiday meal that conveyed a cultural reminder: "We did not always have it this easy; we had considerable help." Although I did not grasp this as a youth, it was a

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**Culture is something that  
is produced, not the  
outcome of consumption.**

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message that also suggested considerable equality with other cultures. The foods themselves were cultural outcasts.

My mother was simultaneously asserting her right to make cultural choices, for reasons that might change over time. This choice was possible only because the family was connected to the production of the foods it ate. After all, to claim a culture solely on the basis of foods that must be imported holds little integrity and is expensive. In both the maternal and paternal two branches of my family, despite being poor people created healthy meals unique to place, using whatever was readily available.

In my column, I often ponder what we actually mean when we strive for “local” foods. The weight of the evidence is that locality involves connection to people and place, not simply the raw cost nor the number of miles food travels. Local food, in a very deep sense, is food we grow, purchase, and eat because it helps us understand that we belong, and how to welcome others into our circle. These transactions build social connectivity, and also stronger local economies.

Yet in a society where computers are easier to come by than farm fields, many policy-makers assert that locality must be measured using a standard national definition, in the hope that economic factors can be compared across places. In reality, the definition of “local” is also inherently a local one, implicitly taking heritage and place into account. Clever public policy will collect and use insights from multiple cultural perspectives, avoiding the reductionism of solely quantitative approaches.

One quick example might be drawn from local foods activity in South Carolina, amid cultures quite different from those in which I grew up.

When the state government asked me to prepare an investment plan for local foods two years ago, several aspects of life struck me as curious. First, several housing developments in the Lowcountry were named, with no apparent sense of irony, as “plantations.” Second, the contemporary discussion of farm labor had been largely distilled to asking how to find immigrants to move to the state; few had considered that there might be something amiss when youth (of all colors) who grow up on farms know little about either food preparation or farming. The two food crops that are most closely identified with the state, tomatoes and peaches, are largely exported to eastern seaboard metro areas, which may help explain the persistence of the plantation mentality.

Projecting future sales for South Carolina foods to South Carolina consumers was deeply interesting, but had it been performed in isolation from these qualitative cultural insights, several central issues would have been overlooked.

Building food systems that foster racial and ethnic pride, a strong sense of self-determination, and lasting heritage requires that policy embrace potent ethnicity as both an important core of discovery and a desired outcome. Yet we are allowing, perhaps for the first time in history, farm and food policy to be set by those who understand neither the heritage of farming nor, on a deep level, the culture of food, and many are asking the wrong questions.

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**In reality, the definition of “local” is also inherently a local one, implicitly taking heritage and place into account.**

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## Solidarity and sweat equity: For reciprocal food justice research

COMMENTARY ON RACE AND  
ETHNICITY IN FOOD SYSTEMS WORK

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### Abstract

Researchers committed to food justice often enter communities and nonprofits with a desire to help. They often think there is a scarcity, such as food, that they want to understand and help to increase. At the same time, research obligations may lead to extracting “findings” without advancing food justice. Such actions may unintentionally work against food justice, especially the goal of dismantling structural inequalities and advancing social equity. This commentary chronicles the ongoing and incomplete process by which I have carried out food justice research and worked toward food justice. In short, reciprocal research requires working *with*, not *for*, organizations and communities. This entails ongoing acts of

solidarity. One way to express this is through flexibility with research goals in order to tailor all or parts of one’s project to answer questions that increase understanding of how to challenge structural inequalities and advance social equity. Relatedly, openness to how food justice activists and organizations confront the food movement and society more broadly to address whiteness, privilege, racial inequality, and notions of diversity can enrich critical social science. Of equal importance is sweat equity. Most food justice activists and organizations have few resources and cannot serve the whims of researchers. Therefore, providing labor is an important allied act. This increases the researchers’ empathy with activists, organizations, and communities, and creates opportunities to build trust and dissolve social boundaries. To enter into a situation that deepens our knowledge of the food justice movement *and* advances food justice requires solidarity and sweat equity.

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### Keywords

allyship, anti-oppression, anti-racism, food studies, food movement, food justice, methodology, public sociology, solidarity, sweat equity

In the fall of 2008, I found myself on the phone with Brahm Ahmadi, then executive director of People's Grocery, a well-known food justice organization in West Oakland, California. I was a graduate student in the Department of Sociology and Criminology & Law at the University of Florida who wanted to write a master's thesis on the food justice movement. After attending university and working in the San Francisco Bay area for six years, building community and social movement ties in many places and seeing friends link food to social justice, I was inspired to return from the swamplands of Florida for fieldwork. When Brahm asked why I wanted to learn about People's Grocery, I told him that it was one of the only organizations I could find deliberately using food justice to explain its work. I wanted to know how they linked food, as an environmental benefit, to fights for social justice in a place with a long history of labor, black power, and environmental justice movements. Brahm told me that while my question was important, he wanted to know that the time I would take away from People's Grocery for interviews would somehow benefit the organization. Thus began a journey to learn about the merits of sweat equity and the necessary acts of solidarity required to do research with resource-strapped organizations in low-income communities of color.

For the next year, I became an interlocutor, translating my experiences and those of interns and volunteers that were part of People's Grocery's "allyship" into words reflecting the anti-oppression framework guiding the organization. My conversation with Brahm ended with him noting that the organization wanted to know how their allyship program was working, what interns and volunteers thought about their role in the organization, and whether this translated into deeper community engagement. Therefore, along with a set of my own questions, these organizational needs shaped the direction of my research. Whereas I had sought to describe how this pioneering organization understood food justice, I instead came away with an appreciation of the opportunities and obstacles faced by food justice organizations adopting an anti-oppression framework (Sbicca, 2012).

Flexibility and openness are basic modes of

solidarity from which researchers can build relationships with potential collaborators and respondents. Flexibility during early stages of research development is important if one hopes to gain the trust of activists and organizations engaged in the daily tasks of movement building. This is especially true if one is asking for interviews or surveys, requesting participants to draw maps or take photographs, or engaging in any other time-intensive qualitative method. Food justice activists, like many activists, are working on a shoestring budget. Coupled with the entrenched social inequalities facing low-income communities of color and the perceived immediacy of problems such as hunger, poverty, and mass incarceration, researchers must recognize how activists might see their work as less important. When one is an outsider with few or no previous ties, remaining open to organizational or community needs can signal sensitivity to the challenges of combating institutionalized racism and cultivating a commitment to food justice in the food movement. We may want to parachute in with a tidy set of questions and then scramble away once we arrive at answers, but this would be to the detriment of future scholar/activist collaborations. Strictly extractive models of research, then, undermine the social change potential of more reciprocal relationships.

Openness to the questions food justice activists and organizations ask about their own work and the critical role they play in pushing the food movement to address whiteness, privilege, racial inequality, and notions of diversity sets up the researcher to play a supportive role. This also positions the researcher to broadcast more widely some of the strategies used by the food justice movement to challenge colonialism, institutionalized racism, racial inequality, and discrimination, and to build alliances across race and class lines. The venues where a researcher shares these strategies may include academic and popular journals and magazines, newspapers, organizational newsletters, webcasts, blogs, and/or talks given at churches, schools, food justice organizations, and food policy councils. The point is that the researcher is in a key strategic position, a position of privilege they can use to advance racial equity.

For example, my time with People's Grocery included attendance at a required anti-oppression training. At the outset of this training, a facilitator noted that food justice could be broken down between "food," which entails cultivating and growing, and "justice," which represents the larger struggle. In essence, the purpose of the training was to cultivate and grow the struggle for social justice. The group in attendance agreed upon a set of rules to create a safe space for the day. The facilitator wrote these up on a number of large easel pads: No judgment; step up and step back; one mic; speak in order; what is said here, stays here; no assumptions about people's identity; bring things up in love; "I" statements instead of "you" statements; stay open-minded to others. After this, we went through an activity called "Community Tree," which began with the group listing problems in West Oakland. These included unemployment, pollution, the number of liquor stores and lack of grocery stores, gentrification, empty lots and foreclosures, drug use and alcoholism, health problems, poor schools, and lack of public facilities. We then listed causes, such as institutionalized racism, the white dominant culture's ability to define other cultures, inequality in the justice system, redlining, capitalism, city officials, unequal distribution of resources, polluting industry, and how the Gold Rush brought people who displaced the Ohlone tribe in the Bay Area. The idea behind making these connections was to point out the structural nature of many social problems intersecting with the work of the food justice movement. We then free-associated solutions like building community, alliances, and a local economy, empowerment, reshaping the environment, creating space for community voice, shifting power, drawing upon community assets, public policy, and education. In addition to these power mapping and solution-generation exercises, we investigated our own privileges, role-played scenarios we might encounter while working with People's Grocery, listened to a talk about what it means to fight for food justice, and came up with one concrete way we were going to live out working as an ally.

For me, working as an ally means leveraging my privilege to support food justice work as a white male professor at a large public university

with many resources. This requires active listening, reflection, and patience in order to resist reproducing asymmetrical power relationships between academia and the food justice movement (Bradley and Herrera 2015). Practice as a graduate student was central to helping me adjust what this looks like depending on the context. I found that People's Grocery offered a powerful anti-oppression framework for building food justice allies, but volunteers and interns understood this differently depending on their social position and previous life experiences. In the years following my allyship, leaders deepened the program by including a regular anti-oppression reading group, which created a space to work through becoming an ally. The reflexive space interviews offered people to think about how to improve their work and informal conversations about movement building while gardening alongside staff and interns enriched the process of making this organizational change. Although a small modification, it led me to believe that researchers can foster reciprocity and active solidarity with food justice organizations.

Sweat equity is another way researchers can build trust. My experience as an unpaid intern at People's Grocery, which included working in urban gardens and a small farm, led me to the conclusion that providing labor is an important act as an ally. When planning my doctoral dissertation, I took into account how food organizations perceive the costs of granting access to researchers. Because I wanted to embed myself with their daily work, I knew that I could not just sit in a corner and scribble notes about what I was witnessing. I had to work with people on their projects and campaigns. Because the three organizations I based my dissertation on sought to improve the food system in distinct ways, I had to meet each organization where they were at and lend my labor where they saw fit. This included paying to attend organic farming workshops, and farming alongside interns and volunteers with San Diego Roots Sustainable Food Project; building edible landscapes, designing surveys, and canvassing with Planting Justice; and recruiting community partners for Black Friday strikes against Wal-Mart, attending protests, and writing a briefing on the All-China Federation of Trade Unions for United Food and Commercial

Workers Local 770.

Beyond the practical benefits of providing labor in whatever ways were most useful to organizations, there were prefigurative benefits. These benefits emerged through the process of working across social boundaries, reflecting in interviews on the race dynamics of the organization, and changing individual and organizational practices accordingly. Each organization had different race, class, and gender dynamics, which to dissect in any depth is beyond the scope of this commentary (for more, see Myers & Sbicca, 2015; Sbicca, 2014, 2015a, 2015b). The point I want to make is that the role that a researcher plays as ally is contingent on the needs of the organization as well as the economic, political, and social context. In one instance, my role was to ask pointed questions about an organization's relationship to a local low-income community of color, which had the unintended consequence of starting conversations about organizational diversity and the problems of color-blind programming. In another instance, my role was to build gardens with formerly incarcerated men, all of whom were black, listen to their experiences, offer help when asked, and relay their stories to a food movement happy to buy prison-produced tilapia at Whole Foods, but afraid of the stereotype Kathryn Russell Brown (2009) refers to as the "criminalblackman." In the final instance, my role was to support the confrontational political tactics driven by low-income communities and communities of color such as strikes, protests, and lobbying. Thus, sweat equity is not an instrumental tool to gain research access, but a means by which to prefigure anti-oppressive scholar/activist ties capable of challenging structural inequalities, and advancing diversity within the food movement and racial equity in the food system.

Food justice research devoid of praxis will not empower low-income communities and communities of color or advance racial equity. This is especially the case when research perpetuates moralist and colonizing practices that elevate the scholar above the activist and ignore the situated knowledge of communities of color (Bradley and Herrera 2015). Alternatively, food justice research can be a means to enrich relationships, start conversations, strategize solutions, and create

institutions to advance food justice while contesting those that do not. To do food justice would require at a minimum, as Cadieux and Slocum (2015) suggest, confronting and acknowledging historical trauma and inequity, developing autonomous and community-controlled exchange systems, creating non-, anti-, and despite-capitalist relationships with land, and pursuing fair labor practices. This requires an initial and then ongoing acts of solidarity. Paulo Freire (2000) put it this way:

Solidarity requires that one enter into the situation of those with whom one is solidary; it is a radical posture... True solidarity with the oppressed means fighting at their side to transform the objective reality which has made them these "beings for another." The oppressor is solidary with the oppressed only when he stops regarding the oppressed as an abstract category and sees them as persons who have been unjustly dealt with, deprived of their voice, cheated in the sale of their labor—when he stops making pious, sentimental, and individualistic gestures and risks an act of love. True solidarity is found only in the plenitude of this act of love, in its existentiality, in its praxis. To affirm that men and women are persons and as persons should be free, and yet to do nothing tangible to make this affirmation a reality, is a farce. (pp. 49–50)

Sweat equity is one of the chief principles that can guide researchers to "enter into the situation." Once present, this principle requires ongoing support for the food justice movement, a process predicated on active listening and strategic action while also doing research. 

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## Alternative agrifood projects in communities of color: A civic engagement perspective

COMMENTARY ON RACE AND  
ETHNICITY IN FOOD SYSTEMS WORK

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### Abstract

In this commentary we very briefly highlight farming- and land-related historical injustices impacting African Americans, and outline useful ways for racially diverse food justice organizations, activists, and academics to collaborate on place-based interventions in an equitable and inclusive way. Place-based strategies to address inequity in the food system must begin with an equitable and

inclusive environment within which residents can engage in developing solutions. Equitable and inclusive civic engagement can build capacity, trust, and empowerment in marginalized communities, creating an environment where communities can enact transformative local food system change using their own resources. Transformative change is change that occurs at the very core of ourselves as individuals and in our communities. Such change requires us to reexamine our long-standing customs, assumptions, beliefs, and institutional

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practices, moving community conversations towards those that build relationships, foster mutual accountability, and strive for respectful understanding among neighbors and neighborhoods. Transformative change doesn't come easily. However, practicing equitable engagement can help build capacity for sustaining change. Alternative food movement scholars and activists can lift up and build on community assets, but to do so requires historical understanding, recognition of individual and community strengths, and work to build long-term relationships of trust.

### Keywords

alternative agrifood movement, civic engagement, race, farming

**I**ndustrialization and globalization of the food system have wrought profound changes in local food environments with respect to cost, availability, and variety. And while one result is that food is a small percentage of household expense in the U.S. (making up 9.8% of the average budget in 2013) (USDA ERS, n.d.), the cost of a balanced and health-promoting diet depends on where one lives (Hilbert, Evans-Cowley, Reece, Rogers, Ake, & Hoy, 2014). Thus the percentage of income needed to maintain a balanced diet might vary widely. Many urban neighborhoods with little internal wealth or external investment lack full-service grocery stores, and many of the residents of such neighborhoods lack adequate transportation to access affordable, healthy food (McClintock, 2011; Odoms-Young, Zenk, Karpyn, Ayala, & Gittelsohn, 2012).<sup>1</sup> Often families living in these communities must travel longer distances than those in other neighborhoods to access full-service grocery stores, or are limited to shopping nearby at

smaller stores. These smaller local stores may improve selection in neighborhoods which lack full-service grocery stores, but often have higher prices and/or reduced quality (Raja, Ma, & Yadav, 2008). At the same time, rates of preventable diseases, infant mortality, and other public health concerns are much higher in neighborhoods with inequitable healthy food access (Heynen, Kurtz, & Trauger, 2012; Odoms-Young et al., 2012).

The alternative agrifood movement (AAM) has broadly positioned itself as an alternative to the global, industrial food system (Friedland, 2008). Some AAM members promote local, organic and identity-preserved foods as important components of personal, public, and environmental health (Harper, 2011). While this movement is directed at all food consumers (regardless of income), accessing healthier food is often a matter of consumer choice for affluent consumers. But within many economically distressed urban neighborhoods, accessing healthy food can be very challenging. AAM initiatives aiming to bring healthy food to low-income communities have been met, on occasion, with indifference or even open hostility. Some scholars attribute this phenomenon to a lack of understanding of, and sensitivity to, the historical relationship between Whites, African Americans, the land, and food (Green, Green, & Kleiner, 2011) as well as the perceived "elite" status of the AAM (Cadieux & Slocum, 2015; Guthman, 2007, 2011; Harper, 2011).

In this commentary, we very briefly highlight farming- and land-related historical injustices impacting African Americans and outline useful ways for racially diverse organizations, activists, and academics to collaborate with urban communities of color in an equitable and inclusive way. Equitable and inclusive civic engagement can build capacity, trust, and empowerment in marginalized communities, creating an environment where communities can enact transformative local food system change using their own resources.

The historical legacy of farming in America, and in particular in the American South, is formidable. Indeed, agricultural structures and systems, beginning with slavery and extending to tenancy, sharecropping, and the crop-lien system, underpinned land-owning Whites' subjugation and

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this short commentary, the authors have chosen to focus on urban food environments and African American history. We recognize that rural food environments and the exploitation and marginalization of other racial and ethnic populations are equally significant, and that they share some of the social and political drivers of inequality that can characterize African American neighborhoods lacking full access to healthy foods. We look forward to collaborating on a longer article that delves more deeply into the fuller story of racialized land loss, inequality, and food injustice.

control over African American (and poor White) people and farmers in the South throughout our early history (Green et al., 2011; Massey & Denton, 1993). The corresponding legacy of these structures and systems are reflected in both African American cultural attitudes toward farming, and the underrepresentation of African Americans in the American agricultural sector (Green et al., 2011; Guthman, 2011).

African Americans remain underrepresented in farm ownership today. Particularly during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, smaller farms struggled to keep up with the cost of mechanization, more complex inputs (e.g., fertilizers, pesticides, new cultivars), and the need to purchase additional acreage to capture ever-greater economies of scale. This struggle to compete at increasing scales was systematically greater for African American farmers than for White farmers (Hinson & Robinson, 2008). Over the last century, the country experienced an estimated 98 percent loss in African American farm operations and a 66 percent loss in White farm operations, all while the largest (and typically White-owned) farming operations grew even larger (Green et al., 2011). Although African American farms tended to be smaller than White farms in terms of acres and sales, Wood and Gilbert (2000) found that when controlling for scale of operation based on gross sales, African American farmers were still disproportionately reflected in these farm loss trends.

Institutional racism at various levels of government disproportionately created barriers to land ownership and farm growth for African American farmers. In particular, African American farmers were not fairly awarded USDA loans. In 1982, a U.S. Civil Rights Commission found that in 1980 and 1981 local offices of the USDA loaned less than two percent of all farm ownership loan amounts and less than three percent of all farm operating loan amounts to African American farmers (Hinson & Robinson, 2008). As a result, the largest class action lawsuit in U.S. history, known as the *Pigford* case, was filed against the U.S. Department of Agriculture in the late 1990s and was settled in 2000, resulting in ongoing claims processing for African American, Hispanic, Native

American, and women ranchers and farmers (Hinson & Robinson, 2008).<sup>2</sup>

The loss of farm land ownership pushed many African Americans into urban spaces, migrations reflected in many central cities that are now home to large African American populations (Green et al., 2011; Massey & Denton, 1993). Unjust practices of urban housing and neighborhood exclusion such as redlining, block-busting, restrictive covenants, and steering segregated neighborhoods by both race and class. This was followed by consistently inequitable and reduced investment in minority neighborhoods by city governments and private interests throughout the U.S. (Gotham, 1998; Highsmith, 2009; Logan & Molotch, 2007; Massey & Denton, 1993; Schildt, 2011). Racism, exclusion, and disinvestment led to a downward spiral in opportunity that is reflected in high unemployment rates, high vacancy rates, high rates of preventable health problems, and failing local economies (Dreier, Mollenkopf, & Swanstrom, 2004; Massey & Denton, 1993; Wilson, 1996). As local economies failed and access to necessary resources like credit and insurance declined, many businesses (not just food-related businesses) left these neighborhoods (Massey & Denton, 1993). The combined effects of these practices made the acquisition of land for any use—residential, commercial, farming—challenging for the African American community (Gotham, 1998; Highsmith, 2009; Logan & Molotch, 2007; Massey & Denton, 1993; Schildt, 2011). Thus the U.S. food system remains inequitable, long after overt racism has subsided (Alkon & Agyeman, 2011).

Reconnecting people with food and farming is often seen as a means of addressing the vast, often racialized economic and health-related disparities in the food system. The AAM often recognizes and critiques the inequities and injudicious policies inherent in the modern food system (Alkon & Agyeman, 2011; Cadieux & Slocum, 2015; Guthman, 2007, 2008, 2011; Harper, 2011). Yet prescriptions for small-scale urban agriculture and diet-related behavior do not examine the root causes of the injustices they are meant to address (Guthman, 2007, 2011). And because of the rich

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<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.outreach.usda.gov/settlements.htm>

history of farming in African and African American culture (despite the multiple barriers to land ownership and repeated attempts to exploit African American labor in the U.S.), many African Americans find it offensive when Whites travel to urban neighborhoods and offer to “teach” them how to garden (Guthman, 2008). Though well-intentioned, AAM proponents may be offering a short-term solution when they could contribute powerfully to a sustainable, long-term one by investing in community engagement for collective empowerment and transformative change.

The Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity (Kirwan) has worked with low-income communities of color to build capacity for transformative change for over a decade, and has recently summarized a set of principles for equitable and inclusive civic engagement as a result of this work (Holley, in press).<sup>3</sup> The following abridged summary of principles for equitable engagement and transformative change is taken from this work in the hopes that it can be helpful to the important food justice activism and scholarship across the country.

Transformative change is *change that occurs at the very core of ourselves as individuals and our communities*. Such change requires us to reexamine our long-standing customs, assumptions, beliefs, and institutional practices, moving community conversations toward those that build relationships, foster mutual accountability, and strive for respectful understanding among neighbors and neighborhoods. Transformative change requires a shift in how we measure engagement outcomes (changes achieved), and

perhaps even more importantly, a change in how we work within communities (changes in how engagement occurs).

The principles that can serve communities well in the context of the AAM include facing the effects of race, history, and power inequities as a community, embracing the gifts of diverse communities, and building trust and commitment in the community engagement environment. Additional principles include honoring dissent and protests as expressions of civic voice, practicing radical community hospitality, and adapting to community changes.

The historical legacy of the relationship of African Americans and food production in America is a particularly painful one. It is a history rife with profound injustice and inequity. The cumulative impacts of rural and urban disempowerment, displacement, and exclusion has resulted in long-standing urban and rural inequities. Yet this history and its consequences should be acknowledged and understood—not ignored—today. All of our communities, however well or poorly they have been treated, are important places in people’s lives. Our communities are places where our personal histories unfold. Embedded in each place is its own history, which is a part of each community member’s personal narrative as well. Too often the people who make up the neighborhoods, and their stories, are ignored or forgotten. Transformative change in the food system can begin by creating empathy and opportunities for people within communities to explore their histories together, leading to a greater understanding of how history shapes our personal and community narratives as well as the inequities we experience.

Embracing the gifts of diverse communities is also essential. Every community has assets, and many can be found in the skills and talents of the individuals living in the community. These gifts can manifest themselves through the abilities, competencies, and unique experiences of each member of the community. For example, some community members may possess artistic skills that can be put to use promoting community events. Others may possess leadership skills, language skills, a gift for working with children, or have connections to

<sup>3</sup> Much of what we have learned over the last 10 years has been in conversation and co-learning with our community partners. This learning, grounded in the writings of Peter Block’s *Civic Engagement and the Restoration of Community* and *The Abundant Community*, and Eric Uslaner’s *Civic Engagement in America*, is detailed in “Growing Together for a Sustainable Future: Strategies and Best Practices for Engaging with Disadvantaged Communities on Issues of Sustainable Development and Regional Planning,” “Expanding Democracy: A Framework for Bolstering Civic Power and Rebuilding Communities,” and “Shining the Light: A Practical Guide to Co-Creating Healthy Communities,” all available at <http://kirwaninstitute.osu.edu/>

other organizations that wish to partner. Flora and Flora (1996) describe such skills and talents as *human capital* and such relational connections as *social capital*, both forms of community capitals that also include the *natural* (in the land), *built* (grocery stores, for example) and *financial* forms of capital. When a community is aware of and embraces all of its capitals, it can draw from these collective assets when confronting challenges. It is also through realizing and celebrating the gifts inherent in its people that further social capital is built, and it is through such relationships that the bedrock of our communities are formed.

Transformative change cannot occur without empowerment. Building trust and commitment is a necessary step toward empowering communities to create transformative change. A culture of distrust often exists in impoverished communities as a result of years of disinvestment, broken promises, and structurally segregative policies (Gotham, 1998; Highsmith, 2009; Logan & Molotch, 2007; Massey & Denton, 1993; Schildt, 2011). Suspicion of new public and private initiatives is a common result of this sad experience, frequently culminating in civic disengagement. But trust can be built by forging relationships based on mutual support. Trust can also be fostered by making and keeping promises. Building trust in communities where high levels of doubt, suspicion, and disengagement are present requires consistency and long-term commitment by organizations and individuals. Further, building trust means building empowerment; that is, it means promoting and supporting leadership in community members and recognizing that local community leaders are essential to achieving transformative change. Finally, mutual accountability is vital to community engagement; not only can it create more complete and honest communication between community stakeholders, but also encourages shared responsibility and shared learning, which are essential aspects of building trust. Through mutual accountability, communities can ensure that the agreements and plans created to strengthen the community today will be able to withstand political and social changes tomorrow.

Examples of the principles of equitable and

inclusive civic engagement in action can be found in Kirwan's work in its home community of Columbus, Ohio. "More Than My Brother's Keeper" (MTMBK) is a program run in partnership with key community anchor institutions, including the local children's hospital and a neighborhood community-development collaborative. The program supports at-risk African American male youth (ages 10 to 14) and their families residing on the south side of the city. MTMBK incorporates both experiential learning and intensive mentoring to help kids discover their own assets and build relationships of mutual trust with each other and with the Kirwan (and other partner) staff and community members. While Kirwan leads conversations among community stakeholders to address issues of affordable and safe housing, food access, and healthy and diverse "third places,"<sup>4</sup> the needs and strengths of the boys and their families are the key drivers of the program's adaptive design. This collaborative process has resulted in the creation of a neighborhood leadership academy, a plan for addressing housing needs in the neighborhood, a community focus on supporting vibrant third places, and a plan to address issues of food access and insecurity, particularly with the community's children.

Place-based strategies to address inequity in the food system must begin with an equitable and inclusive environment, within which the people can engage in developing solutions. Change doesn't come easily. However, practicing equitable and inclusive civic engagement that recognizes our collective, and often painful, historical legacy can help equip community members and collaborators with the tools required to build capacity for sustaining change. Alternative food movement scholars and activists can lift up and build on community assets, but to do so requires historical understanding, recognition of individual and community strengths, and working to build long-term relationships of trust.

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<sup>4</sup> Third spaces are community meeting places that are neither work nor home. See Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community*, 1999.

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## Race, food, and borders: Situating migrant struggle in the Okanagan Valley, British Columbia

COMMENTARY ON RACE AND  
ETHNICITY IN FOOD SYSTEMS WORK

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### Abstract

Over the past century, the Okanagan Valley's social, economic, and physical landscape has been largely shaped by the region's agricultural industry. Within this landscape migrant farmworkers have an essential role, yet are rendered invisible and remain marginalized. This commentary explores migrants' struggle by looking at the intersections of

colonialism, race, borders, and the local food economy. We begin with a historical examination of the racialized nature of the region's agricultural labor force, and also provide an overview of the local food economy. Following this, we outline Canada's Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP) and discuss how the SAWP places migrant

*Note:* In the spirit of collective work, lead authorship is both interchangeable and equally shared.

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laborers in positions of precarity, often resulting in worker isolation and superexploitation. We then turn to the social conditions migrant workers encounter upon arriving in the Okanagan Valley by describing the institutional discrimination they face, as well as the everyday prejudices and aggressions they endure due to their status of being labeled both “foreign” and “temporary.” Next we provide a brief explanation of settler colonialism, the imposition of borders, and the common struggles shared by migrant workers and Aboriginal people. Finally, we offer some recommendations for change that would ameliorate some of the challenges migrant workers experience upon arriving in the Okanagan.

### **Keywords**

Temporary Foreign Worker Program, Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program, migrant labor, racism, settler colonialism, food systems, Okanagan Valley

### **The Okanagan Valley, British Columbia: Unceded Syilx Territories**

Within the Okanagan Valley there is an ongoing, yet largely hidden, migrant struggle. This struggle is broadly defined by what is “seen” and what remains “unseen.” More specifically, the hyper-visibility of mostly white residents and tourists enjoying locally produced food and wine lies in stark contrast to the largely invisible plight of both racialized migrant workers and Aboriginal people. This juxtaposition highlights the diverse yet contradictory cultural landscape of the region, where the politics of food, race, and colonialism are intertwined.

In this commentary, we explore how these complexities have come to be. We do so by providing an intersectional overview of settler colonialism, Canada’s Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP), and the experiences of racialized migrant workers living in a culture of white privilege. Our discussion is informed primarily by empirical data gathered from formal and informal interviews with Mexican and Caribbean SAWP workers, ethnographic fieldwork undertaken by the authors, and over two years of grassroots community organizing.

In Canada the connection between food and race manifests itself most vividly when looking at settler colonialism’s imposition of borders. Considering the lasting effects of settlement on Aboriginal communities, it becomes clear that the Canadian state imposed its borders to eliminate Indigenous people, to accumulate land, and as a way to enable corporations to amass profits (Coulthard, 2014; Hunt, 2014; Razack, 2002). The practice of asserting colonial borders led to forced dislocations of Indigenous inhabitants and the commodification of the Indigenous territories into private properties, some of which are now settler-owned, for-profit orchards, vineyards, and farms. Dispossession, whether it applies to Aboriginal people in Canada who have had their territories expropriated or farmers from different countries who have been displaced and become migrant workers, thus serves as the prime example of the links between colonialism, race, and the current food system (Andrée, Ayres, Bosia, Mássicotte, 2014; Holt-Giménez & Shattuck, 2011). Accordingly, as this commentary unfolds we (the authors) recognize that the colonial geography we discuss throughout the piece is the unceded Syilx territories of the Okanagan Nation. It is with the acknowledgment of the Syilx people as rightful overseers of the land since time immemorial that we proceed in our overview of food and race in the Okanagan Valley.

### **A Brief History of Race and Agricultural Labor in the Okanagan Valley**

The Okanagan Valley is well known for its striking landscape, sunny weather, and pleasant temperatures. Located in the south-central interior of British Columbia, it is considered one of BC’s most fertile regions. It sits upon a mountainous, pine-forested topography scattered with pristine lakes, sandy beaches, vibrant orchards, and manicured vineyards. Due to the region’s status as a premier wine producer, it is often referred to as “Napa of the North” and proudly brands itself as a tourist attraction and retirement destination. The region is also heavily marketed as having a trendy food culture, luxurious resort and golf scene, relaxing environment, and bustling overall economy. Today the Okanagan’s agricultural sector alone is a billion dollar industry. Despite this, migrant farmworkers

in the valley, who are at the heart of the agricultural economy, remain invisible.

Over the past century, the Okanagan's agricultural economic base has transitioned from ranches, farms, and orchards to a postsubsistence food economy revolving around wineries and agritourism, as well as food production for both local and global markets (Hessing, 2010). This ongoing historical process has thereby transformed the area into a predominantly "white space" (Aguiar, Tomic, & Trumper, 2005). Orchardling in particular shaped the pattern of settlement and the ethnic makeup of growing communities. Since the early 1900s, the development of irrigation systems and the accompanying parceling off of lands were conscious efforts made by land-development companies to attract wealthier British (white) immigrants. Orchardling was advertised as a "gentleman's pursuit" in order to entice this class and/or race of immigrants to the "British Garden of Eden" (Demeritt, 1995).

Farmworkers, however, were typically not members of the same demographic of immigrants who were drawn to the Okanagan as farm owners. Early laborers were often from Aboriginal communities or were Japanese or Chinese immigrants (Wong, 1989). Farmworkers were then positioned as necessary but unwanted community members. In 1917 a wartime labor shortage prompted members of the BC Fruit Growers Association (BCFGA) to call for the federal government to allow for the import of indentured Chinese laborers (BCFGA, n.d.). At the time, migration from China was restricted and Chinese immigrants were prohibited from owning land, further marginalizing farmworkers and ensuring that they would not become permanent members of predominantly white communities (Wong, 1989)

Currently, the Okanagan has a thriving agricultural industry for both local and export-oriented products. The tree fruit industry reports revenues of CA\$130 million each year (BC Tree Fruits, n.d.) and is reliant on migrant farm labor, primarily workers in the SAWP, to continue to be profitable. The local food industry is also central to the billion-dollar tourism sector of the economy, as visitors come to experience the food and wine for which the region is renowned. The social landscape

and perceptions of the Okanagan as a "Garden of Eden" is produced through agritourism, the growing wine industry, and an affluent locavore culture, yet the farmworkers (predominantly racialized) who cultivate and harvest the food served to privileged locals and tourists (disproportionately white) are erased from local restaurant and winery scenes. This dependency on migrant labor goes widely unrecognized, as it is undervalued and remains largely unseen by those outside the industry. Thus, despite their invisibility, it is undeniably clear that racialized migrant workers drive the local food economy.

### **Canada's Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP)**

Of the nearly 40,000 migrant agricultural workers legally employed across Canada in 2012, some 30,000 were contracted from Mexico and Caribbean countries through Canada's federal SAWP (Employment and Social Development Canada [ESDC], 2014). The oldest and longest-standing of Canada's temporary migrant worker programs, the SAWP was first conceived in response to grower lobbying in 1966 as a pilot program to meet the labor demands of Ontario's expanding agricultural sector. Since its introduction, the SAWP has grown steadily and attracted global attention for its bilateral approach to the management of circular labor migration, in addition to its collaborative administration in involving industry, government bodies, and the ministries of migrant-sending states. Since British Columbia joined the SAWP in 2004, the number of SAWP workers destined for BC has grown fivefold, from 855 the first year to nearly 5,000 in 2012 (ESDC, 2014), with approximately half being sent to farms in the Okanagan Valley. Today the SAWP is the most commonly utilized of four agricultural streams of the federal Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP) and is a mainstay of Canada's agricultural economy. The program has a reputation as a "model" for the world (Parliament of Canada, 2010).

Despite its popularity with growers and policymakers, as well as migrant workers for whom the program is an essential source of income, the SAWP has been criticized for rendering migrant workers "unfree" (Trumper & Wong, 2010; Walia,

2010). This occurs through several specific aspects of the program. First, the SAWP ties workers' visas to a single employer, preventing them from seeking jobs on other farms or outside of agriculture. This results in the segregation of labor by separating "foreign" workers who cannot leave their job from "local" (citizen) workers who can exercise labor mobility. Second, under the SAWP growers are mandated to provide housing for migrant workers, which is typically on-farm. Requiring employers to oversee housing for their labor force is problematic not only because it facilitates increased surveillance of workers, but also because it simultaneously positions growers as migrants' landlords. Third, the SAWP precludes workers from paths to permanent residency, excluding them from legal and political rights and making them vulnerable to deportation if they complain about working or living conditions, or even if they become unable to work due to injury.

This "permanently temporary" status demonstrates that SAWP workers are only valued as laborers and not as citizens, as were other racialized groups throughout the 20th century. All in all, while rejecting the SAWP as a global model for the management of agricultural labor migration, numerous voices have exposed the program's flaws and demonstrated the ways that the SAWP renders "foreign" migrant workers highly precarious, isolated, and superexploitable (Paz Ramirez, 2013; Preibisch, 2012). We now turn to some examples of the conditions that arise for migrant workers in the SAWP.

### **Racism and Everyday Life: Experiences of SAWP Workers in the Okanagan Valley**

A combination of legal and extralegal mechanisms result in migrant workers' virtual exclusion from the wider communities. Despite the fact that many spend more time in Canada than their "home" countries, they cannot bring their families and are heavily discouraged from forming intimate relationships while in Canada, so that they have nothing to "distract" them from work. SAWP workers' presence in their wider communities is highly regulated and kept to an absolute minimum as they live under the watchful gaze of their employers, conform with extralegal "house rules" (such as curfews

and no visitor policies) imposed by many farm owner/landlords, and lack access to transportation. Whether these rules are framed in terms of maintaining productive work forces, protecting permanent jobs for "citizens," or minimizing employers' liability, in practice they combine to create a de facto system of racial segregation.

In addition to being excluded from Canadian society through both legal and extralegal mechanisms, SAWP workers are often targets of everyday acts of racism on farms and in the wider communities. Many cite being assigned less desirable, "dirtier and harder" tasks, or being paid at lower rates, as ways employers treat them differently than Canadian workers. Farm housing is often segregated by country of origin, with the worst accommodations assigned to black workers. Numerous migrant workers from the Caribbean and Mexico recount being followed, or repeatedly questioned, by law enforcement officials both in situations where they are on farm, as well as when they are off the premises simply moving in and about the community.

It is also not uncommon for Mexican men walking along busy roads to be the daily target of racial epithets, or get yelled at by passersby in vehicles to: "Go back to Mexico!" An especially troubling incident occurred one evening when a group of Mexican migrants were at a local pub and a man picked a fight with them, yelling, "go back to the cherry orchard where you belong!" (A. Lopez, personal communication, October 2014). These examples illustrate the aggressions SAWP workers endure in the Okanagan, and demonstrate how being a racialized farmworker, labeled as "foreign," and told "you do not belong here" are integral parts of racist discourse and practice.

### **Common Struggle and Decolonizing Solidarity: On Becoming "Unsettled"**

Echoing the opening lines of this commentary, we again contend that links between colonial borders, race, and food do exist. As the Okanagan Valley's agricultural economy is operating upon a foundation of land dispossessed from Indigenous people, as well as the superexploitation of migrant workers, we believe any conversation about the region's food system should include the topics of colonialism, capitalism, and racism. We also realize that

discussions of such systems can often prove to be sensitive and uncomfortable. Despite this, we consider listening to these conversations and becoming “unsettled” by such topics to be necessary parts of decolonizing solidarity (Hunt & Holmes, 2015).

Engaging in these dialogues will also require an honest admission about what has been (disproportionally) the result of these issues for Aboriginal people and migrant workers; for many it has been isolation, segregation, and, more succinctly, a denial of their dignity. In noting that Aboriginal people and migrant workers experience oppression as a result of racism and ongoing colonialism, we are not contending both groups are homogenous, nor are we suggesting they are affected in exactly the same ways. Rather we are stating that both have been targeted and compromised by colonial borders yet remain resilient in the face of them, and therefore a common struggle exists. In this way, this commentary serves as a reminder to humbly listen to, and committedly struggle with, the Aboriginal people and migrant workers in our local communities, despite the complexities we know will arise in doing so.

As residents of the Okanagan Valley who are troubled by these issues, we would also like to propose a few short- and long-term remedies to the problems touched upon in this piece—specifically the injustice inherent in current Canadian food systems. Ultimately, the racial segregation of our communities, the forced separation of families, and the existence of a two-tier labor force (with one having less access to social, legal, and political rights) are rooted in the policies of illegitimate colonial governments. The only long-term solution to these problems, in our view, is a dismantling of the imposed borders and immigration laws used to adjudicate and enforce belonging and exclusion.

We recognize that decolonization is a long-term project and process, and from some perspectives may even seem impractical; therefore we would also like to suggest some “in the meantime” solutions for some of the most grievous issues. Firstly, SAWP workers’ visas should not be tied to a single employer, but like any citizen or permanent resident of Canada, they should be free to change

employers for any reason. This would alleviate to some extent the extreme power imbalances currently existing between SAWP workers and farm owners. Secondly, farm owners should not be landlords for their employees. Workers should be paid a fair living wage, one that allows them to freely choose where to reside and not be obligated to live under the housing conditions, surveillance, and arbitrary rules of their employers. Finally, SAWP workers should not have to choose between employment and their families. While many argue that the decision to become a migrant worker and move away from one’s family is a personal choice, we also realize the unjust circumstances creating the conditions to do so are inherently societal. Individual decisions to migrate cannot be judged in isolation, nor can they be critiqued outside of the socio-economic situation in which they are made. Thus we believe that the current family-fracturing policy faced by migrant workers is inhumane and must be changed. Spouses and children of SAWP workers should be automatically eligible to come to Canada as visitors, students, or workers.

In sum, when the SAWP was established in 1966 it was conceived as a temporary solution to a short-term labor shortage. Nearly 50 years on, it is clear that the shortage was not temporary and the program has in no way been a “quick fix.” While the SAWP serves as an economic lifeline to tens of thousands of migrant farmworkers, it also capitalizes on their precarious circumstances by legislating the inequalities they face and perpetuating the racial discrimination they experience within our food system. In this way, justice for migrant farm labor, as well as Aboriginal people, requires that we cultivate a socially just food system, one not built upon colonial borders rendering certain people (and races) temporary and disposable, but rather one founded upon affording dignity and belonging to all. 

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## Race, ethnicity, and the promise of “Good Food” for Michigan: A three-voice commentary

COMMENTARY ON RACE AND  
ETHNICITY IN FOOD SYSTEMS WORK

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### Abstract

This set of three interconnected commentaries begins by tracing the evolving narrative of the local food movement to embrace racial equity as a critical part of a sustainable food system in Michigan, using the Michigan Good Food Charter as a potential framework. Researchers, educators,

and advocates of local food must first have a clear understanding of the structural racism that is present in the American food system before they can work effectively toward the vision of sustainable and equitable food for all. The commentary then calls out the need for new tools and resources for local food students and professionals (including

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<sup>b</sup> Kaitlin Koch is currently a community food systems educator for MSU Extension and a native of northern Michigan.

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Her previous work in urban agriculture in Detroit catalyzed her interest in ensuring that equity is an important part of her food systems work.

<sup>c</sup> Anel Guel is a recent graduate in the Department of Community Sustainability at MSU. Her work ranges from mapmaking and community food systems in Michigan to gender empowerment and ecotourism in Peru. Raised in Juarez, Chihuahua, Mexico, and Grand Rapids, Michigan, she is the lead author of *An Annotated Bibliography of Structural Racism Present in the U.S. Food System*, mentioned in this commentary.

Cooperative Extension staff) to better understand the role structural racism plays in the U.S. food system. One new resource identified and developed by two of the commentary authors is an annotated bibliography of structural racism present in the U.S. food system.

### Keywords

racial equity, structural racism, good food, local food systems, Michigan Good Food Charter

### Changing the White Narrative in the Local Food Movement: The Promise of the Michigan Good Food Charter

*by Rich Pirog*

Many white local food systems advocates like myself who were active starting in the 1990s in states with limited racial and ethnic diversity developed a local food narrative focused on economic justice for the mostly white farmer audience we worked with. This well-intentioned approach was myopic in its lack of inclusion for the farmworkers, food processor workers, and foodservice workers (often people of color), as well as for the farmers of color in that same food system. We also overlooked the inequitable policies and history of discrimination that often limited the healthy food choices of people of color in the neighborhoods where they raised their families. We aspired to help build a food systems infrastructure we thought would be sustainable for all. Unintentionally, this particular food system narrative may have contributed to white privilege rather than helped dismantle it.

The local food movement across the U.S. has changed and matured in recent years, with local food becoming an important socioeconomic thread joining an interdependent fabric of movements in health, equity, food justice and sovereignty, and the environment. These movements have the opportunity to expose and reduce racial injustice. We can thank our nonprofits, foundations, new generations of leaders of color, and many others for this convergence. The maturation of local food as part of an interdependent fabric of other movements, combined with recent events exposing racial injustice, has made it paradoxically more difficult, yet inherently more critical than ever, to have

meaningful dialogues about the future of our food system across lines of race and ethnicity.

Although an agriculturally and racially diverse state, Michigan has significant disparities across race and ethnicity in regard to quality of life and economic well-being. In both the Detroit and Flint metropolitan areas the median wage for all jobs for workers of color is US\$4 less than white workers (PolicyLink, 2015). In Grand Rapids, Michigan, the white worker median wage is US\$6 higher per hour than workers of color (PolicyLink, 2015). Obesity rates in Michigan are significantly higher for blacks and Hispanics than for whites (State of Obesity, 2013).

Although equity is likely the most powerful economic development vision we have, there are significant challenges in making that dream a reality. Michigan is fortunate to have developed its local food system plan with equity as an important lens. Michigan's Good Food Charter (<http://michiganfood.org>), developed in 2010, envisions a thriving economy, equity, and sustainability for all Michiganders through a community-based good food system, where "good food" means food that is healthy, green, fair, and affordable for all. Currently more than 150 Michigan nonprofit organizations and food-related businesses have signed on to the charter; a significant number of these are working toward one or more of its six goals.

The Michigan Good Food Charter provides all Michiganders working in and across food-related movements a pathway to build a new narrative that answers the question as to why local, healthy, green, fair, and affordable food is so important for our collective future. The equity lens of the charter, in particular, needs more emphasis in this new narrative to identify ways that farmers, farmworkers, food processing workers, and foodservice workers will be treated fairly and be free from exploitation.

The change in narrative for white researchers, educators, and advocates working to promote a "good food" system is essential, and it starts with examining and understanding structural racism in the institutions we work in and the food system as a whole. This is hard, often uncomfortable work and needs introspection, an open heart and mind, and dedicated financial resources in order to

happen. It means changing the composition of our food systems undergraduate and graduate students, faculty, and staff at our public and private institutions to reflect the people of the state. It means re-examining whether programs, initiatives and hiring practices at our institutions are equitable and accessible for all.

### **Cooperative Extension's Challenge To Integrate Racial Equity into the Legacy of Present and Future Local Food Professionals**

*by Kaitlin Koch*

Michigan State University (MSU) Extension is fortunate to have a Community Food Systems work group with educators working statewide toward the goal of developing local and regional food systems within their communities. As an Extension educator and member of this group, my perspective is that my work group receives a minimal amount of racial equity training. We also have limited opportunities to discuss how racial and ethnic inequities manifest in our work. In Michigan, each MSU Extension employee is required to attend a diversity and inclusion workshop where difference is discussed in depth, and power, inequity, and structural racism are introduced. Unfortunately, that is currently the only required training and space to discuss these issues. There are other resources available, but MSU Extension employees must seek out these limited opportunities.

Additionally, our community food systems work group is mostly white, while a significant number of the communities in which we work are predominately people of color or First Nations people. Without a space for our work group members to examine issues of power, racism, privilege, and how structural racism manifests in the food system, it is quite possible that our work group may be advancing food systems initiatives that disadvantage people of color and ultimately work against our goals of providing equitable opportunities for all people. This outcome is not because our group is intentionally working to advance white privilege and opportunity, but because the system within which we are working is a complex, layered ecosystem of policies and

power structures historically built on racial inequity.

To mindfully incorporate racial equity into our work, white Extension professionals need targeted training on undoing racism, power structures, and building authentic relationships with people of color to work in partnership towards the goal of equity. To be most effective, these topics need to be explored within Extension's historical context of inequity. Extension staff members also need a space where we can honestly reflect on how our work and actions are affecting the communities in which we work and identify and name when we, as white educators, have upheld a system of oppression. This work is deep and personal, and requires a lifelong effort of identifying and dissecting our actions. Without these spaces, chances are that the system will push us toward the easiest option or path, which is a path that may disadvantage people of color.

The MSU Center for Regional Food Systems has recently released the publication *An Annotated Bibliography on Structural Racism Present in the U.S. Food System* (Guel & Pirog, 2015) that can be found on the center's website and at the link provided below. The bibliography was introduced in May 2015 and citations were added in June 2015 in response to comments received from across the U.S.. This bibliography is an example of a tool that can assist Extension professionals with their personal and professional journey of undoing racism and inequity. I believe that other trainings that focus specifically on undoing racism should be required of all Extension professionals. Such new tools and resources will allow Extension professionals to develop a language and awareness around racism and inequity, which must be used in our conversations with all community partners (and especially in communities of color) to work toward shared goals. These tools will assist the current Extension staff to co-develop educational programs that truly meet the needs of the community in which we work by considering historical context, content, and the cultural appropriateness of messaging. We will become more mindful about who is teaching and who is learning, and how all aspects of each program either work toward equity or reinforce disparity.

## Race, Ethnicity, the Food System, and Academia

by Anel Guel

From the standpoint of a woman of color at a graduate-level academic institution in the Midwest, I have observed and experienced that racial inequities are omnipresent throughout all sectors of U.S. society. As much as this may be a concern, “race” continues to be a difficult conversation to have. Even in the academic setting one may witness one side feeling guilty or attacked, while the other is left feeling misunderstood or even patronized. Both parties feel sensitive about the issue. Although it may be easy to avoid the issue of race, it is both critical and necessary to have these uncomfortable conversations. This dialogue may become particularly challenging when the work of developing an equitable food system comes from a well-intentioned place. Nonprofits, university institutions, and government organizations are also seeking to “bring good food to others” (Guthman, 2008, p. 431). However, this outreach work bringing good food to communities of color often lacks a fundamental cultural understanding of the communities served. In other words, project development—from assessing community needs to evaluating a project—are often done with little to no involvement from the actual communities served. Work from this standpoint is ineffective, unsustainable, and could even have the potential of causing more harm than good.

Some argue that the groups best able to serve the needs of underserved communities are leaders from those specific communities. Following this train of thought, some even argue that it is white researchers’, educators’, and advocates’ job to “sometimes even stay away” (Guthman, 2008, p. 444) from work focusing on “serving” communities where larger issues are not truly understood. My opinion is that it would be very difficult to reach either of these outcomes and it is questionable whether either truly would be effective. So what can we do now—together? Critically

analyzing one’s privilege is a step in the right direction, as well as realizing that one does not—and probably never will—truly understand the “other’s” situation. This goes for white people and people of color alike. I believe the largest leap forward can be made when both parties realize that work is most effective when development projects are collaborative in nature.

Our hope is that *An Annotated Bibliography on Structural Racism Present in the U.S. Food System* (Guel & Pirog, 2015) can help open the dialogue for all future college and university students of what role race plays in developing equitable food systems—not just those who study local food. The intention is that this bibliography, while taking into account the history of structural racism in the U.S. food system, will bring to light larger questions that shape the reality of today’s food system and steps we can create together for the future. 

*An Annotated Bibliography on Structural Racism Present in the U.S. Food System* is available at [http://foodsystems.msu.edu/resources/structural\\_racism\\_in\\_us\\_food\\_system](http://foodsystems.msu.edu/resources/structural_racism_in_us_food_system)

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## Lost in translation: Delivering culturally and linguistically appropriate interventions to Hispanic populations

COMMENTARY ON RACE AND  
ETHNICITY IN FOOD SYSTEMS WORK

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### Abstract

Hispanics became the United States' largest minority in 2012. Lack of culturally and linguistically appropriate interventions in the Hispanic population at the health-care and community levels increases the risk of negative health outcomes, such as obesity and type 2 diabetes. Delivering nutrition education can modify cultural traditions associated with food and decrease diseases associated with food habits. Barriers faced by many Hispanics include, but are not limited to, limited English proficiency and/or immigration status. Developing interventions to improve Hispanics' health outcomes requires understanding of Hispanics' cultural values and diversity. Active recruitment and training of

Hispanics into food system fields is crucial to developing and implementing culturally sensitive and language-oriented intervention.

### Keywords

Hispanics, social determinants of health, culture, linguistics, food systems, education, food habits, obesity, diabetes, health outcomes

In the U.S., minorities have been dealing with a greater burden of diabetes and obesity when compared with non-Hispanic whites (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2014). While we are beginning to see a shift from individual-level to system-level approaches, it is important to learn the ability of public health programs to alter lifestyle factors (e.g., nutritional intake and physical activity levels) following nutrition education. Hispanics' health outcomes can be improved by delivering culturally and linguistically appropriate system-level education on

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healthy lifestyles. Cultural traditions associated with food can be modified easily based on knowledge alone. Public health and medical providers can learn from food systems work, taking into consideration social determinants of health as especially significant factors for Hispanic populations.

### **Impact of Social Determinants of Health on Health Outcomes**

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines social determinants of health as “the conditions in which people are born, live, grow, work, and age” (WHO, 2014, para. 1). Social determinants of health, shaped by financial resources, distribution of power, and allocation of resources at the personal, community, state, national, and global levels (Stevens, 2004) are part of the underlying causes of lifestyle-related diseases. As Hispanics recently became the largest minority in the U.S. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012), the negative impact of social determinants of health on Hispanics health outcomes has become more notable (Peek, Cargill, & Huang, 2007). Some of the barriers faced by many Hispanics are limited English proficiency, low educational attainment, low income, and/or being undocumented. Trying to develop and deliver a public health or medical program for Hispanics might mean first overcoming those barriers. How can we help Hispanics improve their health if their primary concern is income or immigration status? This will require nontraditional partnerships with organizations outside of the public health and food systems sectors before we can begin to develop culturally sensitive and language oriented interventions.

### **Delivering Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Interventions**

In my work, I often see public health and food systems materials merely translated to Spanish from English. This does not deliver the culturally appropriate services that are needed. Ineffective communication can lead to negative health outcomes due to misunderstanding of participants’ concerns, inappropriate follow-up, and poor participant compliance and satisfaction (Wilson,

2013). As a Hispanic woman and mother, I personally have faced these frustrating barriers in a medical setting myself, where health-care providers did not value my knowledge of my own health and medical history. We need Hispanic populations to know that we not only value, but require, their input and buy-in for programming to be successful.

Participants in my diabetes-prevention program expressed the need for public health and health-care providers who truly understand Hispanic cultures. Despite speaking the language, some translators cannot effectively communicate the issues, medical problems, and realities faced by Hispanic populations. The urgency and severity of medical problems faced by Hispanic populations can be lost in translation. Having some materials translated into Spanish is not sufficient when personal interaction is needed to deliver and understand specific, individualized messages. The importance of culturally responsive programs cannot be understated when delivering medical services and interventions to decrease the burden of diseases linked with lifestyle factors disproportionately faced by Hispanics.

Researchers and practitioners involved with public health and food systems initiatives must understand that in Hispanic cultures, food is synonymous with celebration and love. Family recipes go beyond a tradition that is passed from generation to generation; they represent the love of a family member through cooking. Public health researchers and practitioners must respect this aspect of Hispanic cultures. As a health behavior scientist I understood to some degree the difficulty of changing health behavior habits. My perception changed when I started to work with communities. When I worked on pre-diabetes and type 2 diabetes prevention interventions with Hispanic communities in southwest Virginia, I realized that food habits could be modified with this group as long as we worked with participants in a respectful, culturally responsive manner. I learned that people need to feel understood and free to express themselves. I also learned that willingness to help was not enough if we did not also explain why we were offering help. Education and demonstration are key when teaching and trying to motivate people to

change. In order to develop and increase the capacity to address health issues, a community needs to be not just engaged, but also invited to become a partner in the change process. In order to motivate change in food habits, people need to be approached and heard in a respectful way while showing how a habit might be affecting their health.

One final point needs clarification. There is currently a focus on developing educational programs for Hispanics, but that is a diverse group of people. Being Hispanic, I have a deep understanding of Hispanic cultures, but non-Hispanic public health and food systems researchers and practitioners need to understand first that every Latin country has a different set of traditions. In order to develop any educational intervention, we need to understand that every community has its own traditions; even more importantly, every community member has a specific set of traditions based on his or her country of origin, religion, educational attainment, and socio-economic status. Developing culturally and linguistically appropriate services calls for recruitment and training of people of color into food systems fields. 

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## Organizing the new food labor movement: From neoliberal alternatives to worker- based justice

COMMENTARY ON RACE AND  
ETHNICITY IN FOOD SYSTEMS

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### Abstract

Scholars and activists have launched numerous critiques against the alternative food movement, deriding its neoliberal politics and privileging of white notions and imaginaries of “good food.” This commentary examines the recent formation of a U.S.-based food labor movement that is actively responding to the pitfalls of the alternative food movement and developing strategies for building coalitions across class, race, ethnicity, gender, and occupation. It also highlights some of the key ways the movement organizes around issues of discrimination, wage exploitation, and abuse throughout various sectors of the industrial food system, and challenges corporations to assume accountability in the ways workers are treated.

### Keywords

food labor, food movements, race, social justice

The twenty-first century has seen an explosion of concern and activism around food. Much of this engagement has cohered, albeit loosely, around what many have called the “alternative food movement.” Vocal largely around food issues related to pesticide and chemical use, carbon footprints, genetic modification, overprocessing, and factory farming, the alternative food movement has championed a politics of personal responsibility for effecting change in the food system, typically by promoting the buying and eating of local and organic food. Indeed, the alternative food movement’s signature approach to responding to the environmentally destructive, industrial production of nutrient-deficient foods is fundamentally neoliberal, privileging individual “choices” of “voting with your dollar” and

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supporting alternative food producers and lifestyles (Guthman, 2008).

Of course, not everyone has access to and can afford to participate in this kind of movement. Many have derided the food movement for being too expensive and racially exclusive, highlighting the pervasive middle-class whiteness that occupies and colors the spaces and imaginaries of alternative food. Poor communities of color are often discursively portrayed as trapped and obese consumers in food deserts, uninformed shoppers who make poor decisions, or celebrity examples who help others “overcome” the plight of “unhealthy” diets through their popular food initiatives (e.g., Will Allen, First Lady Michelle Obama), while white, liberal consumers, gardeners, and nutrition educators are given privileged roles as movement leaders. Moreover, as some have noted, the movement has inherited a white farm imaginary, a set of values that orient the hard work in fields around an imagined white farmer, making invisible today’s predominantly Latino farmworkers and marginalizing the historical struggles of black farmers and Latino-led groups like the United Farm Workers of America (Alkon & McCullen, 2011; McCutcheon, 2013; Ramírez, 2015; Slocum, 2007). This argument can easily be extended to assert that the work of people of color throughout the food system has also been grossly overlooked and underappreciated.

In more recent years, however, a new food labor movement has begun to form across the U.S., bringing awareness to and addressing the unjust rules and practices within the food system that abuse and mistreat not just food but also the people who make it. Composed mainly of labor organizations, social justice groups, and food workers, this movement combats the many forms of exploitation that have become normalized in food labor: low wages or unpaid labor, unsafe or cruel working conditions, racial and gender discrimination, and sexual abuse. Groups like the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) and the Restaurant Opportunities Center United (ROC United) have filed litigation to redress cases of modern-day slavery and wage theft, respectively. These efforts confront the lax regulation around exploitation and the discriminatory policies and practices that

disproportionally affect women, people of color, and immigrants—the three groups that form the backbone of food system labor. The food labor movement thus advocates for “good jobs” as well as “good food” (Myers & Sbicca, 2015).

In addition, the food labor movement conscientiously aims to avoid many of the mistakes made by the alternative food movement by intentionally building an inclusionary coalition that confronts multiple axes of inequality, places workers in leadership roles, and represents a diversity of worker interests in the food system. Spaces are also created for food workers to communicate their grievances, understand them as part of a wider phenomenon, and strategize measures for enacting more just relationships with food corporations and employers.

For several years, as a researcher and food justice ally, I have had the opportunity to observe and take part in a slice of this movement from the geographic corner of South Florida, a node of growing importance in regional and global networks of radical food justice organizing. I have attended several local organizational meetings for strategizing low-wage worker campaigns and actively participated in public demonstrations led by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), the Organization United for Respect at Walmart (OURWalmart), and the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW). As a participant observer and scholar-activist in these settings, I have become more attuned to the ways in which workers, unions, and labor groups expose injustices within the corporate food system and advocate for policy changes.

For instance, the SEIU-led “Fight for \$15” campaign mobilizes planned nationwide strikes, worker testimonies, and various forms of media to draw attention to the nation’s widest pay gap between corporate chief executive officers (CEOs) and low-level fast food workers and to the effects of low-wage work on the quality of life of ordinary Americans. Demanding higher wages and the right to unionize for fast food workers, the “Fight for \$15” campaign aims to secure significantly improved working conditions for workers in an industry that pays the minimum wage to the largest portion of its employees and is notoriously anti-union (Schlosser, 2001). The CIW also stages rallies, pressuring major growers and corporate

buyers to enter into the Fair Food Program, a legally binding agreement that ensures that workers earn better wages, receive education about their rights, and have their protection standards regularly monitored and upheld. Contrary to the alternative food movement's neoliberal politics of consumer choice, both of these examples identify corporations as primary agents for enacting food system change. As corporations continue to distance and absolve themselves from any responsibility in the treatment and compensation of rank-and-file workers (while profiting from their exploitation), food labor campaigns aim to radically alter the terrain of corporate food business practice by reinscribing CEOs and corporate headquarters within an ethical relationship of accountability.

In May 2014 I was graciously welcomed to attend the Food Chain Workers Alliance (FCWA) annual retreat, which provided me with an inside look into the most intentional U.S.-based effort to link workers' struggles across the food system's many sectors. The FCWA officially formed in 2009 following a meeting between several organizations at the Labor Notes conference in 2008 in Dearborn, Michigan. As one FCWA leader explained at the retreat, "Michael Pollan was publishing book after book after book, and there was a lot of exciting conversation about food, but we were all saying, 'Who brings the food to the table?'" In just a few years the FCWA has successfully formed a broad coalition of worker-based organizations, including the CIW and ROC United, representing agricultural, processing, warehousing, retail, and restaurant and hospitality industries. Their work brings to light a number of worker-related issues that have historically been siloed and muted within their respective sectors, and builds a network that fosters communication, support, and strategizing across the food chain (Lo, 2014; Lo & Jacobson, 2011). To bridge the geographic and perceived occupational distances, one FCWA leader stated, "We're not actually in different industries. The product is food, and we in this room are the ones making the food." During my two-day participation, I listened to dozens of workers and leaders share their stories of mistreatment and discrimination. Each story was unique yet resonated with the experiences of other workers facing similar

conditions. The main message was perhaps most succinctly verbalized by a meatpacker from Arkansas: "We want to take the ingredient of abuse out of our food."

Throughout the retreat, nearly every word that was uttered was translated from English to Spanish or vice versa by a translator well familiar with social justice concepts and terminology. Participants also learned each other's protest chants, from "Qué queremos? ¡Justicia! Cuándo? ¡Ahora!" ("What do we want? Justice! When do we want it? Now!") to "El pueblo, unido, jamás será vencido!" ("The people, united, will never be defeated!"). This speaks to the active steps taken by the FCWA and other groups to build a more inclusive movement. One segment of the retreat featured a workshop on issues related to class, immigration, race, gender, and LGBTQ identity. Participants were encouraged to list topics of concern on a whiteboard that then prompted discussion and the sharing of thoughts and experiences. The "Immigration" heading elicited the most fodder for understanding, as several members of the CIW and other predominantly Latino laboring industries described story after story about encounters with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and immigration police, or "La Migra," human trafficking, and threats of deportation from farm crew leaders. A trained facilitator then skillfully situated these narratives within the history of policies that shape labor in agriculture and food processing.

In Miami, I have also seen a concerted effort among food labor activists to form relationships with prominent members of the clergy, some of whom have taken key leadership roles recently in the newly reinvigorated labor movement. I have witnessed the growing of a coalition predicated on becoming multilingual, intersectional, interfaith, and intercultural in a very real way. Far from espousing the vapid rhetoric of multiculturalism (and the cultural exoticism embraced by many "foodies"), the food labor movement incorporates a range of voices in its work toward dismantling the systemic forms of injustice that beset workers inhabiting various axes of difference.

Over 50 years ago the 1960 CBS documentary *Harvest of Shame* featured a quotation from a farmer that still exemplifies labor relations within the

entirety of the corporate food system today: “We used to buy our slaves; now we just rent them.” The quotation calls attention to the roots of the modern industrial food system, a system built atop a foundation of chattel slavery and racial subjugation. For major producers, profit has always depended on an available supply of cheap labor, and race and gender have been the primary determinants for ordering bodies in the fields, in the market, in the factory, and in the restaurant. Today’s farmworkers and food workers are living a legacy of conditions that may not be identical to formal slavery but are nonetheless dehumanizing. These conditions are often hidden within remote agricultural landscapes or even inside our favorite dining spaces, “behind the kitchen door” (Jayaraman, 2013).

As the industrial food system continues to produce rising patterns of inequality, precarious low-wage work, hunger, corporate consolidation, and climatic threats to life-giving systems, there appears to be little way out but through collectives unified in the struggle to ensure that food is not only healthy and abundant but is made by people who can enjoy a dignified quality of life. In a recent interview, Eric Holt-Giménez, executive director of the Institute for Food and Development Policy, argued for a “triangulation for change...between the farm worker, the consumer and the food worker” (Al Jazeera America, 2015, para. 27). This would require a radical change beyond the neoliberal consumerist fetishization of food commodities towards an ethics of care and solidarity between people living and working in far-flung places and under sometimes vastly different contexts. Building an effective movement to address contemporary food issues will only be as successful as it is inclusive and beneficial for those most marginalized by the food system. As food activism moves forward in working to bridge the many real and discursive gaps that socio-spatially separate our communities, I am reminded of and humbled by a quotation from an Aboriginal activists group in Queensland, Australia: “If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together” (Mz.Many Names, 2008, para. 1).

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## A community engagement case study of The Somerville Mobile Farmers' Market

COMMENTARY ON RACE AND  
ETHNICITY IN FOOD SYSTEMS

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### Abstract

The Somerville Mobile Farmers' Market, a food access initiative in Somerville, Massachusetts, is an example of community-municipality collaboration and a testament to the importance of community engagement, justice, and respect in the creation of a culturally relevant program. Traditional farmers' markets have been exclusive spaces catering to the white and elite, but through a community engagement process, The Somerville Mobile Farmers' Market has come to represent the immigrant-rich community in Somerville and increase food access in a culturally appropriate way.

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### Keywords

food access, food security, food system, farmers' market, mobile farmers' market, equity, community engagement, justice, health

Shape Up Somerville (SUS) is a 15-year-old strategy in the Health and Human Services Department of the city of Somerville, Massachusetts which aims to build and sustain a healthier, more equitable community through policy, systems, and environmental change. Improving access to fresh food for low-income communities in Somerville is part of SUS's mission. In 2008, a supermarket in the immigrant-rich, lower-income neighborhood of Winter Hill closed, leaving residents with limited options for food access. In 2011, SUS and partner organizations Groundwork Somerville (a youth development and environmental justice organization) and The Welcome Project (an immigrant empowerment and service provision organization) facilitated a relationship

with a local farm, Enterprise Farm, to create The Somerville Mobile Farmers' Market. While work takes place on other policy-based systemic approaches to the issue, this market provides a short- to midterm solution to food accessibility by selling fresh, local produce at low prices. Now in its fifth season, the evolution and success of this market is the product of a community-driven, culturally appropriate program supported by the unique collaboration between community and municipal entities. In our immigrant-rich community, this market defies the notion of farmers' markets as solely white and elite spaces. This commentary will reflect on how The Somerville Mobile Farmers' Market came into being and how we put the principles of community engagement, justice, and respect into action at the market.

The first step in preparation for any community collaboration is an awareness of skills and knowledge. Creating robust partnerships requires each player to understand the unique skills they bring to the table and respect the different skills of others. As actors in an institution—the municipality—SUS provides capacity in terms of infrastructural, financial, and staffing support, and must be aware of the community's expertise, crucial knowledge, and assets. To contribute to a robust partnership, we as a municipality must actively work against a siloed process that has historically excluded community groups, use a justice lens, and value sources of community knowledge, including those that are nontraditional. We can leverage our capacity to equitably collaborate with the community for deep change. To us, this requires long-term community engagement and respect for the community at all stages, from planning to implementation and evaluation, a value evident in our mobile farmers' market.

During the planning phase to address food access in Winter Hill, SUS worked with our nonprofit partners to host forums and discussions with community stakeholders about what type of food access initiative would be most helpful for their community. Some initial discussions at the SUS office had included a short-term solution of shuttle buses running from the city's easternmost housing development in Winter Hill (a half-mile and a six-lane highway away from the nearest grocery store)

to other existing grocery stores. At one community forum, a youth community member taking part in a leadership development and language interpretation program from The Welcome Project suggested we follow the model common in her home country: carts with fresh produce for sale which visit multiple neighborhoods each day. Evidence from surveys done in Winter Hill that same year by the nonprofit Institute for Community Health also showed that residents desired a farmers' market for access to fresh, affordable produce. The idea of a traveling farmers' market—one borne of the community and less common in the U.S. currently—led to The Somerville Mobile Farmers' Market as an empowering, culturally relevant space. As SUS helps carry out the community's vision, it is important to properly recognize its origin. Whenever the history of the market is discussed, we believe it important to credit the community for the inception of the market model to give respect to the community that birthed this idea from their experience and knowledge.

Now that the market is established, community engagement, both directly and indirectly through our staff, helps increase our awareness of community assets and needs. Our primary employee, who started off as a cashier during the first year of the market and has moved up to market manager, is a resident of one of the city's housing developments (our primary locations) and is well connected in the community. The trust our customers have in her as a fellow community member is a crucial asset influencing the market's success as a community-serving and -building effort challenging the dominant narrative of farmers' markets as white, elite spaces. She receives candid feedback about the market that otherwise might not get relayed. For example, in the first year of the market her interactions with customers influenced our unique match program where we provide a 50 percent discount not only to people using SNAP, WIC, or Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition Program coupons but also to those who live in the housing developments but do not qualify for food assistance programs. Many farmers' markets offer a small matching program, but our market is unique in that roughly 75 percent of our customers use the match program, especially with our addition of

housing development residents to the match program. In order to sustain our work, we now aggregate produce from multiple Massachusetts farms, buying wholesale up-front and then selling to our customers at lower-than-average retail prices (see Figures 1 and 2). With our low prices and match program, we must fundraise each year to support the produce cost and allow our farmers to receive the full cost of their produce but keep our prices low. A portion of all full-priced purchases goes to support the match program as well, bringing in a “social good” aspect for full-price shoppers and contributing to market sustainability. This setup allows us to offer affordable produce to all who want it, and we gather community input into our operations, from the guidelines of the match program to the types of produce we order each week. Awareness of our community’s composition, issues, and strengths positively influences our

abilities to build policies that increase equity in the local food system.

We also use this valuable feedback and awareness to change our produce offerings. The market has steadily expanded over the years, but the main critique we heard last year was that we do not carry enough fruit and culturally relevant produce. Through consistent program evaluation and attention to customer input, we expanded the market from the original model of working with just one farm to working with four. While logistically difficult, especially as a municipality, this process was necessary to truly meet our customers’ needs, which differ from customers of many traditional white upper-class farmers’ markets. Farmers’ markets continue to grow and contribute to the fabric of their communities but cost, market schedules, and locations often isolate low-income communities, communities of color, and immigrant

**Figure 1. The Somerville Mobile Farmers’ Market van was provided by Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources grant and Herb Chambers Car Dealership sponsorship.**



communities from participating, contributing to the perception of markets as an elite luxury. By diversifying our produce to reflect the preferences of the community, keeping the produce affordable, and making the market mobile, The Somerville Mobile Farmers’ Market has contributed to food justice in our community. Changing our stocking practices also helps us limit the paternalistic practice of only providing produce available in our dominant food supply—the produce that mainstream America has determined is healthy rather than valuing diverse community knowledge about healthy foods and stocking the produce the community requests.

Additionally, a common refrain at farmers’ markets serving low-income communities, communities of color, and immigrant populations across the country is that “we have to educate our shoppers about healthy food and how to cook it.” On the contrary,

**Figure 2. Rolling racks let us set up in any space and move quickly.**



we at The Somerville Mobile Farmers' Market have found that community members have a wealth of knowledge on cooking healthy food; it's just not always the food with which we white, middle-class, American-born people are familiar. Our customers come together at the market and take part in both structured and organically occurring recipe swaps, sharing everything from Trinidadian callaloo stew recipes to Armenian eggplant techniques and Latin sancocho variations, a process valuing community knowledge and cohesion as well as cultural preservation and celebration. Those of us setting up the market could never have facilitated these values if

we had based the market on the traditional deficit-model approach, assuming that our customers do not know how to cook or eat healthfully. The reality, rather, is that there are systemic barriers to culturally relevant opportunities for healthful eating that are related to price and supply-chain availability. We are bridging that gap and bringing healthy and culturally appropriate produce to our communities who are asking for it. We who set up the market learn about cultural produce that is new to us alongside our customers learning about other types of produce that are new to them. It is this collaborative learning and valuing of

community knowledge that we aim for in our programming.

The Somerville Mobile Farmers' Market continues to evolve, with our ultimate goal to develop a more sustainable, systemic approach to increasing access to healthy food for all in our city. We are looking into facilitating changes in supply chains to bodegas and corner stores to increase affordability and cultural relevance of their produce year-round and other opportunities. No matter which direction we take, community engagement, a justice lens, and community respect must be the foundation of our work.

## Beyond inclusion: Toward an anti-colonial food justice praxis

COMMENTARY ON RACE AND  
ETHNICITY IN FOOD SYSTEMS WORK

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### Abstract

Activists and academics have increasingly drawn on the concept of “food justice” in recent years. While this trend is encouraging, we argue that a focus on “inclusion” by these actors may actually work to *reproduce* inequitable relationships. Food justice

research and practice should thus move beyond inclusion to connect food system inequities to interlocking structures of oppression, such as capitalism, patriarchy, white supremacy, and colonialism. In Canada, placing food justice in the context of ongoing processes of colonialism—and recognizing that no justice can happen on stolen land—is particularly important. While we make these suggestions, we do not claim to have all the

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### About the authors

The Food, Equity, and Activism Study Team (FEAST) is an emerging research group based at the University of Toronto, Canada. Our research interests include anti-colonialism and Indigenous self-determination, environmental governance, immigrant women’s environmental justice activism, Indigenous food sovereignty, and urban food accessibility. Our overarching goal is to develop practices—in collaboration with activists—that substantively promote equity, justice, and solidarity, both within food activism and across different kinds of justice organizing.

answers; we struggle through the same tensions we raise here in our own work. Nonetheless, we feel that encouraging those interested in food activism to consider intersecting systems of domination, to challenge such structures and their complicity in them, and to build solidarity with other activists, perhaps using land as the basis for new conversations and alliances, may be key steps toward cultivating an anti-colonial food justice praxis.

### **Keywords**

food justice, equity, activism, inclusion, intersectionality, indigeneity, settler colonialism, anti-colonialism, land, praxis

### **Growing Food Justice in Canada**

Over the past five years, the language of “food justice” has been increasingly embraced in both activist and academic spaces. As members of the Food, Equity, and Activism Study Team (FEAST) based in Toronto, Canada, we are surrounded by initiatives—the Afri-Can Food Basket, the Black Creek Community Farm, FoodShare, and The Stop, to name a few—that aim to strengthen food access for underserved and equity-seeking groups. Foodie academic circles have also embraced food justice, as was reflected at the 2015 meeting of the Canadian Association for Food Studies (CAFS), with a keynote titled “Critiquing Hegemony, Creating Food, Creating Justice: Cultivating an Activist Food Studies” and multiple sessions focused on injustices within the food system based on gender, class, or race.

We are encouraged by these trends and the well-timed release of this special issue. Drawing attention to inequities, stressing the value of listening to and including marginalized voices, and highlighting various forms of resistance all make important contributions to food justice. However, this can only be a starting point. We believe that to build a more equitable food system we need to move beyond inclusion and think more carefully about the structures that create privilege and disadvantage in our society, and that damage our relationships with the land and each other.

### **Food Justice and the Perils of Inclusion**

We make this argument out of a concern that

focusing on *inclusion* may re-inscribe privilege rather than redress the inequities that characterize the contemporary food system. When activists (and, in particular, *white, middle-class, settler* activists) talk about including diverse groups, they can reinforce preconceived notions of who “needs help” and who are the helpers. As Julie Guthman eloquently describes, food justice initiatives can be problematically rooted in “white desire to enroll black people in a particular set of food practices” (2008, p. 433). In our own work, we have seen the ways in which “helping” discourse is employed with “missionary zeal” (Guthman 2008, p. 436) in both academic and activist communities, particularly—although not exclusively—among the young and enthusiastic students in our courses and among interns working in food programs and on farms. Whether concerned with environmental sustainability, nutrition, or food access, a common focus in their work is to help those with seemingly less knowledge or fewer resources—for example, newcomers, the poor, or the obese.

Our purpose here is not to mock the enthusiasm that activists bring to their food justice work, but rather to highlight how important it is to confront one’s own *complicity* in hierarchical relations of power. Positioning subordinated groups in relation to an unnamed but assumed norm—described by Lorde as “white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, Christian, and financially secure” (Lorde, 2007, p. 116)—naturalizes the oppression of nondominant groups, first by seeing the elements of this assumed norm as superior and desirable, second by positioning difference as somehow deficient or even degenerate, and third by assuming that the solution can be found by changing the nondominant group rather than through systemic transformation (see Cahuas, Malik, & Wakefield, in press). Elsewhere, Guthman (2011) notes that when food justice involves “improving” and “providing charity” it “rarely address[es] the source of inequality... bringing individual improvement rather than allowing for (or supporting) collective action” (p. 157). In this context, our point is not to encourage people to “confess their privilege” and achieve absolution (see Smith, 2013), but rather to use this new awareness to work toward structural change.

## Challenging Interconnected Structures of Oppression

Turning the focus instead to the “interlocking systems of domination” (Collins, 2002; Fellows & Razack, 1998) that shape food systems would position food activists to contribute more effectively to food justice. Connecting inequities within the food system (e.g., food insecurity) to larger structures of oppression—capitalism, patriarchy, colonialism, and white supremacy—and understanding how these structures operate (as well as overlap and intersect) to shape food injustice needs to be a focus of our work.

Attention is not always paid to these underlying structures within the food movement, and even where structural concerns are top-of-mind, the *intersections* of these systems have proven hard to tackle. This means that activists with different concerns sometimes fail to see how their work is all related to the broader project of social transformation.

In the Canadian context, we would suggest that taking these intersections seriously means that settler colonialism must be engaged with as an ongoing structure (Wolfe, 2006) that continues to shape the lives of everyone who dwells here.

## Taking Colonialism Seriously in Food Justice

In our own work, we have repeatedly come across a tendency to position colonialism as something that happened in the past or far away, and to conflate ongoing processes of colonization with institutional racism. This is evident in recent academic work as well: for example, in an edited collection about food justice, settler colonialism is framed as a “racial project” (Alkon & Agyeman, 2011, p. 5; Norgaard, Reed, & Van Horn, 2011, p. 25) without attention to the ways that colonialism is different. We echo Lawrence and Dua’s (2005) call to avoid conflating colonialism with race-based oppression (see also Byrd, 2011); maintaining this distinction is important because thinking about Indigenous peoples as one racial minority among many can function to erase their calls for sovereignty and self-determination as nations (Lawrence & Dua, 2005). While settler colonialism cannot be understood without considering racism, we think it

is necessary to see colonialism as a distinct but interlocking system of oppression with its own goals and logics, an approach that remains under-articulated by those who work within food justice frameworks.

Some recent work in Canada demonstrates a growing commitment to documenting the ways in which settler colonialism has violently impacted Indigenous food systems, self-determination, and sovereignty. For example, Food Secure Canada’s “People’s Food Policy Project” calls for a “return to the original nation-to-nation agreements” (2011, p. 11) and a greater focus on Indigenous rights as central to food sovereignty.

However, settler food activists and academics have yet to unpack what this means in practice and, in particular, how this might alter our understanding of *land* in the food system. Food justice scholars have done well to emphasize the importance of addressing capitalist systems of land ownership as a key part of transitioning to a more just and sustainable food system; to connect disproportionate access to land with institutional racism; and to highlight the ways that land policies in North America bar racialized groups from accessing agricultural land (Akram-Lodhi, 2013; Goodman, DuPuis, & Goodman, 2011; Guthman, 2004; Holt-Giménez & Shattuck, 2011; Minkoff-Zern, Peluso, Sowerwine, & Getz, 2011; Norgaard et al., 2011; Wittman, 2009). Nonetheless, a lack of attention to settler control of land (e.g., for food production) and to the ongoing violence against Indigenous lands and food systems persists today.

For example, within conversations around access to land for food production (especially for new farmers), little thought is given to how land redistribution has the potential to reproduce settler claims to Indigenous land and its resources. Similarly, with the exception of pieces by authors like Kamal and Thompson (2013), Daschuk (2013), and Carter (1990), agriculture is commonly framed as beginning with white settler food production (e.g., Hinrichs, 2003), a perspective that omits the long history of Indigenous land cultivation. This omission is important because it erases Indigenous peoples’ claims to sovereignty by removing them from the conversation and the landscape.

Wolfe notes that “territoriality is settler

colonialism's specific irreducible element" (2006, p. 388). Indigenous peoples have been, and continue to be, dispossessed from their lands through "tools" of colonialism (Harris, 2004). In particular, refracting Indigenous modes of production worked to establish settler control of Indigenous lands and to functionally erase Indigenous presences (Harris, 2004, p. 172). Because erasing Indigenous peoples is central to the settler colonial project, so are settler attempts to legitimate and justify, or simply to take for granted, their continued occupation of native lands. Without attention, this process continues through the food movement.

### **Walking the Talk**

Moreover, while discussions of the ways that settler colonialism and other structures of oppression within food systems are on the rise, work that actively challenges this ongoing process has not kept pace. For example, settler solidarity-building with Indigenous movements has been limited. At the aforementioned CAFS meeting, which took place in Ottawa and had a clear focus on food justice as well as the ways that colonization affects food systems in Canada, multiple attendees brought up the failure of the conference to support the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that was holding its closing events a few blocks away. "Where were we during the solidarity march?" one CAFS participant asked. If we literally cannot walk in solidarity in a march down the street, and take time from the conference to do so, are we not guilty of simply "talking the talk"?

In order to walk the talk, food activists need to engage more meaningfully with the work of other justice activists, supporting them in their efforts without attempting to control the dialogue or to enroll other justice activists in their own food-related initiatives. This would widen the scope of learning about others' experiences, build an understanding of what meaningful social transformation could look like, and demonstrate what could happen if we fail to make such changes. As Sherene Razack said in a recent interview, "We have to learn that the colonial project that is Canada is not viable, because it is not structured on the principle of a common humanity....We need to say to white people, 'I don't want you to help me. I want you to

understand that your life will be really bad if things continue as they are'" (cited in Pinnington, 2014). As our society continues to dehumanize people and despoil the land, the stakes are very high indeed.

### **Moving Toward an Anti-colonial Food Justice Praxis**

We are posing these questions and challenges here because we know that activists are often ahead of scholars in their understandings of these critiques. In voicing our concerns at conferences, in front of our graduate committees and classes, and in activist spaces, we have consistently learned that activists are already having these conversations because they experience these tensions in their everyday work.

In presenting this commentary, we are not suggesting that we have all the answers. As graduate students, course instructors, and faculty, we continue to struggle through these tensions in our own research, teaching, and praxis. Still, we feel that encouraging those interested in food activism to consider how what they do is implicated in interlocking systems of domination and to be mindful of these connections, rather than privileging one perspective at the expense of others, is an important first step. In the Canadian context, this means paying serious attention to how the colonial project continues to shape our society and, in particular, how we view land, sovereignty, and our relationships to each other.

The production of dominance is not inevitable (McKittrick, 2006). One way to challenge it, as critical race and anti-colonial scholars have pointed out (e.g., McKittrick, 2006; Razack, 1998), is to make space for counterstories (see also Dixon, 2015). This approach has made its way into some parts of food justice work, particularly activism and research undertaken by marginalized and racialized communities or individuals. Counternarratives are clear in the activities of Toronto-based activist groups such as Justicia for Migrant Workers, the Toronto Black Farmers and Food Growers Collective, and FoodShare; they also surface in initiatives across the country, such as Feeding My Family (based in Nunavut) and the Working Group on Indigenous Food Sovereignty (based in British Columbia).

This work contests dominant perspectives about who “speaks” and who “knows,” as systematically oppressed communities are often the best positioned to identify and address food challenges and work toward more equitable systems. We would suggest, therefore, that less time be spent intervening in the lives of marginalized communities; the focus should shift to challenging the activities and structures of oppression that we are all implicated within in different ways.

Contesting structures of oppression also requires working in solidarity with others who seek to enhance equity beyond the issue of food. If justice is the goal, a consideration of food’s intimate relationship to land may be necessary for respectful engagement with other activists. As there can be “no justice on stolen land,” engaging with how we each come to this land can build solidarity and challenge assumptions that may help to develop meaningful alternatives that can lead to food justice.

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## The food system should unite us, not divide us

COMMENTARY ON RACE AND  
ETHNICITY IN FOOD SYSTEMS

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### Abstract

The U.S. agrifood system was built upon land redistribution, enslavement, and labor exploitation. This system encompasses economic, social, and biophysical components deployed under a set of policies that negatively affect Native Americans, African Americans, and Hispanics. Researchers have studied the problematic issues affecting

marginalized groups and published their analyses, while leaving intact the issues they document and research. Researchers have the responsibility to redress the exploitative premise of the agrifood system for communities whose circumstances have helped advance academic careers. Marginalized communities can be essential partners in practical and intellectual innovation and improvement of the agrifood system. The most effective way to redirect our system is to redefine the purpose of that system. Nations that invest their public resources equitably produce greater overall well-being for people of all incomes. The purpose of public investment in our food system should be to nourish and maximize overall health and well-being. We should establish an overarching national policy to create norms leading to equitable outcomes.

### Keywords

equity, food, health disparities, policy

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## The Food System Divides Us

The United States' agrifood system was built upon appropriation of the means of production by European colonists, involving land-grabbing, enslavement, and labor exploitation. Securing our nation's land base required a genocidal program and displacement of tens of thousands of Native Americans (Chalk & Jonassohn, 1990). Making that land base agriculturally productive then required relegating millions of African Americans and Hispanics to the role of base laborers whose costs were to be minimized. Because of that, we have been left with an agrifood system that divides us, with skin color and ethnicity as a clear marker for that division. This system encompasses economic, social, and biophysical components that have been deployed under a set of policies that benefit many, but also harm many. These policies have produced an inequitable outcome. This is manifested in a number of ways, primarily in disproportionately high hunger and poverty rates among Native Americans, African Americans, and Hispanics—more than twice that of whites (Coleman-Jensen, Gregory, & Singh, 2014).

While much social progress was achieved between the Civil War and the civil rights era, much more is needed to secure social equity in opportunity, employment, income, and food security for marginalized generations now and in the future. Currently, the probability that a child born to parents in the bottom fifth of income distribution reaches the top fifth is only 7.5 percent (Chetty, Hendren, Kline & Saez, 2014). If that child were born in Canada, his or her social mobility would be twice as high (Chetty et al., 2014). In the past 50 years, African American median household income in comparison to White household income has barely improved, from 55 to 59 percent (Pew Research Center, 2013). African Americans without a high school diploma are twice as likely to be unemployed than Whites without a high school diploma (Lee, 2008). In 2013, African Americans were nearly three times more likely than whites to live in poverty (27.3 percent compared to 9.7 percent) and Hispanics were two and half times more likely (23.7 percent) (Kaiser Family Foundation, n.d.). Food insecurity rates track poverty rates; in 2013 approximately 11 percent of Whites were

food insecure, compared to 26 percent of African Americans and 24 percent of Hispanics (Coleman-Jensen, 2014).

## How Can the Food System Unite Us?

The interests of communities of color have often been repressed in the policy-making process, resulting in policies that clearly (and often intentionally) affect those communities' transportation, housing, jobs, and schools, reinforcing the nation's discriminatory history along lines of ethnicity and color. With the 2013 repeal of the 1965 Voting Rights Act the political franchise of African Americans has been further undermined (Dinan, 2013). In the academic world, researchers have often studied the problematic issues affecting marginalized groups and published their analyses, while leaving intact the very issues they document and research.

The futility of such a cycle in addressing the practical interests of communities of color can lead understandably to those communities dismissing collaborations with researchers. While not all researchers are guilty of this system of benefitting professionally and personally while their "subjects" experience no shift in their circumstances, it is the responsibility of researchers who have relevant knowledge and the social standing to intervene to do so. This is all the more so because the scientific community has served as de facto intelligentsia for the industrializing power structure that has implemented the present agrifood system. Researchers have the responsibility to redress the exploitative premise of the agrifood system, and to relate equitably with communities whose circumstances have helped advance their academic careers.

In this task, marginalized communities can be essential partners in practical and intellectual innovation and improvement of the agrifood system. Action-based research bolstered by appropriate methodologies for capturing complex community knowledge and worldviews can provide a vehicle for academics and community members to collaborate for effective and equitable food system improvement (Bloor, Frankland, Thomas, & Robson, 2001; Patton, 1990). Our current agrifood system serves some of us well, but greater and

more equitable collaboration among all sectors of society can make it work well for everyone.

### **A Systemic Approach to the Food System**

Reshaping the structure of the agrifood system away from exploitation of people and the environment requires a systemic approach. Researchers, policymakers, community members, and advocates must recognize that many complex interactions are embedded in the structure of our agrifood system. These interactions have socioeconomic and biophysical components. Several analytical frameworks exist to guide the work of researchers collaborating with communities in such complex milieus. Examples are soft systems analysis (Checkland & Poulter, 2006) and the business sector's "wicked problem" approach (Nelson & Stroink, 2014). Public health's socio-ecological framework (SEF) suggests that health and health behaviors are affected by different levels of influence: individual, interpersonal, community, and societal (public policies and systems) (Sallis, Owen, & Fisher, 2008). The SEF highlights that individuals both shape and are shaped by their environment, and are also influenced by public policies and systems affecting the distribution of power and resources.

To shape local, state, and federal policies that redistribute power and resources equitably it would be helpful to follow Meadows' (1999) observation that the most effective way to redirect a system is to redefine the purpose of that system. Our nation is a complex system. It was established on the aspirational premise that all its citizens are equal and "endowed with certain unalienable rights," according to the preamble of the Declaration of Independence (although at the time of its inception these rights were extended to White land-owning males only). Therefore we advocate nothing radical, but simply the actual fulfillment of this nation's founding vision: the right of everyone to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Comprehensive socioeconomic research demonstrates that communities and nations that invest their public resources equitably produce greater overall well-being for people of all incomes (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011). The purpose of our food system should not be exclusively to maximize output and

profit, but to nourish and maximize overall health and well-being.

Our food system is an amalgam of public and private investment. Because it is intertwined with so many sectors of our economy—labor, transportation, education, health care—the aim of public investment should be a system that benefits us all. We should establish overarching national policies and principles that create norms leading to equitable outcomes (Bittman, Pollan, Salvador, & De Schutter, 2015). Policy-makers at the local, state, and federal levels should lay the foundation for a better agrifood system by implementing democratic, science-based policies to protect the environment with sustainable farming practices, support the research and marketing needs of all farmers, build the economic standing of food system workers through fair wages, and build a healthy food environment where good food is accessible and affordable for everyone. Our food system should unite us, not divide us. 

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## Valuing all knowledges through an expanded definition of access

COMMENTARY ON RACE AND  
ETHNICITY IN FOOD SYSTEMS

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### Abstract

Historical racial injustices as well as more recent public and economic policies have culminated in the displacement of supermarkets from some central city neighborhoods. With this displacement, many low-income and minority neighborhoods not only have been deprived of affordable healthful food, but also have experienced prolonged exposure to energy-dense and highly processed snack foods. Partly as a consequence of this loss of supermarkets, diet-related diseases have become prevalent. Our current policies to improve this health issue address only objective measures of access, with little input from community residents, and they are having limited results. In response, I have reconceptualized access as a construct with

five dimensions: acceptability, accessibility, accommodation, affordability, and availability. This new expanded view supports both objective and perceived aspects of access and values the knowledge of residents through community-based participatory research, thereby providing a more complete understanding of access.

### Keywords

food access, race, five dimensions of access, grocery gap, health disparity, community-based participatory research, social determinants of health, food desert

The increase in youth obesity rates and diet-related diseases across age groups in low-income and predominantly minority neighborhoods relative to middle-class White neighborhoods has received national attention of late (Bodor, Rice, Farley, Swalm, & Rose, 2010; Zenk, Schulz, Israel, James, Bao, & Wilson, 2005). Our attempts at reducing this disparity and improving

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health outcomes by increasing access to healthy foods have had limited and uneven success (Guthman, 2008a, 2008b; Slocum, 2007). In this commentary, I suggest that we reconceptualize and broaden our definition of “access” to go beyond objective measures of location, affordability, and availability to include emotive components such as acceptability, accommodation, and residents’ perceptions of their food environment and foodways (Usher, 2015). This expanded notion of access supports community-based participatory research that values the knowledge of and includes residents as research partners, and provides for a more complete understanding of food insecurity, food sovereignty, and deprived areas or “food deserts.”

Many studies, although not all, have suggested that having access to full-service supermarkets influences families’ selection and consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables, and thus affect their long-term health outcomes (Grigsby-Toussaint, Zenk, Odoms-Young, Ruggiero, & Moise, 2010; Pothukuchi, 2005; Raja, Yin, Roemmich, Ma, Epstein, Yadav, & Ticoalu, 2010). This is based on research that has found that supermarkets are the best sources of a variety of high-quality, healthful food at affordable prices throughout the year (Caspi, Kawachi, Subramanian, Adamkiewicz, & Sorensen, 2012; Laraia, Siega-Riz, Kaufman, & Jones, 2004). Not only do low-income minority neighborhoods suffer by having fewer supermarkets than upper-class White neighborhoods, but also there is a statistically significant link between the racial composition of a neighborhood and the density of fast-food restaurants (Block, Scribner, & DeSalvo, 2004). Kwate’s (2008) work in New York City showed that the dominant factor in determining fast-food density in majority Black neighborhoods is race-based residential segregation. Block and colleagues (2004) found that predominantly Black (80 percent or higher) neighborhoods were geographically associated with fast-food restaurants even after controlling for commercial activity, the presence of highways, and median home values. They also found that there were 2.4 fast food restaurants per square mile in majority Black neighborhoods compared to 1.5 restaurants per square mile in majority White neighborhoods. Race is also a significant factor in

the presence of large chain supermarkets. Black neighborhoods tend to have half the availability of supermarkets of White neighborhoods, and low-income African Americans on average live 1.1 miles (1.8 kilometers) further from the nearest supermarket than low-income White families (Block et al., 2004; Odoms-Young, Zenk, & Mason, 2009; Powell, Slater, Mirtcheva, Bao, & Chaloupka, 2007).

As our selection and consumption of food are largely based on the choices we have in our neighborhood of residence, it follows that low-income minority residential areas that tend to have fewer health-promoting resources such as supermarkets that offer high-fiber foods, and have prolonged exposure to highly processed, energy-dense foods, also display higher rates of cardiovascular diseases (Diez Roux, 2001; Ver Ploeg, 2010; Walker, Block, & Kawachi, 2012). In addition, a 2012 U.S. Department of Agriculture study found that 16.4 percent of the population, or 50.1 million people, lived in food-insecure neighborhoods, and 37.6 percent of these were low-income residents (Coleman-Jensen, Nord, Andrews, & Carlson, 2012). African Americans, Hispanics, and other minority groups have higher rates of morbidity and mortality rates, and suffer disproportionately from “diseases of life-style” namely coronary heart disease and Type II Diabetes, than Whites (Eisenhauer, 2001; Short, Guthman, & Raskin, 2007). Obesity, for example, is 50 percent more prevalent in low-income households, which tend to be in areas that lack other amenities such as parks and full-service supermarkets (Laska, Hearst, Forsyth, Pasch, & Lytle, 2010; Morland, Diez Roux, & Wing, 2006).

In addressing this disparity in health outcomes, some municipalities have recognized that they are less the result of genetics, individual behavior, or access to health care, and more a consequence of historical, social, physical, and economic factors that shape opportunities for neighborhoods—or social determinants of health. These observed realities are often predicated on systemic inequities that marginalize groups based on racial and ethnic identity, religion, gender, age, socioeconomic status, mental health, sexual orientation, and geographic location (Food in Neighborhoods Committee, 2010; L. M. Smith, 2008; P. Smith,

Pennington, Crabtree, & Illback, 2011). However, our extant notion of access does not reflect this insight. Current policies attempt to fill the “grocery gap” and to make healthful food more affordable through subsidies (Bell, Mora, Hagan, Rubin, & Karpyn, 2013; Bitler & Haider, 2011; Song, Gittelsohn, Kim, Suratkar, Sharma, & Anliker, 2009). While these are useful and necessary, they are not sufficient. More scholars are calling for studies and policies that consider perceived as well as objective access and value self-reporting as reasonable measures of access (Alkon, Block, Moore, Gillis, DiNuccio, & Chavez, 2013; DeLind, 2006; Moore, Diez Roux, & Franco, 2012). For example, at present access does not consider residents’ perception of food quality or neighborhood crime rates. Winkler, Turrell, and Patterson (2006) found no differences in price and availability of healthy food based on the socioeconomic characteristics of their study area. And Covey and O’Dwyer (2009) concluded that living in a “food desert,” by itself, did not hinder access to healthy food. Residents were able to mitigate this obstacle through social networks that provided access through private transportation to food outside their neighborhoods.

Access incorporates objective as well as

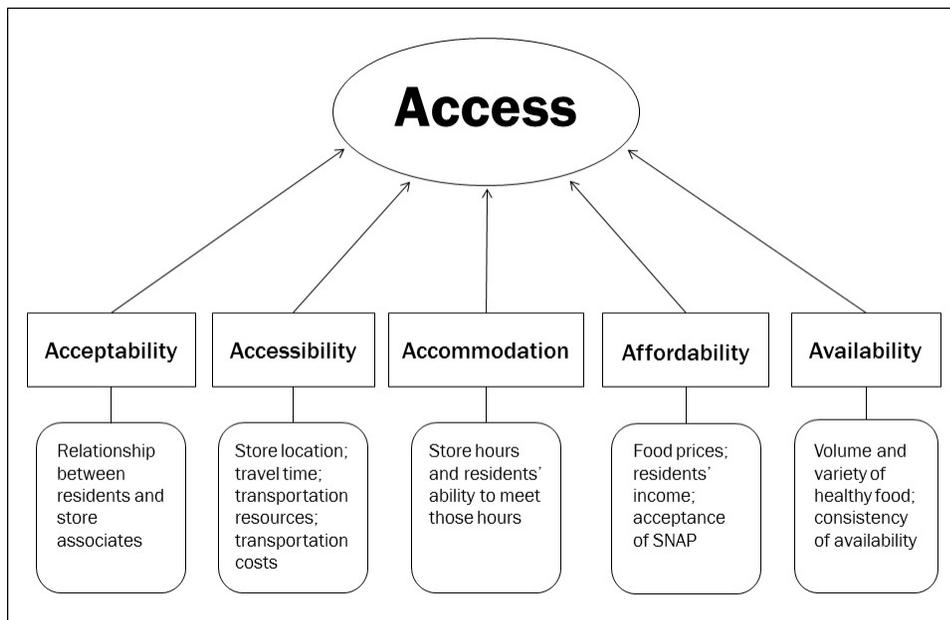
perceived elements, and it is a dynamic, not static, condition; that is, it is not realistic to expect that attracting a new supermarket will solve all food access issues in perpetuity. Given these constraints, I have reconceptualized “access” to reflect a construct that is an aggregation of factors (or “strands”) that influences residents’ ability to acquire and benefit from healthy food (Penchansky & Thomas, 1981; Ribot & Peluso, 2003). This conceptualization highlights the social interactions, cultural norms, socio-political, and economic factors that influence access to resources across the landscape. As these factors interact with each other and residents orient themselves geographically in relation to resources over time, the strands affect residents’ power or self-efficacy and level of access to resources (Penchansky & Thomas, 1981; Ribot & Peluso, 2003; Usher, 2015). In this way access is understood as the level of “fit” between residents and the local food system and residents’ ability to meet their nutritional needs.

I illustrate this conceptualization of the Five Dimensions of Access in Figure 1. The five dimensions are *Acceptability*, *Accessibility*, *Accommodation*, *Affordability*, and *Availability*. Acceptability is defined as the relationship between customers and store associates, including owners. It considers

residents’ attitudes toward the quality and cultural appropriateness of the food being sold. Accessibility queries residents’ perceptions of the relationship between the location of the food sources and the location of residents, taking account of residents’ transportation resources, travel time, distance, and transportation costs.

The third dimension is Accommodation, which I define as the

**Figure 1. The Five Dimensions of Access**



residents' perceptions of the manner in which healthy food is organized to meet residents' needs. This refers to residents' perception of store hours of operation, food displays, the physical condition of the venue, and perception of area crime. Affordability refers to residents' perception of their ability to purchase the food, including consideration of their income and their knowledge of food prices outside their neighborhoods for comparison shopping. This dimension also includes the food sources' ability to make healthy food more attractive to residents through subsidies and discounts. Finally, the fifth dimension is Availability, which investigates the relationship between the volume and variety of healthy food and the needs of residents, as well as the availability of food throughout the year (Usher, 2015).

Each of these five dimensions is dynamic and not easily separated. For instance, a family might move to another neighborhood, affecting their accessibility to healthy food, or a family member might secure a better-paying job, which may affect perceptions of affordability and accessibility. However, the model remains stable. It is also important that this model creates both the intellectual and scientific space for us to conduct community-based participatory research (CBPR) and for us to value self-reporting as a valid source of knowledge by incorporating both objective and perceived measures of food access. In this way we—social scientists, policy analysts, and community stakeholders—involve local residents as true partners (Arnstein, 1969), empower residents in problem-solving, build social capital, and gain a more complete view of families' food environments and an understanding of food choices in order to develop more effective local food policies to improve the health of all. 

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## The food movement: Growing white privilege, diversity, or empowerment?

COMMENTARY ON RACE AND  
ETHNICITY IN FOOD SYSTEMS WORK

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### Abstract

Food systems work is both a stimulus to the growth of the food movement and a response to the concerns of the activists who lead and participate in that movement. In the United States and many other nations, the development of a vocal, articulate, and passionate group of people who are critical of food systems work has led to many changes. However, the food movement lacks diversity representative of the communities in which food systems work takes place. People of color, the poor, and many ethnic and religious minorities remain almost invisible in the food

movement. A diversity model approach to food systems work would suggest that the food movement should include people of diverse backgrounds and characteristics, reflect the needs and interests of a diverse society, and respect everyone's food choices and values in determining solutions and creating alternatives to the current food system. Instead, the food movement most often reflects white, middle class interests, and ignores or even rejects the interests and cultural histories of diverse populations when establishing what constitutes "good food." We call for an empowerment model that instead embraces diversity and respects the variability in food choices and values within our society. We argue this model will liberate both the underrepresented and underserved *and* the elite and that the result will be more equitable and lasting solutions to complex social problems in the food system.

### Keywords

diversity model, empowerment model, food movement, white privilege, ladder of participation

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Food systems work is both a stimulus to the growth of the food movement and a response to the concerns of the activists who lead and participate in that movement. The increased effort to understand and improve the food system both globally and in the United States is valuable to consumers, farmers, and other actors in the food system. It has spurred an ongoing discussion of the strengths and weaknesses and also the successes and failures of the large-scale, global systems of production and marketing that developed in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the United States and many other nations, the development of a vocal, articulate and passionate group of people who are critical of food systems work has led to many changes. The growth of farmers' markets, increased research on sustainable and organic production techniques, and growing demand for fresh fruits and vegetables are just a few of the noticeable changes that have resulted. However, we argue that the work on food systems, with few exceptions, has not been able to incorporate a diversity model.

### What Would a Diversity Model Look Like?

At the most basic level, implementing a diversity model would require that the food movement and those of us engaged in food systems work include actors who represent the full diversity of the societies of which we are a part. One important indicator of the degree to which diverse actors are engaged fully is their participation not just as "beneficiaries" or "advocates" but as leaders of the food movement. People of color, the poor, and many ethnic and religious minorities remain almost invisible in the food movement. The membership of the food movement, those who advocate and work on food systems, and certainly the high-visibility leaders of the movement in the U.S. remain largely white, of "Anglo" heritage, and middle class. Nor is the diversity of the nation reflected in the land-grant colleges and universities that receive the lion's share of federal funds for food systems research and extension. The National Research Council (2009) issued an assessment of agricultural education in the U.S. that specifically called for greater diversity in the faculty and student body at these institutions. The Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU) (2009)

echoed the NRC recommendations.

A diversity model also requires that food systems work address the needs of the diverse groups of people in our societies. We have greatly increased the attention we pay to alternative modes of production, distribution, and marketing of foods. For example, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) now funds research and outreach on organic food production and has programs designed to provide training and assistance for new or beginning farmers and ranchers. However, organic foods are neither affordable nor accessible by the poor. Food systems workers have recognized these limitations, but much of the work to increase the quality of foods available to food insecure people has focused on gardening. In essence, this involves telling the poor to "raise your own food," ignoring the cost in time and money and the high risk of crop loss inherent in gardening, especially for the inexperienced. Attention to the "whiteness" of the food movement and food systems work has grown in recent years (Alkon, 2012; Alkon & Agyeman, 2011; Billings & Cabbil, 2011; Bowens, 2015; Etmanski, 2012; Freeman, 2013; Guthman, 2008; Slocum, 2006). The APLU also issued a report (2010) that called for greater diversity in Cooperative Extension as an organization and in regard to the diverse needs of the American public.

To improve food systems work, it is useful to think about the implications that a diversity model would have for the food movement and food systems work that supports it. A diversity model would respect *everyone's food*. Intentionally or not, the food movement has defined for many people what constitutes good food. Some aspects of the definition are science-based and hard to challenge. Foods loaded with fat, sugar, and salt are not nutritionally good foods. However, for many in the food movement good food also includes intangible attributes; typical examples are organic, local, GMO-free, from a small farm, heritage cultivars, and free range. In and of themselves, these attributes represent food choices that certainly reflect values. However, this "labeling" extends beyond differences in values expressed in open discourse. The white privilege reflected in the composition of the food movement membership, and especially its

leadership, extends to what constitutes “good food” in many cases. One example is the “collards versus kale war.” Collards and kale are essentially equivalent nutritionally. Collard greens are a typical Southern food, a food choice shared by both black and white southerners. Yet kale has become the poster child for “really good food,” while collards are virtually absent from the food discourse. A negative image of collard greens as “overcooked with too much salt and lard” reflects a judgment of Southern, and more specifically traditionally African American, foods and indirectly of the people who prepare and eat them.

A more inclusive approach to food systems work could be based on Arnstein’s model of the “ladder of participation.” Arnstein (1969) divides “participation” into eight categories. At the bottom of the ladder are manipulation and therapy, where participants are essentially “subjects.” The middle levels of participation include informing, consultation, and placation. The highest levels are partnership, delegated power, and citizen control. If we apply her model to food systems work today, we can see that progress has occurred. The discussion of the need to include people of color, to meet the needs of the food insecure, and the increasing interest in foods not traditional to the U.S. and Western European diet all point to opportunities for a broader participation in food systems work. However, a critical self-examination may lead to the conclusion that the food movement has not yet moved beyond placation, a form of tokenism in Arnstein’s hierarchy.

### **The Need for an Empowerment Model**

As food system workers and food movement advocates and representatives, we have become more sensitive to the *need to embrace diversity*, but most of us probably remain trapped by the dominance of our white, middle-class experience *as a group* that prevents us from fully understanding the meaning of “embracing diversity.” Nonetheless, our work takes place in a system that is itself a product of white privilege, both historically and today. We can move from “therapy,” solving the problem “our way,” to consultation and even placation. For example, most of us will intellectually reject the idea that race has anything to do with

how “good” and “not good” foods are defined. We welcome and seek out the participation of people of color, the poor, and ethnic and religious minorities in our work. However, we are deeply challenged when we try to move beyond “welcoming others to the movement” to “welcoming and participating in multiple movements,” some of which are quite different in content, approach and form from our own. Ultimately, diversity is critical to the sustainability of the global food system because no single set of solutions, created under a single cultural and social system, is likely to produce the range of ideas and approaches needed to create lasting and evolving solutions to the challenges of feeding 9 billion people good food.

Diversity is not a nicety or “simply” a social desirable condition. Diversity is essential to creativity and the ability to engage in critical self-examination. An empowerment model may well be a more appropriate one to create diverse and transformative food systems work. Empowerment moves beyond an emphasis on diversity for its own sake to focus on the necessity of learning from and incorporating the full range of human experiences to develop equitable and lasting solutions to complex social problems. Empowerment is both an individual and a group process. Like our efforts to incorporate diversity, it does give voice to the underrepresented and underserved. Ultimately, however, a successful empowerment model for food systems work opens resources, authority, and power to those who have been denied opportunities to control their own lives (Burdick, 2014; Kojolo, 2013; Naylor, 2012; Rodriguez, 2011). It provides an environment in which diverse groups create a mosaic of solutions that they share and respect, even when the solutions reflect different values, cultures, and traditions (Fagan & Stevenson, 2002; Gollub, Cyrus-Cameron, Armstrong, Boney, & Chhatre, 2013; Leerlooijer, Bos, Ruiters, van Reeuwijk, Rijsdijk, Nshakira, & Kok, 2013).

The role of traditional power elites in a food movement and in food systems work built on an empowerment model undergoes transformation. It changes from one of arbiter of norms, agenda setting, and leadership to one of supporter and advocate of solutions that may differ greatly from one’s own. One of the most important aspects of an

empowerment model for development work of all types is that it liberates both the underrepresented and underserved *and* the elite. The ability to share fully in creating solutions that are not “of one’s own experience” is transformational (Kriner, Coffman, Adkisson, Putman, & Monaghan, 2015).

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## Diversity education at land-grant universities from the perspective of a female student of color

COMMENTARY ON RACE AND  
ETHNICITY IN FOOD SYSTEMS

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### Abstract

As a land-grant university student, in order to graduate I must fulfill the requirement of a two-part diversity course. In reflecting on my own experience and growth from taking these classes as a female student of color, I examined my involvement within the agrifood system. I assert the need for diversity education and training in land-grant universities. Finally, I state the necessity for increased practices and strategies for land grants and extension departments to recruit and retain more diverse students, staff, and faculty.

### Keywords

barriers, diversity, education, extension, land-grant universities, people of color, race, requirements, students

### Introduction

When I tell individuals, friends, and family from my small suburban hometown about my interest in sustainable food systems and my studies in agricultural sciences and development, I frequently receive astonished responses due to my nonfarming background. “Why agriculture?” I am often asked, to which I respond by explaining our shared connection to food and the ways in which production, distribution, and consumption methods affect our entire society. Finally, I explain that, despite my not-so-agrarian background, I am able to study sustainable agriculture due to the Morrill Acts’ creation of land-grant institutions, and to the Smith-Lever Act (1914), which allocates federal support and funding annually to each state to enhance the study and research of agriculture and other applied fields, and also created and funds extension services to share the advancements and resources with American citizens.

Attending a land-grant university in the

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Northeast has given me the opportunity to connect with other students who have similar interests yet hail from different locations and backgrounds. My involvement with agriculture began as a young equestrian in my suburban neighborhood. Wishing to further pursue my interest in large animals and livestock, I applied and enrolled in a land-grant university as an animal science major. As my education progressed, I learned more about our modern food system and its impacts on our health, society, economy, and environment. By declaring double minors in nutrition and food science, and food systems, I have been able to supplement my major with transdisciplinary subjects.

As a female student of color in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at an institution where more than 83 percent of students identify as primarily white, I often reflect on *my* current and future involvement in the agrifood system as compared to that of my peers and classmates. While some of my peers are eager to get their hands dirty working on local organic farms during the summer or picking up a part-time job at a nearby dairy after classes, I am hesitant to get involved in the production aspect because of my perceptions of the past and present relationships of minorities and farm labor.

In this commentary, I will examine my own personal barriers in agricultural education and within the agrifood system. Through this lens, I will explain the need and purpose for diversity education and training at land-grant universities. Finally, I will assert the necessity for increased practices and strategies for land grants and extension departments in the recruitment and retention of a more diverse faculty, staff, and student body.

### **Diversity Training and Education**

Of the U.S.'s 70 land-grant universities, 43 have instituted diversity requirements for their undergraduate core curriculum (Association of Public and Land-grant Universities [APLU], 2012). In many cases, diversity course requirements are embedded in the curriculum in order for students to, as Cornell University typifies, "enhance their abilities to communicate with people of different cultural perspectives; to listen carefully and respectfully to the views of others, especially views with

which they disagree; and to employ ethical reasoning in judging ideas, actions, and their implications" (Cornell University, College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, n.d., para. 1). To meet the growing diverse population of our nation and more specifically the increase of students of color enrolling in colleges and universities, more institutions are instating this requirement into their general education core curriculum.

However, these requirements may vary in their specificity. For example, some universities, such as Clemson and Washington State, have a rather broad three-credit course requirement with the goal for students to "demonstrate the ability to critically compare and contrast world cultures in historical and/or contemporary contexts" (Clemson University, 2014, p. 37) or "understand, respect and interact constructively with others of similar and diverse cultures, values, and perspectives" (Washington State University, 2014, p. 41). These requirements can be met through certain classes that may cover domestic *or* global cultures. Allowing for overly flexible diversity coursework may mask the initial purpose and mission of the requirement. While focusing on global diversity allows for broader perspectives of the world beyond our country, this can lead to obliviousness to the perspectives and issues that exist between white and minority identities in the U.S.

Some land-grant universities and institutions established by the acts of 1862 and 1890 have more specific requirements that address the issue of race and racism within the United States. North Carolina State University has a three-credit diversity requirement, with the reasoning that "the study of diversity in the United States provides students the opportunity to consider questions of difference and culture, identity and community, privilege and oppression, and power and responsibility in our nation, and to gain an understanding of how these issues affect both individuals and communities" (North Carolina State University, 2014, p. 150). General diversity courses that meet the requirement, such as an English course that explores African American literature, can be used to portray an African American perspective. However, in a land-grant setting offering more diversity courses in agriculture could have a

powerful effect in following the mission of land grants: to be able to successfully offer agricultural and technical advancements to a diverse range of American citizens.

At my university, the diversity requirement is comparably particular, with required classes that critically assess race and racism in the U.S. context. The diversity class in which I was enrolled was a societal and developmental analysis of our modern food system and the historical background that led to its current structure. In my research on domestic diversity courses across the country, few land-grant universities offered courses in relation to agriculture.

By viewing the food system in the context of its social component, my entire outlook on agriculture and my intentions for using my education were altered. Previously I had been very focused on the environmental and economic effects of conventional and mainstream agriculture. Understanding that the causes and origins of socially constructed racism stemmed from agriculture was shocking to me. The creation of the constructs of race and racism to justify the involvement of subordinate identities—more specifically ethnic minorities—in early U.S. agricultural production systems has led to the overpowering effects of systemic race and racism in a society that is certainly not post-racial. These concepts were very groundbreaking and empowering for me.

### **Implications of Diversity Education on Students of Color**

Despite learning about minority groups in the U.S. from a young age—from the original populations that inhabited this country, to plantation agriculture and slavery, to the Civil Rights Movement—it was not until this diversity course in my sophomore year of college that I learned about the systemic causes and modern day effects of racism, despite the strides that minorities have made in regards to civil rights. As an underrepresented agricultural student reflecting on my previous views of minorities and farming, my personal interpretation has been shaped by historically traditional tropes—subjugated Native Americans, enslaved Africans, liberated African Americans who still experienced trouble accessing land and resources,

or exploited Latinos (Grant, Wood, & Wright, 2012). The thought of following in these exact, or emblematically similar, footsteps had always deterred me from experiencing the joy and nobility of farm work that white peers and classmates often share. For example, a white peer asserts the privilege of jumping head-first into a position as a farmhand, working in the field with little hesitation, while I have found it challenging to take on a role that was and often still is passively held by other minorities. This led me to question how many other underrepresented students feel similar personal or systemic barriers to an agricultural education at a land-grant university, or a farming occupation, despite their strong interest.

In the required diversity courses offered at many land-grant institutions, a study in and reflection on a variety of contexts about diverse cultures and their perspectives and views are carried out. When students of color do not have access or even see individuals who are outwardly similar to them involved in an industry of interest such as agriculture, they often look to previous views and roles in agriculture that their predecessors may have taken. Students of color may, or may not, notice the privilege that whites assert within the food system—the ability and privilege to embrace any role, from a laborer to a farm operator, or even as a CEO of a multimillion-dollar food corporation—with comparably less personal barriers. While reflecting on the history and even present systemic tribulations and subsequent oppressions that exist for individuals of color, students may feel the presence of a personal barrier simply due to the knowledge of such an existing element. However, these courses also have the opportunity to promote the empowerment of social and racial justice.

### **Moving Forward and Steps for Extension and Outreach**

In reflecting on my personal barriers, I wonder about barriers that other individuals of color face when considering involvement in the agricultural field. Carolyn Finney (2006) discusses such barriers in “Black Faces, White Spaces: African Americans and the Great Outdoors,” highlighting that some may feel that they are faced with “exclusionary practices.” The second Morrill Act of 1890 was

enacted 125 years ago. Since this time many strides have been made in advancing higher agricultural education. Moving forward, I see even more potential for individuals of color to access education at land grants across the country. However, their inclusionary practices have room for improvement as well.

The reasoning behind diversity requirements at land-grant universities vary by the institution; however, each generally strives to educate and engage students in a reflection on the causes and effects of racism and race relations in our society. In my experience of learning about diversity in the domestic and global food systems contexts, my views of and barriers to agricultural production have changed. The academic agricultural community would benefit greatly by adding or increasing training and education on diversity within the food system.

In my reflection of my diversity coursework, I was curious about the structure and organization of diversity requirements at other land-grant universities. Although there is little detailed information and data on land-grant diversity requirements available, this little-explored area has great potential. I foresee great outcomes deriving from further examination and research on diversity training, education, and courses that relate directly to our domestic food systems. We must look inward at our own domestic issues and potential before we step outward to make change in global food systems. After my study and in-depth reflection on diversity within food systems, I have considered my barriers and realized that a better alternative is empowerment for action. After getting my bachelor of science degree, I hope to further my career in food systems in a graduate program. In pursuing higher education, I will get involved in extension programs to be able to serve underrepresented communities in rural settings. Eventually, I hope to have a career in public health and to contribute to a food system that is more sustainable—economically, socially, and environmentally.

Throughout my diversity courses, I was engaged in the class as an empowered learner. With the knowledge gained subsequently, I see myself taking the next steps as an empowered doer. In diversity courses offered by land-grant

universities, an emphasis on empowerment and change will encourage white and minority students to examine both their own and others' personal barriers. Additionally, students of all races and identities can bring about change by understanding the gender and racial barriers that exist, and consequently contributing to a more diverse food system by getting involved, listening, and learning about diverse identities, and empowering themselves and others. 

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## To the American food justice movements: A critique that is also an offering

COMMENTARY ON RACE AND  
ETHNICITY IN FOOD SYSTEMS

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### Abstract

a love letter,  
that is also a Dear John letter  
an invitation,  
that is also a plea  
a vision,  
that is also a grievance  
that is also a call to action

### Keywords

cultural work, critique, food justice, movement strategy, movement building, organizational development, personal reflection, *la cultura cura*, visionary activism, transformative justice

**T**o the American Food Justice Movements:

Thank you for your work. Thank you for the time, energy, and love you are all offering to

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protect our dear Mother Earth. Thank you for defending our seeds, for growing dark and healthy soil, for fighting to defend our waters, for working in the interest of Life and all our relations. Thank you for caring about the young people in our communities, providing meaningful jobs, ways to find training and work (paid or not) that support the health and wellness of our communities. Thank you for honoring our elders, for respecting our ancestors' wisdom and ways of knowing across generations. Thank you for farmers' markets, community gardens, healthier corner stores, educational kitchens, grassroots restaurants, and food trucks. Thank you for seed banks and seed bombs, time banks and radical skill shares. For worker-owned cooperatives, land trusts, and community supported food systems. Thank you for the songs, poems, performances, books, novels, and documentary films. Thank you for permaculture, agroecology, and for supporting the struggles of food and farm workers. Thank you for cultivating, nurturing, planting, watering, waiting, protecting,

pruning, thinning, harvesting, cooking, eating, composting, and turning under. Thank you for tending to these cycles of life and death that make our existence possible. Thank you for your thoughts, your energy, for walking these prayers.

Thank you for caring about the suffering of others. Thank you for taking care of yourself. Thank you for wanting to do something to respond to the injustices you see in our food system.

My gratitude for you all is overflowing, not just for how much I have personally benefited from being a part of this movement, but also for how much “impact” I have already seen us have. Our movements have already begun to transform our food systems. I give thanks for how this work has supported my own family, my relatives, my communities, the children, my peers, students, co-workers, etc.

Rooted in this love and gratitude, I want to offer a space to “check-in”—an invitation to slow down and consider some ways that I have also felt upset by this movement. Nobody is forcing you to read this, but I am asking, for a bit of time and space and energy, for my feelings to be heard and considered as a part of y/our community, y/our struggle.

Why should you care?

Because I am no better, nor worse, than any of you, than any of us.

And who am I to offer these comments?

I am a “person of color” who has been directly involved in “food systems work” since 2007. I am someone who felt moved to respond to this call for commentaries... and I fit the description. Also, I am your brother, your relative.

Speaking, and thinking from my own personal realities, my lived experiences and shifting identities, I offer these thoughts, for us to consider, in a conversation on “race and ethnicity in food systems work.”

When I received this call for commentaries through various listservs (food\_justice [GF]I),

CRT\_FOOD, URBANAG, etc.), I immediately opened a word .doc and began writing. At first all that came out were my grievances, which I will also share here, but after careful reflection, I could not offer my grievances without rooting them in my hopes, my visions, as well as my gratitude. I honor Grace Lee Boggs here for this reminder, for her teachings and guidance on how this work takes time, effort, and the energy to honor and witness our reactionary energy, as it slowly transforms into visionary and (r)evolutionary critique (Boggs, 2011).

As I kept writing, my grievances were many, but as I sat and observed them over time my visions and hopes showed through, and became more abundant—not only more numerous, but also more powerful. In sitting with and writing down my woundings, I opened to vulnerability, making possible the spirit of connection, as I pray for the possibility of healing.

The heart of my grievances, and also my visions, is our collective mis/understandings of “power, privilege, and oppression,” and therefore how we strategize their undoing and/or transformation through food systems work. I have often felt frustrated and stuck when it comes to how we understand and define the “political,” and what that means for food justice movements. I have felt limited, even blocked, by bourgeois understandings of “politics,” asking me to operate within the narrow and limited confines of “policy work” and other top-down strategies for change: organizing campaigns, appeals to elected officials, ballot measures, and/or nonprofit bureaucracy. There is often an unspoken, or sometimes explicitly stated, preference for this type of work, a privileging of the most concrete and tangible “victories” for us to celebrate. Organizational and community capacities are focused on strategizing, measuring, and evaluating our “impact” through this discourse, this lens.

Power, privilege, and oppression are “structural,” in the sociological/anthropological sense of the term, and also in the ways that countless anti-oppression and antiracist trainings make clear. However, what can be lost or overshadowed in a perspective, and “training,” that is solely focused on structural change and “policy work” (or on

nonprofit organizations driving and defining community change) is the opportunity to transform our everyday shared practices that re-perform and reproduce these structures of power. It is this space of the everyday that I would like to refer to as “culture,” and its accompanying activism: “cultural work.” To be sure, here my critique is not of “policy work” itself, because it is obviously and urgently important work to be done. Instead, what I am asking for is a shift, an expansion, an integration of our understandings of power itself, and therefore a turn in some of our activist energy as we also consider another point of focus—that is, the *cultural*. This is not to suggest that food justice workers are not already doing *any* cultural work; in fact, much of my own understandings of cultural work that I am sharing here have been developed through my own experiences *within* many food justice organizations. But what I’d like to reflect on, and bring into question, are my repeated experiences over time and place of fellow food justice organizers and workers marginalizing, postponing, silencing, ignoring, or not knowing how to practice and engage cultural work.

Cultural work does not refer *only* to the practice of art-making—poetry, music, film, photography, murals, etc.—though this work is necessary to any sustainable social movement. Instead, my theorizing of cultural work asks us to focus on our *everyday shared practices*, on our collective actions, our common doings, or in Spanish, our *vida cotidiana*. In this way the everyday is a space, a location from which we can “strategize, measure, and evaluate” our work. By everyday shared practice I refer to the *things we do, every day*. This means language, clothing, shelter, transportation, ethics, mathematics, and where and how we consume food and water (of course, we’re food activists!), just to name a few examples. In verbs it means: eating, sleeping, going to the bathroom, walking, driving, sitting, breathing, talking, listening, cooking, sharing, caring, calling, working, thinking, storytelling, planning, designing, reading, writing, drawing, singing, etc. These are sites of *culture*, and thus cultural work refers to the forms of activism that seek to transform these spaces that are numerous, vast, and yet intimate. Cultural work is, in short, a lot of work!

Before this understanding of cultural work becomes too abstract, let us situate it within the context of this conversation on the culture of food justice movements, and our related organizational practices. Already I need to point out how much of our movement culture is based on being affiliated with an organization (nonprofit, nongovernmental organization [NGO], for-profit, limited liability corporation [LLC], etc.), and how this itself is a cultural move. Normalizing this approach—that is, professionalizing activism—ends up making this work inaccessible to many people in our communities. (I prefer to discuss *access* rather than exclusion/inclusion.) Building a movement that is based on having the privileges that are necessary to access nonprofit organizations and/or NGOs is precarious and not sustainable in that it creates a culture in our movement that doesn’t recognize that social movements must be, first and foremost, *social*. In other movements and parts of the world (outside the United States in particular) activists including those in the food movement understand themselves *in relation* to NGOs, but not as *being* NGOs themselves. In fact, many social movements that are rooted in the Global South (Via Campesina in particular) are deeply critical of how NGOs become proxies for multinational corporations and other imperial projects. This then becomes a site of cultural work. How are we going to do the “work” of undoing the nonprofit industrial complex and its influence on our social movement (INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, 2007)? It is the role of cultural work itself that would allow us to have this conversation and take the time and energy needed to look at how middle-class, bourgeois, corporate culture is being re-articulated and re-inscribed in many of our food justice projects precisely because we are looking elsewhere for the “work to be done.”

It is in the context of these movement spaces that I have been asked, or called in as a “consultant,” to discuss “anti-oppression,” “anti-racism,” or other ways to engage the perennial (and very frustrating) question of “why are there no people of color here?” Or more often than not, “why is there a *lack of diversity* in our organization?” or “how can we be more *inclusive*?” It must be noted that “lack of diversity” and “inclusive” are often

neoliberal code words for a space being already white-dominated. When I see a call for papers asking for a list of “how tos” for working with people and communities of color in food systems, I am reminded of the dozens of times I have been asked these sorts of questions, and the dozens of times I have been unable to offer the prescriptive answers these folks may be seeking. Many times when I hear these code words, I fear it is already too late. A space and culture has already been created and established that is so thoroughly white (corporate [we don’t need to be a corporation to *be* corporate] and heteropatriarchal [dominated by the norms of heterosexual males]), that it contains within it one of the hallmarks of whiteness itself: white guilt and its accompanying savior complex.

Looking through the lens of culture, the American food justice movement often resembles a performance of middle-class, corporate cultural norms themselves. Part of this culture has also been a confusing overemphasis on race and anti-racism and an almost complete erasure of other systems of domination that make white supremacy even more durable, not the least of which are analyses of class (neoliberal capitalism) and gender (heteropatriarchy), and how deeply these systems affect our cultural practices as movement organizers. I share this as a middle-class, raised upper-middle class man of color who is the son of two physicians. In other words, I have felt comfortable participating (or even have been able to participate) in the food justice movement precisely because of my class and educational privilege, and I am taken more seriously with fewer qualifications because of male privilege and (at times) straight-passing privilege. How are we ever going to dismantle food injustice, whose very roots are situated in neoliberal capitalism and heteropatriarchy (in other words, the dominant culture) if we are re-performing these systems in our everyday shared practices? Many of my visions for our movement include strategies that challenge the cultural practices that have been borrowed from the academic, nonprofit, and other industrial complexes that disrupt our ability to collectively transform ourselves and the food system, and that instead re-embed us in the status quo.

This critical cultural work can and will make us uncomfortable. It forces us to “grow our souls” (Boggs, 2011, p. 28), to engage in “spiritual activism” (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2009, pp. 292, 323). This all sounds grandiose, but it is actually very humbling and unglamorous work to do. When I am asked how to engage in dismantling racism with an organization, I often suggest organizing an all-staff and community meeting where we project everyone’s salary on the wall and see what happens. No place that I have worked has taken me up on this idea (yet!). Doing this will make them uncomfortable. It will make me uncomfortable. But not knowing each other’s salary, and it being taboo to even ask or share this information, is part and parcel of neoliberal capitalist culture. Normalizing these sorts of silences is precisely how they are perpetuated and made invisible.

When we commit ourselves to moving together and collectively through the discomfort of breaking these silences and seeing where it takes us, that is cultural work. This is the inner, personal, and interpersonal growth and working through fear (and other feelings we don’t like) that is necessary to shifting culture. Building relationships and trust is not only a part of cultural work, it is cultural work itself.

In Spanish there is a cross-cultural *dicbo* (saying), *la cultura cura*, that translates to English as “culture cures” or “culture is healing.” Here *la cultura* is referring explicitly to our indigenous-centered and ancestrally oriented ways of knowing that have helped us survive, and continue to thrive, in a dominant culture that is based on our erasure, a culture that normalizes violence and genocide, a culture that silences its survivors (MarÍñez, 2013). Survival is an everyday shared practice in many communities of color. In this way, cultural work, like healing work, emphasizes *process* rather than an end product, making it much more difficult to measure and apply for grants to fund. But imagine how deeply we could transform our food systems if we committed to ending a culture of genocide, slavery, sexual violence, and the like. What would our work look like if we shifted from asking how to “attract diversity” to our organizations, and instead asked how to dismantle the cultures that oppress communities of color on a daily basis?

Everyone can and needs to participate in this level of cultural work, of transformation, if we wish to overcome age-old tropes like tokenizing (turning people of color into a gimmick to sell our work) or other forms of retraumatizing and rewounding.

With this I will end as I began, with a prayer of gratitude. To all my relations, for everyone who is present in this piece and in our work, whether I know your name or not, I honor you. My visions, my grievances, I present to you as an offering, an invitation, to be in movement together, to honor our “precious knowledge,” shedding the autumn leaves of a dying neoliberalism, to feed the roots of our Mother Earth, the land, that is our home in the cosmos, that is our source. 

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## Critical food systems education and the question of race

COMMENTARY ON RACE AND  
ETHNICITY IN FOOD SYSTEMS

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### Abstract

Studies of food systems education have largely avoided questions concerning race. In this commentary, we interrogate the racial assumptions behind certain food systems education projects. Food systems educators are often motivated by a whitened cultural desire to “bring good food to others” and see garden-based learning projects, which seek to instill healthy nutritional behaviors, as the solution to the problem of purported food

deserts. We argue that food systems education is in need of a critical intervention. In this commentary, we propose critical food systems education (CFSE) as a theoretical framework, set of pedagogies, and vision for policy that moves beyond teaching students about the food system, and helps them realize their potential to structurally transform it through collective action. The CFSE perspective is theoretically grounded in food justice, food sovereignty, political agroecology, and critical

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pedagogy, and food sovereignty. Dr. Meek’s research has been funded by the National Science Foundation, Social Science Research Council, and Fulbright Foundation.

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pedagogy. The CFSE approach is not merely theoretical, but arises from the examples of grassroots social movements throughout the world that have developed radical forms of food systems education. We highlight this approach using the example of the Brazilian Landless Workers' Movement (MST). The MST opposes a racialized discourse of the "peasantry" as backwards and ignorant. The movement's leaders reject a vision of education that reproduces white modernity, and instead support a vision that advances radical agroecological education programs that train students to be political subjects capable of creating a socially and environmentally equitable food system. The example of the MST underscores the potential of CFSE as a corrective for the food systems education's racialized assumptions.

### **Keywords**

race, garden-based learning, food systems education, critical food systems education, Landless Workers' Movement, MST, food sovereignty, food justice, agroecology, critical pedagogy

### **Questioning Race in Food Systems Education: Towards a Transformative Alternative**

A troubling racial narrative increasingly characterizes certain forms of food systems education. The images are ubiquitous. They hang in the hallways of universities, on the doors of local farm-to-table restaurants, and in the promotional materials for numerous nutrition intervention programs, such as First Lady Michelle Obama's Let's Move. African American elementary-school children kneel down beside raised-bed gardens staring with amazement at the succulent vegetables they are growing. These images are frequently paired with statements lamenting the lack of school funding, the number of children receiving free meals, and the paucity of access to fresh produce for socioeconomically disadvantaged students. The nongovernmental organizations and government officials promulgating these projects, like many in the alternative food movement, are motivated by an honest desire to "bring good food to others" (Guthman, 2008).

As critical food scholars point out, the

alternative food movement is characterized by an "unbearable whiteness" where its agrarian ideals, such as the importance of "getting your hands dirty" (Guthman, 2008, p. 435), reflects whitened cultural histories and ultimately produces racialized spaces of social exclusion (Slocum, 2007). In spite of the best of intentions, many food education projects falter because they are based in these whitened cultural ideals and agrarian imaginaries. Researchers contribute to this problematic racialized intervention by showing that the environmental attitudes of African American students who participate in garden-based learning increase less than their White counterparts (Waliczek & Zajicek, 1999). Rather than asking why food education projects do not achieve their purported goals among students of color, we follow Guthman's (2008) lead and question the ideological intentions and racial assumptions of these programs and their proponents.

Food systems projects often serve as a form of problem enclosure, in which a specific definition of a problem determines the understanding of the causes, consequences, and appropriate solutions (Guthman, 2012). In the case of food systems education, the "problem" is frequently defined as food deserts where socio-economically depressed communities presumably have low access to fresh produce. Yet a growing scholarship is challenging the food desert narrative (Boone-Heinonen, Gordon-Larsen, Kiefe, Shikany, Lewis, & Popkin, 2011). Lee's (2012) study, for example, shows that in comparison with wealthier neighborhoods, low-income communities have twice as many fast food restaurants and three times as many convenience stores, but—here's the kicker—surprisingly, almost twice as many large supermarkets per square mile. Focusing on schools, An and Sturm (2012) find no relationship between the types of food that students report eating, their weight, and the types of food available in close proximity to their homes. By framing food deserts as a problem of low access, rather than one of historical and social processes of red-lining, state disinvestment, or racist lending practices, for example, the problem definition produces the conditions for its own intervention: creating school gardens to help instill good

values and nutritional choices in “at-risk” populations. While its proponents see these programs as redressing socioeconomic inequalities, food systems education is insufficient for helping youth understand the racialized injustices inherent to the current food system, and their capacity to transform them through collective action.

Part of the problem is that despite the burgeoning critical scholarship on race in the alternative food movement (e.g., Alkon & McCullen 2011; Ramírez, 2015), surprisingly little has focused on education—a strange absence given education’s role in maintaining racial and class privilege (Anyon, 1997; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Lipman, 2011; Willis, 1977). A notable exception is the work of Allen and Guthman (2006), who explore the increasing neoliberalization of farm-to-school programs. Etmanski’s (2012) work also provides a welcome departure, exploring how adult educators in the organic farming movement can engage in anti-racist pedagogy, becoming allies with indigenous movements, and connecting their practice to the rapidly growing food sovereignty movement. The purpose of our commentary is to build on these emerging works in order to transform the dominant discussion about food system education and offer a concrete alternative.

Education, we believe, is both a natural site to explore racially problematic interventions related to food, as well as an arena to develop transformative alternatives. There is a long history in the field of education of blaming communities of color for their so-called underachievement in schools. This line of argument can be traced back to the 1965 Moynihan report, *The Negro Family*, which argued that “for the vast numbers of the unskilled, poorly educated [Black] city working class the fabric of conventional social relationships has all but disintegrated” (U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Policy Planning and Research, 1965, p. ii). This line of reasoning that identifies family structure as the reason for racial disparities in education became solidified as the “culture of poverty” argument over the next several decades; see the writings of Oscar Lewis for the origins of these ideas. The irony of the argument is clear: just as communities of color gained the right to equal educational opportunities, overcoming de jure segregation, white flight

became legitimized as de facto segregation and communities of color in these newly segregated areas are now blamed for their educational inadequacies. This culture-of-poverty argument, along with a persistent belief in a color-blind ideology (Bonilla-Silva, 2006) in schools, masks the real reasons for educational disparities, namely, structural racism.

We argue that certain contemporary forms of food systems education fall into this same racist logic, assuming that school gardens and courses on nutrition are the key to improving the health and well-being of students of color. Nonetheless, we agree that more discussion about food systems in schools is a critical component of integrating youth into a collective struggle for more equitable food systems. Drawing on over six years of research with the Brazilian Landless Workers Movement (MST), we propose critical food systems education (CFSE) as an alternative to the “unbearable whiteness” of food systems education. The MST is one of the largest social movements in Latin America, with over 350,000 families that have addressed food insecurity and poverty through occupations of unproductive land estates that force the government to redistribute this land to these landless farmers (Branford & Rocha 2002; Wolford, 2010). An alternative educational model is a central component of this struggle, as MST leaders have developed a series of organizational, curricular, and pedagogical initiatives that encourage youth to stay in the countryside and become peasant-intellectuals, helping to contribute to the sustainability of these new rural communities (Meek, 2015; Tarlau, in press). This educational struggle is in direct opposition to a racialized discourse of the “peasantry” as backwards, ignorant, and a soon-to-disappear segment of the population. The leaders of the MST reject the goal of education as producing “urban (white) modernity,” and instead implement alternative educational programs that posit the peasantry as a political subject who can produce a more equitable food system, based in agroecological farming methods, in the twenty-first century Brazilian countryside.

Inspired by the MST’s struggle in Brazil, we suggest the concept of critical food systems education (CFSE) as a theoretical framework, a set of

pedagogies and pedagogical methods, and a vision for policy that can address the racialized narrative in U.S. and international food systems education. As a theoretical framework, CFSE incorporates insights from diverse theoretical traditions, such as critical pedagogy, food justice, agroecology, and food sovereignty. Critical pedagogy, grounded in the educational ideas of Paulo Freire (2002), defines education as a political project that is either actively maintaining or transforming the status quo. This suggests that the role of food systems education should be a dialectical process of analyzing the reality of the local food system, linking this local reality to national and international structures that have coproduced this local reality, and helping students come up with creative solutions to transform these realities: Freire's famous concept of praxis. The CFSE framework also draws on the lessons from food justice, a grassroots movement that is predicated upon a critique of the racial and class-based inequalities in the food system (Mares & Alkon 2012). Food justice's attention to the structural racial and class-based inequality in the food system should be directed at transforming the neoliberal school food system, which increasingly consists of contingent labor, private-sector funding, and the delegation of responsibility to the local (Allen & Guthman, 2006). Agroecology also plays an important role in critical forms of food systems education. CFSE engages with agroecology from a political perspective (de Molina, 2013); it focuses attention on the politics of agroecological knowledge, asking who is producing what knowledge and for what purposes? It also departs from the uncritical valorization of agroecological practices, asking students to consider how particular practices arose among particular marginalized communities, and the politics of appropriating them. Finally, food sovereignty, closely aligned with the political nature of agroecology, provides another major foundation for CFSE (Wittman, 2011). Food sovereignty is itself a global movement. Social movements fighting for food sovereignty, such as the MST and Via Campesina, have created their own educational institutions to train the next generation of movement leaders in political organizing and agroecological techniques (Rosset & Martínez-Torres, 2012). Thus, as a

component of CFSE, food sovereignty insists that food systems education be linked to these larger collective struggles.

In summary, critical food systems education (CFSE) is a tripartite perspective consisting of a theoretical framework, set of pedagogies, and vision for policy that posits food systems education as an inherently political and economic process that is mediated by racial and ethnic histories and identities, while also maintaining that these educational processes can be transformed to be a form of education for liberation. CFSE is directly relevant to questions concerning the intersection of race and the alternative food movement because it brings into question the larger project of food systems education and the motivations of its proponents. It calls us to explore how garden-based learning educators conceive of the subjects of their intervention and the subjectivities they seek to mold. As a transformative alternative, it also asks how educators in these programs can develop the critical consciousness to recognize and question their own racial assumptions, and engage with their students as cocreators of a transformative future. CFSE is not a new perspective, but rather builds on a long history of social movements incorporating education into their larger struggle against classism, racism, and sexism. Along with these social movements, we believe that "education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world" (Freire, 2002, p. 34). 

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## A Native perspective: Food is more than consumption

COMMENTARY ON RACE AND  
ETHNICITY IN FOOD SYSTEMS

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### Abstract

Effectively engaging in food work with and among Native American people toward food sovereignty requires cultural competency, historical knowledge, and a more complex understanding of how food informs community well-being. Drawing on both personal and academic experience, this paper argues that Native Americans' food consumption is tied to land, place, relationships, community, and health. Native American relationships to food stand in contrast to American individualism and function as an intricate part of communities to maintain relationships, build cultural knowledge,

and satisfy emotional and physical health. Food problems among Native people have developed over centuries of forced change, a history that provides insight into the way food has been utilized to colonize. As a result, many tribes and individuals have become food dependent on the U.S. government. Food systems research and outreach that focuses narrowly on consumption and access risk oversimplifying Native communities' relationship to food as well as their movement toward food sovereignty. Solutions that do not account for the cultural and historical realities of Native people are not real solutions to the problems confronting them. We must make room, therefore, in the food justice movement to envision alternative solutions that better reflect Native realities, cultures, and lives.

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Parts of this commentary were drawn from the author's master's thesis, *Food systems among Native American peoples in Oakland, California: An examination of connection and health*, as cited in the reference. Some of this commentary was written during paid staff time at CoFED.

### Keywords

Native American, food justice, food movement, culture, food sovereignty

As a person of Yaqui and Mescalero Apache descent, I have a long history of personal engagement with Native people within the context of community as well as working for Native organizations that work on Native issues. My educational journey has also focused on Native people and their relationship to food within the context of food justice. I currently work at the Cooperative Food Empowerment Directive, where we hope to encourage a world where food cooperatives build community wealth. My experiences working on food issues with Native people have led me to the question: How do we build resilient Native communities that are empowering *and* powerful? In attempting to answer this question I have discovered that the relationship to food for Native communities has been ruptured, making food central to the question of empowerment and power. For many Native people a ruptured relationship to food resulting from colonization has had profound effects beyond nutrition and health. These effects must be examined in more detail to develop a better understanding of food's power in community building given historical realities that have informed current relationships to food for all Native communities in this country.

According to the 2010 census there are over 566 federally recognized tribes, 2.9 million people who identify as Native only, and 5.2 million who claim Native identity in combination with another race (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], n.d.). As one works with Native people it is important to acknowledge that we are *not* one people. Although our experiences with U.S. society have helped to create a pan-Native identity, we are not one. Each tribe has its own language, customs, beliefs, and histories. However, there are many commonalities found among these diverse populations, commonalities such as Native philosophies of interconnectedness, obligations, and responsibilities between people, animals, land, water, and air.

The current perspective, drawn from research for my master's thesis at Colorado State University (Vernon, 2014), uses a qualitative PhotoVoice project with participants from the Intertribal Friendship House (IFH) in Oakland, California. The goal of the project was to further the under-

standing of contemporary relationships to food for Native people, while also highlighting some of the tremendous work of Native organizations and people within their communities. Among the 11 tribal identities represented, some individuals had a history of occupation of their ancestral/reservation homelands and others did not have much connection to their homelands.<sup>1</sup> The majority of participants were women ranging in age from their late 20s to 60s. This project illuminated the ways that Native people challenged the myths of individual choices and consumption around food. To expand the narrative around health and food, I have chosen one story to share that I believe informs us about how we can work in solidarity to solve the food issues that Native people encounter.

What my research found was that food cannot be disentangled from people and relationships; consuming, producing, and foraging for food all have meaning because they facilitate the strengthening of community bonds. Some participants believed that eating "well" is not always about the nutrition of the food, that it has more meaning. Photo 1 highlights this idea. A quick or cursory look would suggest that this food means the person is not eating well, due to both the quality of the food and its potential effects on health and well-being.

This photo could be treated as evidence of the "problems" with food consumption among Native people, and this food—the McDonald's coffee and a sweet pastry—could easily be transformed into a warning poster of what not to do. It confirms the dilemma nutritionists have identified with the diet of marginalized people, a diet that includes too much sugar and fast food and illuminates the unhealthy choices of an entire community. Too easily this image could be used to fuel a narrative of what is wrong with the food choices of Native people, placing the blame for health problems upon this community. However, there is an alternative reading of this image, one that tells a story of nourishment, relationships, and safety.

The hand in the photo belongs to the 82-year-

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<sup>1</sup> The tribes represented were Zapotec, Ohlone, Chumash, Hopi, Tewa, Navajo, Yurok, Seminole, Stockbridge Munsee-Mohican, Sioux, and Shoshone.

old aunt of Ana, a participant who shared this picture during a focus group at the Intertribal Friendship House (IFH). Ana shared at that meeting how this picture was taken after she had endured a long day of arranging for the secure and affordable parking of her car, which required both negotiating informal arrangements at IFH and dedicating precious time to traveling on public transportation. Exhausted by the process, Ana still found a sense of happiness, love, and community as her aunt presented her with some food.

I had to bring my car to IFH and leave it in the parking lot, and Carol was nice enough to let me do that because I don't have secure parking. And then, taking the BART and a bus home, and then the BART to the San Francisco Airport and then getting a red eye—it was just really exhausting and such a long journey. It felt so good to get to that airport and my aunt that I'm really close to, she's 82. So that's her there in the car and so she picked me up and she had brought me a sweet roll that another aunt had packed for me, that she had driven. So I just thought it was so sweet that my aunty making it the day before or something, and my other one [auntie] packing it and driving it about an hour to the airport and so it was already ready for me all packaged in the car. Then a senior priced coffee from McDonald's. You know she got her discount or whatever and got it for me. So, I know it's not healthy or something but it was, you know, just a meaningful moment and I really felt like I could totally relax at that moment.

This strikingly beautiful story illuminates the healing nature that food and connection have on people's lives. It illuminates deeper notions of

nourishment, situating the relationships of the producers of the food as sacred, while also demonstrating how this food, this experience, is tied to home, to being on or near her reservation. This moment also signals satisfied emotional health. In sum, what this story teaches is that the meaning of food among Native people must be discussed with more depth. Food means more than simply personal responsibilities about food choices and includes a more complex understanding of how food invokes community, well-being, and connectedness. The key point in the interaction is not the food itself, or the act of consuming the food and the resultant health factors, but instead the role the food has in community and individual well-being.

The severe disruption of Native communities and lives extends to the altering of their relationship to food, and is deeply tied to racism, colonialism, and the loss of autonomy and power. Stripping Native communities of their food sovereignty and traditional diets increased nutritional deficiencies and starvation for Native people and contribute to current health disparities in obesity, heart disease, and diabetes. (First Nations Development Institute, 2014). Destruction that began at contact became apparent when the Native population dropped from over 5 million to 250,000 in 1900 (Thornton, 1987, p. 133), a decrease resulting from

**Photo 1. Ana receives a sweet bun and coffee upon her arrival home.**



disease and war that had a dire impact on the ability of Native people to hunt, gather, grow, cure, and cook food. Many Native people were also relocated off their traditional lands onto bounded reservations. The policy to limit land access affected their hunting and gathering since they were no longer allowed to hunt in traditional places, and much of the reservation lands were not the best for planting. Some relocated tribes were also unfamiliar with the land they were relocated to, thus limiting their ability to find or produce traditional food.

Eventually, the U.S. government launched the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations, which is still currently available to “low-income households, including the elderly, living on Indian reservations, and to Native American families residing in designated areas near reservations and in the State of Oklahoma” (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2015, para. 1). This program provides canned goods, powdered milk, white sugar, and commodity cheese. According to food sovereignty activist Winona LaDuke, “these highly processed, high sugar, high fat, and packaged foods” (LaDuke, 2005, p. 194) provided by the government have contributed to the high rates of diabetes rates found in Native communities and is a direct impact of the “loss of access to traditional foods” (LaDuke, 2005, p. 194). This loss affects the practice of consuming traditional foods and the teaching of food preparation and foodways across generations, between genders, and within families. This loss of traditional food practices is connected to a loss of human connection, a loss of community strength.

Both reservation and urban Natives have encountered a loss of control over the food they interact with through consumption, production, and distribution. Contrary to the common belief that Natives live on reservations, approximately 78 percent of Native peoples live off-reservation, which may further affect their ability to access traditional foods and knowledge (Norris, Vines, & Hoeffel, 2012). Urban Native communities have struggled to have access to quality food since moving to urban areas.<sup>2</sup> The Governmental

Relocation Program in the 1950s moved thousands of Native people into urban areas with the hope of assimilating them into modern American society (Fixico, 1986). These programs have generally failed since Native people have been integrated into mostly poor urban areas and have been subject to the food deserts of the already existing marginalized communities of color.

This historical context helped shape Native communities’ current relationship to food and should be central to addressing food related concerns within these communities. Too often, those involved in food justice work see the lack of consumption of healthy foods as an issue of personal choice rather than one resulting from a deeply traumatic history of food relations in Native communities. The common U.S. narrative about Native people is that we do not care about our health and subsequently make poor eating decisions. In her chapter in *Cultivating Food Justice* (2011), Guthman explores how universalism and color-blind logic inform the assumptions of white communities regarding “why” people of color do not frequent places such as farmers markets in the same numbers as white communities. Guthman’s ethnographic study on farmers markets found that many white vendors relied on evaluative statements about whites having higher education levels and exhibiting greater interest in health as factors that lead to primarily white patronage of farmers markets. Guthman’s study argued that farmers market vendors believe that low education levels lead to a disinvestment in health, participation, and education about food. Such ideologies and discourses around race, health, and food for Native and marginalized communities oversimplifies the relationship to food and deny the systemic way colonial oppression works.

There is no doubt that, given the limited scholarship, further research on food (in)security among Native people is needed. This exploration must include a cultural understanding about food and its importance for community well-being. There is a dire need to connect food to community well-being rather than just individual health. Since

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moved due to forced removal from their tribal communities by the U.S. government.

<sup>2</sup> Some of these individuals have moved willingly, while others

some research finds that many “Native American communities experience a lack of access to high-quality and culturally appropriate foods” (Jernigan, 2012, p. 113) and these communities have “higher rates of chronic-disease-related outcomes, including obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular diseases” (Jernigan, 2012, p. 113), more research on foodways is vital for understanding how these poor health outcomes and lack of access have affected communities’ functioning and well-being. Those interested in working with Native people must develop a deeper, historically grounded understanding of Native food consumption, including knowledge about their specific food histories and elaborate foodways.

For many Native communities, including the participants of my study, food is the sinew that holds communities together. Food helps build cultural knowledge and practice, satisfies health holistically by satisfying emotional and physical needs, and brings people together through the act of producing, consuming, and distributing foods. This was evident in my work with the IFH and its food programs.

While food brings people together, it can also be a source of great pain, shame, loss, and disconnection. This was most evident through the story of a participant who lamented that her daughter did not like salmon, a traditional and sacred food of her tribe. Those devising strategies to build food sovereignty must have a deep historical understanding of how food has been lost, how people have been moved or constrained, and how food acts as a community-bonding factor. The narrow focus on food consumption and access as they relate to physical health limits Native attempts to achieve food justice for our communities.

To address the food needs and well-being of Native peoples, we must expand the contemporary scholarship and policy efforts addressing health disparities that focus only on personal accountability and personal choice in eating and exercising. While it is important to address access, accountability, and choice, these approaches are not a holistic solution for Native well-being. Mainstream attempts to address issues involving food among Native people are singular in analysis and deny the complex effects of colonialism. These attempts

also deny the function and role that many “unhealthy” foods have in Native communities. Changing diets means creating new meaning and integrating new foods into old practices. In the case of Native people living near their homelands, it might also mean integrating old foods into current practices.

The food movement must support Native people in their work toward rebuilding tribal food systems. In Oakland, Native people have created a community garden, cooking classes, community dinners, a food pantry, and a cookbook in an effort to build their own urban food system. Several tribes are utilizing food as a means to change the economy, revitalize traditions, and provide more food security. Examples of this work can be seen among the traditional foods programs supported by the CDC among the Mohegan, Muscogee (Creek) Nation, Oneida, Laguna Pueblo, and Suquamish tribes (CDC, 2013). These projects share similar themes found in my own work (Vernon, 2014) that include strengthening cultural identity, sharing knowledge, and fostering intergenerational knowledge. Programs across the country in both urban spaces and on reservation lands are improving health and building community through engaging in food sovereignty. We must support these projects and help build leadership among Native people by providing them with resources and greater visibility for their projects. Those people interested in assisting these efforts must develop cultural competencies within the communities where projects are located that include historical and contemporary understandings of power relations that support rebuilding Native food systems in culturally relevant and meaningful ways.

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# The Rohingyas of Myanmar and the biopolitics of hunger

COMMENTARY ON RACE AND  
ETHNICITY IN FOOD SYSTEMS WORK

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## Abstract

The Rohingya Muslims of Myanmar have faced discrimination due to their ethnicity and religion from the majority Burmese-Buddhist population and have been subjected to biased policies governing citizenship. This has resulted in prejudicial behavior on the part of the state in terms of movement, employment, education, and, consequently, access to food. Such discrimination has led to the Rohingyas being one of the most food-insecure communities in Asia. Using concepts of biopolitics and governmentality, I discuss how acute hunger in the community is a state-created construct—one of many strategies to isolate and control the Rohingyas.

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## Keywords

food insecurity, citizenship, biopolitics, Rohingyas, Myanmar, development

The Rohingya Muslims of northern Rakhine State in Myanmar<sup>1</sup> are a minority group in the country. This community has faced discrimination from the majority Burmese-Buddhist population as a result of their ethnicity and religion, and have been subjected to biased policies governing citizenship. This has resulted in prejudicial behavior on the part of the state in terms of movement, employment, education, and, consequently, access to food. Years of this entrenched inimical behavior has resulted in the Rohingyas having diminished capacities in all the seven categories of human security, as defined in the Human Development Report of 1994 (U.N. Development Programme,

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<sup>1</sup> Formerly known as Burma. Both names feature here and are used interchangeably.

1994, pp. 24–25). As a matter of fact, this has led to them being one of the most food-insecure communities in Asia. There is a condition of systematic legal, administrative, and social discrimination that has resulted in their exclusion and prejudicial treatment.

Recent events in the South China Sea and the actions of some Southeast Asian nations have brought them to the forefront again. Abandoned ships with human cargo including Rohingya women and children and mass graves of Rohingya men who were trafficked have made headlines. *Time* magazine had a cover photo of a two-year-old Rohingya toddler, crying his eyes out while held by two social workers and being “processed” at an Indonesian camp. But as all headlines do, they will eventually fade from our collective memory while the world pursues more “current” news. The world’s silence on their plight is notable, notwithstanding the occasional release of statements or comments. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has remained very careful in commenting on the issue and has not placed enough pressure on its member states to address this refugee crisis. Myanmar itself is a member state, but very little is discussed with respect to “Myanmar’s problem” in regional meetings. Sadly, this mirrors the reaction of the international community.

Notwithstanding these biases, life does go on for the Rohingyas, albeit mostly in a state of hunger and malnourishment as a result of outright discriminatory practices.

### **The Archaeology of Systematic Food Insecurity**

The Rohingyas are an ethnic group that descend from Arakanese Buddhists, Bengalis from Chittagong, Bangladesh, and Arab sea traders (Mathieson, 2009). Under the British Raj, centuries of peaceful co-existence were compromised when the national boundaries of India, Bangladesh, and Myanmar were demarcated, with the majority of the Rohingyas ending up in then Burma, in 1948 (Mathieson, 2009). When the British took over Burma following Japanese occupation of the country, they agreed to establish a Muslim area within the Rakhine state (Yegar, 1972). This

politically motivated the Rohingyas, who then requested the merger of northern Rakhine with East Pakistan (current Bangladesh) (Cook, in press). This attempt at breaking off Burma’s territory to merge with Bangladesh is one of the key reasons for Burman Buddhist animosity toward the Rohingyas (Coursen-Neff, 2000, cited in Cook, in press).

In the 1960s a massive nationalization program saw the expelling of thousands of South Asians from Burma. Since then, every successive military government has subjected the Rohingyas to harsh treatment characterized by neglect, exclusion, and scape-goating (Human Rights Watch, 2002). In the late 1970s, an “ethnic cleansing” campaign drove more than 200,000 Rohingyas into neighboring Bangladesh, only to have them return after a year. The squalid conditions in Bangladesh saw 10,000 Rohingyas die from starvation and disease as Bangladeshi authorities withheld food aid, and survivors had no choice but to go back (Grundy-Warr & Wong, 1997).

A discredited census in the 1980s resulted in further alienation for this community when Rohingyas were not included and as a result were classified as “stateless.” The 1982 Citizenship Act further entrenched this status, creating two classifications: full citizens (including most ethnic minorities) and “associates” (those of South Asian and Chinese descent). Rohingyas could not prove their lineage as “associates” prior to 1948 and as a result were disqualified as citizens (Berlie, 2008). In the 1990s the Burmese military drove more than 250,000 Rohingyas out of Burma and into the districts of Teknaf and Cox’s Bazaar in Bangladesh; in 1995 the Bangladesh government forced most of them back across the border in a U.N.–supported repatriation exercise. These moves were marked by violence against the Rohingyas by both the Bangladeshi forces pushing them out and the Burmese troops receiving them (Human Rights Watch/Asia, 1996). Violence against the community escalated with the establishment of the NaSaKa (a border security force constituting the police, army, and customs and immigration offices), which violated the Rohingyas’ human rights by detaining and raping women, taxing marriage registration multiple times, confiscating

land, and encouraging Buddhist migration into these lands (Islam, 2007, cited in Cook, in press).

Examining the food insecurities of the Rohingya is a study in the exercise of biopolitics (or power over lives) on both individuals and the group. Increasing state surveillance on those who lack legality removes political rights from lives and creates subdued, “empty” lives that can be surveyed, detained, and used. The body is the site for the exercise of this biopolitics. Illegality works with other structural vulnerabilities, such as economic insecurity and increasing poverty, that push the individual to “disappear” from society. Such illegality also allows the individual (simply by her or his state of existence) to participate in some aspects of social life but not in others (Gonzalez & Chavez, 2012, cited in Carney, 2014, p. 3). Therefore the Rohingyas are still allowed to work for food (as long as their work is required) or are deployed by the NaSaKa as forced labor. Since 1948 or earlier the state has paid great attention to the biological life of the Rohingyas in order to power their expulsion from Myanmar. By controlling access to food (through limiting economic activities, for instance), and reproductive processes through marriage authorizations and birth registrations in family lists, the state has created norms by which the community lives. The exercise of this biopower over the Rohingyas is complete as now the state has access to their bodies through these norms, which have been internalized by the community and pervade their society. The daily struggles of the Rohingyas in trying to meet their nutritional needs are just one way that represents how the state has systematically, through decades of discriminatory practices, created an uneven form of governance that reveals a biopolitics of food insecurity and hunger. And this biopolitics of hunger is just another aspect of the state’s biopolitics of citizenship and governmentality over this community.

### **The Biopolitics of Hunger**

Earlier moral economies of hunger, which linked both personal responsibility and social obligation to ensure food security, have been replaced by a political economy of exclusion and violation of the Rohingyas’ right to food. The community’s efforts to meet nutritional needs often take place outside

of established norms and through mechanisms that are further hindered by biased policies that deny them access to economic security and the ability to produce their own food. The search for food then requires ever greater creativity or innovation. Food, for example, is often sourced by borrowing from neighbors (if there are quantities to spare) and/or by studying and working in the World Food Program’s (WFP’s) paddy schools (Arakan Project, 2012).

Needless to say, the community, and especially the women and children, suffer from chronic malnutrition. According to the Arakan Project, a human rights organization that has been monitoring the situation of Rohingyas since 1999, food insecurity is a direct marker of forms of discrimination such as forced labor, restrictions on movement, arbitrary arrests, and extortion. These technologies of governance keep Rohingyas “in their place” and allow easier control through their vulnerabilities. Food security for this community is a gossamer web of controls; reported incidences of violence and abuse are flashes of light that occasionally reveal to the world this control over their bodies. Once the media attention fades, the Rohingyas are still left to face the technologies of governance that limit their capabilities in meeting their nutritional needs. One study indicates a food insecurity situation in northern Rakhine state in need of immediate humanitarian attention (FAO & WFP, 2009). This same document reports that the Rohingya in northern Rakhine are highly vulnerable due to restricted mobility, inadequate access to land, and lack of casual labor opportunities. The forced taking of land (the landless being the most food insecure), the restrictions on travel that hinder employment and educational opportunities, especially for women and girls, and forced labor that takes children away from schools (Arakan Project, 2012) and men away from their families and work opportunities, have created a milieu of insecurity and deprivation in this community.

The exercise of biopolitics is almost necessarily racist in that such governance is broadly understood as an “indispensable condition” that grants the state the power (Taylor, 2014), in the case of the Rohingyas, to create methodical structural vulnerabilities, including food insecurity. This

justifies state actions in managing what are perceived as problematic groups. Such governance is best reflected in census-taking. Such an exercise of data collection gave the state vital information about the population that would assist in managing people. The population census of the 1980s and the subsequent dismissal of the Rohingyas' citizenship status legitimized the state's discrimination.

### Future Scenarios

The Rohingyas spend almost 70 percent of their meager incomes on food, a stark indicator of food insecurity in the community. The need for greater economic security sees them desperately searching for opportunities, including paying exorbitant rates, to move to "greener pastures" elsewhere. Such desperation makes them easy prey for human traffickers. This is exactly what recent events in the South China Sea reflect. Rohingyas' willingness to suffer the long and perilous journeys indicate the level of disenfranchisement faced at home.

Illegal movement into Bangladesh in search of family and/or work creates competition for limited resources that can expose the Rohingyas to resentment in the host country. This is already happening in Cox's Bazaar in Bangladesh, where massive deforestation is threatening food security for the local Bangladeshis and Indigenous hill tribes, as well as the Rohingyas refugees (IRIN, 2012). Increasing population pressure on forest resources has resulted in communities having no choice but to sell wood to feed families. There is great resentment against the Rohingyas from locals who feel that the refugees are already being fed by the U.N. and therefore should not encroach upon their source of livelihood. However the malnutrition rates in the two refugee camps and numerous makeshift camps are acute. Often locals attack the Rohingyas and forcefully take away the wood they have gathered (IRIN, 2012).

Climate change scenarios and their potential effects on food production add to increased food insecurities. Future climate variability can affect food production, which will further stress already-stressed resources and deepen vulnerabilities. This might cause mass movements of people toward resource-rich areas, something the Rohingyas will not be able to undertake easily due to their lack of

resources on top of their restrictions on travel. This could severely affect their already precarious situation *vis-à-vis* food security.

There is also the ever-present danger of radicalization. The great suffering of the Rohingyas could push them toward Islamic radicalization, aided by groups seeking to recruit disenfranchised people for their own agendas. However, despite hardships faced by this community, no mass jihadist intents have arisen from the group, which might in itself speak for their wish to live in peace. There are several other factors that explain this seeming lack of organization, but I will not attempt to explain them here. Suffice to say that it is important to understand that there are very human limits to enduring atrocities. When we are no longer able to tolerate and resist, we either perish or ultimately seek to "punish."

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## Decolonizing a food system: Freedom Farmers' Market as a place for resistance and analysis

COMMENTARY ON RACE AND  
ETHNICITY IN FOOD SYSTEMS

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### Abstract

Oakland's Freedom Farmers' Market is more than a venue for food exchange; it is a gathering place for Black cultural expression and economics. More often than not, Black farmers are shut out and even pushed out of mainstream farmers markets. However, fresh food and Black farmers are celebrated at the Freedom Farmers' Market each week. This commentary discusses the critical ways in which this market represents a social discourse about decolonizing our food system. Embedded within this place analysis is also, necessarily, a critique of the dominant places people currently

have available for food. The Freedom Farmers' Market has become a model for disenfranchised peoples to take control of their own food system.

### Keywords

Black farmers, decolonizing food, farmers markets, Black economics, Black farmers markets

*Look closely at the land. Imagine vast fields of okra, peas, turnip greens, watermelon, collards and squash weaving themselves together into a forest of bright colors and amazing shapes. Can you see those crops in vast rural fields on the Motherland where for thousands of years the ancestors toiled with bare feet and bared hands, bending backs into ground, planting not only their hopes but the dreams of their children to come? Can you see those same crops*

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*traveling through the diaspora, those same ancestors, backs bent further, their hopes and dreams now chained, beaten, but still growing, surviving in the richness of legacies encompassed in their foods? Through all the hardships life would bring, the ancestors will continue to plant the crops that feed their children. Through it all these crops will be the salve they have to heal the wounds and nourish the future, a future they continue to grow with their own hands, a future they are determined their children will see: A free future. Our future.*

Every Saturday in Oakland, California, Black food liberation takes place in the form of the Freedom Farmers' Market (<http://www.farmstogrow.com>)—a culturally specific, historically rooted market experience that is bringing Black residents together with Black farmers in a setting reminiscent of an African marketplace. This marketplace was named to honor the work of freedom fighter Fannie Lou Hamer. In rural Mississippi, Fannie Lou Hamer started the farm cooperative called the Freedom Farms. That this freedom movement continues today in Oakland is appropriate. Oakland was home to the Black Panther Party, whose 10-point plan aimed for everybody to have enough food, housing, health, and education to meet their needs. It is the city where the Black Panthers began their Free Children's Breakfast Program, which caused FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover to call the group the "the greatest threat to the internal security of the country." Grits, not guns, were what worried Hoover. By serving children breakfast, the FBI director said, the Black Panthers were "infiltrating the black community." The Freedom Farmers' Market builds on that breakfast program freedom movement and on an earlier Black farmers' market started in the late 1990s by David Roach and his organization, Mo' Better Foods.

Managed by Farms to Grow, Inc., a Black-run organization, the Freedom Farmers' Market is a place for farmers, vendors, educators, and others with resources to address the current power dynamics between the marginalized communities of people and the dominant class structure. Farms to Grow's approach is unlike the large farmers market associations. Freedom Farmers' Market's

primary goals extend beyond making money to focus on community empowerment, farmer outreach, and cultural celebration and preservation. What we have learned is that we should not seek to become a market that is interested only in profits because such an entity is not holistic in its approach and cannot serve more than a small number of individuals. The Freedom Farmers' Market strives to involve the community as a whole in order to ensure that transformation can take place on a scale greater than the individual. We remember the lessons of a past time when people had some understanding of the fact that individuals need more than the financial success that is represented in money. They also need to feed their minds and spirits, as well as their bodies. The spiritual, psychological, and cultural resiliency features that are built into the Freedom Farmers' Market are incalculable.

Cooperation and cultural celebration are two of the principles at the heart of the Freedom Farmers' Market. A farmers market like this, with a focus on the Black experience, can do more than build a local food system: it can create a cooperative environment that has the power to transform the whole community by reintroducing sustainable views of nature through recollections of our folkways and old ways that mattered. Such a farmers market can facilitate a communal perspective and cultural resiliency.

Venues for commerce where Black dollars are spent purchasing food from Black farmers and vendors can be transformative. Without such intentional venues, which themselves provide for a type of analysis of race and privilege, decolonization of a food system may not occur. The Freedom Farmers' Market represents a point of critical analysis as well as a place for the decolonization of the current supply-chain food system. In the process of organizing an all-Black farmers' market, we inadvertently began to take our power back in the local food system. We reached out to, recruited, trained, and eventually brought Black farmers, food businesses, and culturally relevant health information into a setting that necessarily is itself a social discourse about decolonizing our food systems. Embedded within this place analysis is also necessarily a critique of the dominant places people

currently seek groceries and community enrichment.

We sought to shift the discourse in order to drive change from within marginalized food communities to continue to reduce their dependence upon dominant food access points. Commerce can be mixed with cultural food access, and people can be released from the shackles of a colonized supply-chain food system. The Freedom Farmers' Market, itself claimed from the decolonized approaches of freedom fighters, situates its dominant food story within the oppressed stakeholders. The reconstruction of traditional foodways and decolonization of food systems require a liberator space for the redevelopment of traditional identities and more expansive farming narratives where land, people, and food are one.

Unfortunately, the USDA's agricultural policies have always been deeply rooted in a supply-chain philosophy, which allows for greater manipulation of the food supply and pricing by Wall Street, and also creates food gaps, food deserts, land loss, and inequalities in the various layers of the food system. The Freedom Farmers' Market took the opportunity to fill in these gaps of the broken food chain, which ignores Black farmers and slights Black food businesses. We have created a venue for our farmers to bring forth the fruits of their labors that carry the legacies of our food past. The approach brings with it much more than fresh food. When traditional people are able to reclaim their food histories, they may be more likely to overcome the decolonization wreckage pervasive in urban centers. The Freedom Farmers' Market challenges the historical assumptions that there are no Black farmers or that Black food economics do not exist. It is important that Black communities know that Black farmers are still keeping the traditions, despite a mostly hostile atmosphere where White supremacy has haphazardly dismantled Black farmer developments, Black towns, and business districts, and has removed swaths of people from their land.

Imperialism's praxis has left a remarkable trail of people disconnected from their sustainable traditions, with whole histories interrupted by the convenience of Western enlightenment and the accompanying world belief systems. The Freedom

Farmers' Market addresses these effects. It is the resiliency praxis that liberates, decolonizes food spaces, and connects people back to sacred times and spaces. Agroecological environments included sacred spaces where the elders went to pray and forage for herbs and food—food they planted by the signs of the moon, by the rotation process, with the three sisters, all in prayer. We used to know the accompanying herbs to serve with our foods to help it digest better and absorb some of the fat that was inherent in the dish. Although this knowledge lost to many individuals, it has not been lost to our culture because it survives with the farmers and herbalists who still have access to the land. Bringing these farmers and herbalists back together with our urban residents brings this knowledge back to the greater community.

We began the Freedom Farmers' Market because we needed to honor our Black farmers; we needed a safe place to reclaim our legacy around food and community; and we wanted to opt out of the dominant supply-chain food system. Through the market we have demonstrated that creating community around food in the quest for freedom is grounding and can serve as a bridge between the years of the past to the hopes of today and beyond. The Freedom Farmers' Market can and has become a model for disenfranchised peoples to take control of their own food system.

The creation of a culturally specific farmers market community as a revolutionary praxis and a place of resiliency shifts focus from the individualist notions of liberty so deeply rooted in American culture to one on the cooperative and communal characteristics of freedom. In mainstream Western spaces such as predominantly White farmers markets, Black folks can find only slight resemblances of themselves culturally. We find few if any cultural markers of significance. The Freedom Farmers' Market (re)presents an African-based perspective, while defining itself as a place of resilience reclaiming local wisdom and foodways. Nonetheless, it is also a safe and profitable place. Black people who come say it is like walking through an oasis of safety. White people who come through pay respects to Black culture and appreciate the diversity. We have created a hub of Black culture while providing critical access to healthy, fresh

food in places where this has not existed.

We need spaces that represent the resiliency to resist that which cannot be exacted. Providing people with a choice as to where they spend their food dollars is decolonizing the food system. The availability of fresh, culturally relevant produce is decolonizing people's diets. We can look at the Freedom Farmers' Market as a model and a guide. Starting with really small, concrete steps we have reconnected Black growers with Black consumers, and as a result we are reconnecting the people with the culture that is inherent in our legacy foods.

We also talk about how we can recover some of the ancestral knowledge that people hold in their immediate families. Sharing in recipe stories and other food stories provides a positive occasion for Black people to remember fondly and proudly in a safe and supportive environment. Pea-shelling contests, watermelon-eating contests, blues, gospel, and jazz music, dancing, and poetry are all cultural expressions and celebrations that connect us to historical places and honor Black culture and

community. Decolonizing our diet also means honoring our ancestors and the earth, and fostering sustainability. The African natural world view calls for us to be accountable not only to the community, but also to the forest, water, soils, and livestock. This world view has been passed down through generations of Black farmers, and their presence in the community models critical lessons for those who have lost touch with the land. The Freedom Farmers' Market in Oakland has brought various stakeholders together and is implementing food justice by practicing communal food autonomy. Reclaiming our food spaces in the way that the Freedom Farmers' Market has resists the food colonization that has left us in a desert. When we name our liberation spaces within our own community struggle for freedom, we bring back our cultural roots of self-sufficiency. Choosing to decolonize a food system is a quest to be free, truly freed. This liberating act of maintaining a farmers market around food freedom is at the heart of decolonization. 

## Identity and group dynamics in urban food systems

COMMENTARY ON RACE AND  
ETHNICITY IN FOOD SYSTEMS

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### Abstract

In this commentary I argue that access to food and nutrition systems, instead of being uniformly distributed among the urban poor, is a group phenomenon, that is, the shared situation of a group of individuals sharing similar identities, where a group may be defined horizontally in terms of gender, caste, religion, location, and so on. Drawing upon earlier field work in the city of Mumbai in India, I observe that due to identity-driven factors there are certain groups that remain disadvantaged within the food system, while there are groups that are able to attain intergenerational or intertemporal upward mobility despite having similar initial endowments. This happens due to differences between groups in the entitlement relations or due

to the relationship between a group's endowment and its exchange options, which in turn is mediated by group members' religious or locational identity. Thus the factor of group dynamics is necessarily inherent within urban food systems, and this can be analyzed through operationalization of the entitlement approach, as proposed by Amartya Sen (1981). The entitlement approach has much potential as a technique for illustrating the power dynamics underlying identity-based group differential in access to urban food systems. In fact, any policy intervention designed to expand individual capabilities, such as nutrition security, would need to be preceded by an analysis of his or her entitlements, including in relation to group affiliations.

### Keywords

group, nutrition, entitlement, food system, slum, endowment, state, agency, transfer

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Exclusion along race, ethnicity, or any other form of identity is essentially an issue of horizontal inequality, that is, inequality across groups. While “poverty,” as the class segregation of a group of low-income individuals or households, is a known reason underlying the failure of food systems in the context of developing countries like India, there is much ambiguity about what explains inequality of this failure within the groups collectively called the “poor.” In this commentary I argue that access to food and nutrition systems, instead of being uniformly distributed among the urban poor, is a group phenomenon (i.e., the shared situation of a group of individuals with shared identities), where a group may be defined horizontally in terms of gender, caste, religion, location, and so on. Drawing upon earlier field work in the city of Mumbai, India (Choudhary, in press), I observe that due to identity-driven factors there are certain groups that remain disadvantaged within the food system, while there are groups that are able to attain intergenerational or intertemporal upward mobility despite having similar initial endowments. This happens due to differences between groups in resource endowment, on the one hand, and the options to translate those endowments into capabilities, on the other, which in turn is mediated by group members’ religious or locational identity. I found that group identity interferes with the processes of local government and public transfer, which are instrumental to (or constraining for) upward intergenerational mobility of population groups in Mumbai. Thus some sort of group dynamics is necessarily inherent within urban food systems, and this can be analyzed through operationalization of the entitlement approach, as proposed by Amartya Sen (1981). In this commentary I share key reflections from entitlement analysis of four slums of Mumbai that help to illustrate the dynamics underlying identity-based group differential in access to urban food systems.

Sen (1981) describes entitlement as the set of all possible combinations of goods and services that an individual can legally obtain using the resources from his or her endowments based on means of production, labor, trade and/or exchange (Osmani, 1993). However, Sen is cognizant of

certain “fuzziness” in the notion, likely in transitional contexts, where informal considerations based on social beliefs and attitude towards certain groups take precedence over formal provisions and thus constrain those groups’ access to legal entitlements. This is what was observed in the larger study of which this commentary is a part. An analysis of entitlement relation of a person would facilitate understanding of the combination of his or her abilities and social contexts that may result in particular capabilities and associated functioning (see Smith & Seward, 2009).

### **Operationalizing the Entitlement Framework**

For the urban poor, labor is the primary individual endowment and source of entitlement. In the four slums that serve as the premises for this commentary, most forms of labor are unskilled and informally employed except one, which has benefitted from the growth of a large formal enterprise in proximity. However, the four slums (namely, Chamunda Nagar, Rafi Nagar, Padma Nagar, and Cheekuvadi) have shared characteristics as far as their initial endowments, that is, the endowments of their first generation in Mumbai, are concerned. It is due to their differential degree of assimilation in the local environment, mediated by informal considerations, that they end up having differential access to urban food systems and as a result suffer from significantly different levels of food and nutrition insecurities. While Chamunda Nagar and Rafi Nagar are on the verge of starvation, Padma Nagar is suffering from chronic malnutrition. Only one of the four slums, Cheekuvadi, is relatively better off and suffers from only moderate levels of malnutrition.

Each of the four slums has a unique identity and social position, although they overlap in some ways. Field reflections identify three main identities that determined the status of the four slums within the urban local food and nutrition systems: migration status, religion, and gender. Further, these three group identities mediate group members’ access to overall food systems through three different interfaces.

The first interface is in the form of access to municipal transfer entitlements. Except for

Cheekuvadi, all the slums in the present study are informal settlements; that is, they are not included in the list of slums in the Greater Mumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC). Of the three non-notified slums, Chamunda Nagar has been created by a cluster of migrants pushed out of their villages in North India. The other two, Rafi Nagar and Padma Nagar, are inhabited by the minority Muslim community, including one inhabited by allegedly illegal in-migrants from the neighboring nation of Bangladesh. Being non-notified, these three slums do not have access to municipal entitlements, including basic civic service supplies such as water and sanitation. This is an important issue given that even the newest of the four slums has existed for nearly 15 years, certainly long enough for social and institutional assimilation. Although it is not a legal violation to not supply municipal civic services to non-notified slums, there are several barriers informally created in the process of legal notification that have become politicized and are unjustifiable on constitutional grounds. The lack of access to drinking water, sanitation, and an overall livable environment has been a central factor also excluding the three slums from access to minimum nutrition systems.

Moreover, the varying degrees of assimilation of the four slums can be attributed to varying social, cultural, and political backdrops in Mumbai corresponding to the emergence of these slums. When Cheekuvadi—the oldest and the now notified among the four slums—emerged, urban space and resources were not a constraint in Mumbai, and therefore neither administrative nor cultural sentiments toward it were hostile. Also, this slum's dwellers are not migrants from outside the state of Maharashtra. Thus attempts were made to mainstream the slum in terms of education, food, and housing support, which proved helpful in facilitating access to urban food and nutrition systems. In the present context, migrants and minority Muslim members are a resented lot amid the identity politics of Mumbai that are driven by Maratha (the originals of Mumbai) sentiments. Growing pressure on urban infrastructure and changing demography in favor of the former have aggravated negative sentiments, and this in turn is contributing toward institutional alienation of the excluded groups.

The second interface is in the form of access to the public food and nutrition support system. The Public Distribution System (PDS) in India is countrywide scheme that entitles some groups of people below the poverty line to food and nutrition support from the state. Access to the PDS is based on beneficiaries' identity cards. Since all four slums except one, Cheekuvadi, are informal settlements of in-migrants, their residents usually fail to establish their identities and are bypassed by the PDS system. Issuance of an identity card itself is constrained partly by the widespread corruption sweeping the PDS machinery and partly by systemic bias against migrants and minority communities in Mumbai. Thus the residents of the three slums need to rely solely on the market for meeting their food needs. The inability to afford to do this has resulted in circumstances of starvation. Clearly, as Stewart (1999) notes, "democratic institutions are not sufficient to prevent such inequalities, partly because majorities can discriminate against minorities, and partly because even with 'shared' power at the top, lower level elements may involve inequalities" (p. 9).

Affiliation with the group identified as migrants from North India or as Muslims is resulting in social exclusion of access to both tangible and nontangible resources. From the perspective of the entitlement framework, all four slums have similar initial endowments; that is, at the beginning of their settlement their only asset is unskilled and illiterate labor. The difference that has arisen since then lies in the differential nature of entitlement relations faced by each of them. Sen's (1981) framework mentions four types of entitlements, namely those based on labor, production, exchange, and transfer. While all four slums share similar supplies of labor-, production- and exchange-based entitlements, it is the transfer-based entitlement that is generating differential options for them, as mediated by their respective identities.

The third form of interface emerges from the gendered nature of food and nutrition systems that influences a group's ability to translate resources into functionality. Since determinants of malnutrition include several nonfood and nontangible factors, such as health care, reproductive health,

fertility behavior, etc., access to food and cash may not solve the problem completely. The instrumental relationship between low income and low capability is variable between different communities (Sen, 1999). Like food utilization and care practices, intracommunity gender dynamics also usually manifest themselves through cultural beliefs and practices. Gendered processes are salient manifestations of cultural norms in less developed contexts, often resulting in intrahousehold discrimination in food and nutrition entitlement (Agarwal, 1996). For example, based on household surveys, I found that the extent of health-care outreach was much lower for female children as compared to males in all four slums. Further, negligence of reproductive health is also a manifestation of negligence toward women's health. This is particularly visible within the minority Muslim communities of two slums, where women are burdened by repeated child-bearing due to religious taboos. The low status of women, uncontrolled fertility, and poor reproductive health care—key factors behind mother-child transmission of malnutrition—are typical of Rafi Nagar and Padma Nagar, both of which are home primarily to Muslims.

The varying nature of entitlement relation and differential degree of entitlement failure between the four slums are lucid representations of the intersection of class, religion, migration status, and gender. Entitlement collapse of the highest degree occurs when a group is on the disadvantaged side simultaneously in respect of all four dimensions (Joe, 2013). Even if overall malnutrition rates in urban areas may be lower than in the countryside, the three slums in this commentary (excluding Cheekuvadi) show that there are pockets of extreme vulnerability. Thus a reduced rate of malnutrition may not imply a reduction in inequality related to it (Van de Poel, Hosseinpoor, Speybroeck, Van Ourtia, & Vega, 2008). Among the four settlements, only Cheekuvadi experienced upward mobility over the years. Though the four slums were endowed with similarly inadequate resources at their founding, due to the ease of assimilation in the host environment supported by public transfer to its earlier generation, one of them has been able to escape extreme vulnerability.

The remaining three slums seem to be trapped in persistent vulnerability. These three slums do not display any sign of upward mobility, and the younger generation in these slums witness vulnerability transfer from their parents; this is, they inherit poverty (South African Human Rights Commission [SAHRC] & UNICEF, 2014). Given their meager labor options and disparity in access, the three slums are structurally less capable of assimilation into mainstream processes. They also are unable to defend their rights due to the high transaction costs of accessing formal juridical systems (see Birner, 2007). The kinds of deficiency they are suffering from causes long-term impairment related to nutrition and cognitive ability, and it takes a very long time to reverse the process. In such a scenario, tackling deprivation and poverty among vulnerable groups may require tackling the position of the group as well (see Stewart 2007). It is in the ability to problematize this dimension of nutritional vulnerability that the contribution of entitlement framework lies. Even though Sen's entitlement approach has received several criticisms (see De Waal, 1990; Gore, 1993), much of these criticisms are resolved once the entitlement approach is considered as a framework to explore a plurality of causes and to analyze the relationship between rights, interpersonal obligations, and individual entitlement to things (see Vizard, 2001).

To conclude, I argue that the issue of nutrition security has an indispensable and direct role for the state's agency, especially in the wake of the identity-based discriminations observed amid food system dynamics at the local level. Given the culturally diverse nature of Indian society, there is much scope for mediation of food access by identity-based issues such as race, caste, religion, or gender. While the role of civil society and community leaders becomes critical in this regard, this does not absolve the state of its obligations to guarantee constitutional rights to its people. Despite their importance in political dynamics, identity-based discriminations have failed to receive adequate attention in the processes of development intervention. Thus issues such as race, religion, caste, and migration status continue to distort groups' entitlement structures and their access to basic survival options.

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## Using the interconnections and complexities of food systems to teach about human diversity and white privilege

COMMENTARY ON RACE AND  
ETHNICITY IN FOOD SYSTEMS

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### Abstract

How can diversity courses at land-grant universities be shaped to better prepare the next generation of food systems practitioners, educators, and researchers? This is the question I approach in a discussion of the first undergraduate diversity requirement course in a college of agriculture focusing on domestic issues of race, gender, ethnicity, class, and equity in the development of U.S. food systems. I discuss the benefits I found of using food systems studies as a framework for learning about diversity by highlighting the interconnections among people through discussions of issues every student can appreciate: food and eating.

### Keywords

diversity training, food systems, sustainable agriculture, community engagement, land-grant universities, white privilege

### Introduction

As a white research-track faculty at a predominantly white land-grant university (LGU), I often contemplate the values of teaching a diversity course on U.S. food systems at LGUs. In the last decade, LGUs and liberal arts schools have been preparing many white, middle-class students to move into the food system and “do good.” Yet as many have commented on whiteness in the food system, questions arise regarding the benefit derived from these projects. For whom are these people doing “good”? Who has ownership and direction of these projects as they evolve? How are the values of participants represented in these projects? How is privilege challenged or reified in

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the spaces where these projects occur?

These are not questions that I seek to answer in this brief commentary. Rather my aim is to discuss the quality and value of what diversity training at universities could be and how these curricula can be designed to better prepare both minority and dominant group students for fuller, more self-aware participation in our food systems. The issues brought up through a diversity curriculum are important not only for guiding the next generation of practitioners who will graduate into development and outreach positions and will benefit from the enhanced awareness and appreciation for the diversity of people and identities they will encounter, but also for engaging and training the next generation of faculty and researchers. Diversity training at most institutions of higher learning emphasizes international contexts that have paralleled the development of Peace Corps programs, but it has lagged in preparing students to move into domestic service arenas where they are also confronted with issues of diversity. For faculty and staff, preparing the next generation of students for awareness of race, gender, ethnicity, and class perspectives is as important as incorporating these understandings into their own research. Pressing issues of food access, opportunity, and development are interrelated in these issues; anthropologist Roy Rappaport noted (1993) that if we are to affect real change in the world, we need to begin identifying and resolving major problems “at home,” as these radiate and affect places near and far. Finally, within this context I also attempt to examine how my own privilege can be directed toward shaping positive change in the food system.

### **What Does the Next Generation of Practitioners and Educators Need to Know about Diversity?**

If we as faculty at LGUs and other universities and colleges are to provide educational opportunities for students in sustainable food systems, education in all aspects of sustainability needs consideration. LGUs focus well on economic, production, and environmental issues of the food system, but focus less on nurturing an awareness and appreciation for the historical elements of our food system that are

shaped by racial, gender, ethnic, and social identities. Roles of people and groups founded on the dominance and subordination of one group over others are directly related to the development and current state of our food system. The historical relationships between minorities and food production in the U.S. are rooted in systemic racial classification that has relied on prejudice, bigotry, and discrimination to endow a dominant white group with privilege over all others. Awareness among students of the nuances of this history is uncommon, in my experience, yet in my opinion is necessary for anyone who plans to move on to work with others toward making change in our food system.

The systems perspective is an entry point for ecological systems and environmental and food justice, labor justice, environmental justice, healthy food access, and nutrition, in addition to organic and local food systems. These areas then can become learning examples for the importance and value of human diversity—life experiences and the intersectionality of individual characteristics that form our identities and yet make a greater whole, and expand our alternatives for growing, sharing, and consuming food. Moreover, they underscore the importance of tradition, new ideas, and novelty in a larger human social system that currently is running a homogenous, overrationalized model of horizontal and vertical integration. Emphasizing alternatives provides new role models beyond the conventional system of agriculture operated by older white men with large farms, and contests ideas of privilege and wholesomeness among white family farms in our food system.

### **Alternative Views of Agriculture for Students**

As Peña (2015) saliently discusses in this issue, many students are taught the traditional tropes of minorities throughout international and U.S. domestic histories (subjugated natives, enslaved and then emancipated Africans, exploited Latino/a workers, etc.). Less common is teaching the histories of people within the context of food systems, a system that is at the core of U.S. social organization and political economy, and highlights the values that a society has for the people who live

and labor toward producing and consuming food. Understanding the issues and concepts of diversity in complex state-level societies such as the United States can be challenging if taught from a generalized perspective. I find that using the concept of food systems helps contextualize and highlight the characteristics of the relationships among people in that system, which reveals the types of relationships and the effects of power and privilege. A focus on the nuances along the continuum of food production to consumption has the benefit of providing the interconnectedness of a system with the power of self-reflection exercises, such as journaling, pairing and sharing, and response pieces, where students can begin to make their own connections among their social location in the food system with the many other food system actors, the various levels of access in the food system among members of those groups, the power and privilege of each, and the tension between structure and agency in individual and group decision-making.

The lack of appreciation among many policy-makers for the interconnectedness of social problems like food deserts with the histories of low-income and minority communities is problematic. Further, this interconnectedness has resulted in real and perceived barriers to participation among many minority members of society. In large part, this lack of awareness is due to the immensity of the issues stemming from complex and contested histories that are beyond the scope of most many courses. Identifying where privilege originates and how it can be challenged or subverted will prepare undergraduates to identify this privilege in themselves and offer pathways to diffusing it.

### **Shaping Student Perceptions and Expanding Awareness of Identities**

I teach an undergraduate diversity requirement on *U.S. Food Systems, Social Equity and Development*. Many have asked me what a diversity course focused on food systems would offer that students would not receive in other diversity requirement courses. At first I was not sure how to answer this. It took time and reflection, and actually teaching the course, to develop what I think is a sound response. As an anthropologist, I believe that the

need for food, sex, and belonging are drives that shape humanity and link us to our world. Food, or more specifically, eating, is the submission of the individual to the environment, and society prescribes inclusion and exclusion. Further, food inspires art, creativity, and relationships, and shapes production, economics, and interactions with our environment. Embedding a discussion of human diversity in a food systems course provides entry to the interaction between human perceptions of the self and the natural world, through a subject we each relate to, allowing us to discuss larger systems and the opportunities and constraints in those systems. In this approach, students have the opportunity to look around the system, to see the environmental, economic, and production components, and to locate where people labor in relation to ourselves and our locations.

The approach I take borrows from risk perception literature and my background as a practicing anthropologist. My work in risk perception and socio-cultural anthropology offered me insights for trying to build a learning environment that differentiates among beliefs, attitudes, perceptions, and values held by students, individuals, groups in our readings, and the instructor. I think these distinctions are important as a university diversity course is unlikely to change a student's values, but it can alter perceptions by challenging beliefs and changing attitudes toward a topic, planting the seed for perceiving things differently.

In my experience, we give information and are unable to control how it is perceived or how it will be internalized to either enhance or alter existing beliefs and attitudes; that is a risk we take as educators. This evokes another important aspect of the learning process, the identification of current student knowledge and values. Rather than challenging values directly, I try to focus on challenging beliefs and attitudes that can alter perception with facts. If I begin by challenging a student's values, then all I may achieve is shutting off their learning. Pairing what is known by the students with course content that is new to them can be transformational for some and challenging for others. This long-term growth is essential.

This past semester, I learned that a critical

event was the shift in our perceptions of who we identify as a farmer. We learned there are many hidden or shadow-farmers whose labor is neither equitably compensated nor recognized and who are often exploited. Understanding the identities of these people and placing them within a system we all participate in helped shift our views away from seeing people as objects on the landscape and toward perceiving them as having goals, values, and desires similar to our own. We focused on ways to shape self-reflection in our readings and assignments to be cognizant that our desire to go into a community “to help” is supported by a social status and privilege affording us the opportunities and (very often) the social and economic freedoms to do this.

Through trial and error in class, I learned from students that emphasizing positive outcomes or positive actions are important no matter how dire the situation. Through reflection pieces, students have shared that negativity influences them to surmise that nothing can be done and leads them to the conclusion that there is little point in trying. Students have also shared their appreciation for my highlighting the importance of incremental change, and that there is value in small, local changes positively affecting people even when the larger system seems unchanged. As for the larger system, I try to impart an urgent need for policy shifts to move beyond individual action. To this end I try to highlight the historic role of information, education, technology, and subsidies (or simply IETS in the diffusion of innovation literature) that has shaped the 150-year development of the current conventional food and farming system. I trace the origin of this development to the 1862 Morrill Act and underscore the structural disadvantages shared across alternative-agriculture farmers.

This diversity requirement, I feel, is the tip of the iceberg of what food systems curriculum should provide students whose goals are “to help.” They need to be prepared to understand and partner with the people they want to help, which means being exposed to the histories of diversity and development successes and failures, the need for participatory design and engagement, and the impacts of self-directed programs grounded in the

privilege of outreach professionals versus community-based development. They also need concrete examples of the successes of others in these areas.

The big problem that I, and I assume others like me, face is knowing how and where to channel my white academic privilege, and how to coach students to channel their own, toward accomplishing meaningful assistance in partnerships with communities in need while not overstepping, reinforcing, and constructing more privilege. As most would expect, many white students found it difficult to accept the existence of white privilege as the output of systemic racism. Likewise, accepting that racism can extend a system of privilege among well-intended individuals in the food system where whites make judgments and decisions about others in the food system, exacerbating the problem of privilege, was by extension contentious. In negotiating this dilemma, I concede to my students that I have a certain privilege as a white male that my colleagues of other genders and racial categories do not. I am aware of the struggles and burdens of women in academia, and particularly women of color, and the varying degree of respect and gendered assumptions layered upon them by students, colleagues, and administration, specifically but not exclusively from white males. In contrast, I perceive an unspoken, unasked deference and respect from many students in and out of the classroom regardless of race, gender, ethnicity, and social class. Students are often surprised by this, although not all of them, and are interested in discussing it.

Acknowledging our privilege while drawing on our authority as educators can be a way to more comprehensively address diversity issues, challenge privileges in the food system, and construct a learning environment that makes these issues more accessible through interconnected contexts. White faculty and students may not be able to stop the privilege given them, but we can be more aware and better prepared for seeing how it shapes our perceptions, and how those perceptions influence expectations and solutions we may offer in addition to the outcomes we think are fair, just, responsible, and humane. This can allow us to deny this privilege over others in some domains while reflexively using it as a learning example for students. 

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## Food Solutions New England: Racial equity, food justice, and food system transformation

COMMENTARY ON RACE AND  
ETHNICITY IN FOOD SYSTEMS WORK

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### Abstract

When originally conceived, the efforts of Food Solutions New England (FSNE) were centered on discovering the potential and possibility of working together as a six-state entity. Our first New England summit was convened in 2011. We considered the benefits of working together regionally, explored the possibilities of promoting greater food justice, and embraced the merits of expanding food production via the concept of a

New England Food Vision. By 2012 we had adopted the collective impact model as a way to organize our work. In 2013, during this first year of breakout sessions we identified “racial equity and food justice” as non-negotiable, explicit attributes that should inform all food system work. We continue to learn and demonstrate a commitment to promoting greater racial equity and food justice through a variety of network and community strategies. Select examples from FSNE’s efforts are provided as evidence of the power of collective impact and regional collaboration. As states and regions come together to challenge the status quo, share strategies, and align policies and practices designed to address food system inequities, we are emboldened, knowing that our collective commitment and actions will have implications that extend well beyond the food system.

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### Keywords

food systems, racial equity, food justice, New England Food Vision, collective impact, food insecurity, racial disparity, sustainability

This food system works for some, but fails too many of us. Yet, we have a glimpse of the possibility of a just and healthy food system. To get there, we must use a critical race lens to diagnose what's wrong with the current system, assess entry points for change, and determine ways that we can work together to build a better system for all of us. (Gainatarino & Noor, 2014, p. 4)

### Current Realities

During the past 20 years, there has been increasing interest in understanding food system viability and sustainability. Efforts often have focused on food production and the potential economic and environmental benefits to farmers, consumers, and local and regional food enterprises. In this issue of the *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, we have the opportunity to explore efforts and commitments that explicitly focus on the role of racial equity and food justice as integral components of food system transformation. As we challenge the status quo, share strategies, and explore policies and practices designed to promote greater racial equity and food justice, we realize this is indeed a journey in which we are all learning. We know that this work is essential and its positive impact will extend well beyond the grocery cart.

With input from a regional steering committee, in 2011 the University of New Hampshire Sustainability Institute launched an inaugural “Better Together” summit, designed to learn more about each state’s food system work and to leverage commitment to building a more just, democratic, and sustainable food system. Another key theme addressed at our first conference was structural racism. Cathrine Sneed, founder of The Garden Project in San Francisco, served as a keynote speaker, and attendees viewed the FSNE *Voices from the Field* video.<sup>1</sup> Efforts at this first summit to build alignment around common goals and explore regional food production and fisheries capacity have led to the emergence of Food Solutions New England (FSNE), a highly collaborative food

system “learning action network” (FSNE, 2015a); the 2014 release of the report *A New England Food Vision* (Donahue et al., 2014); and extensive connections, relationships, alignments, and learning among numerous state and regional partners. Our regional capacity to connect, envision possibilities, build relationships, and leverage resources has been enhanced by using the collective impact model proposed by Kania and Kramer (2011). As a network of individuals, partners, and organizations, we have been able to help each other in efforts designed to advance policies and practices that transform the food and fisheries system into one that works for all (Bowell et al., 2014; FSNE, 2015b). The evolution of the regional commitment to an explicit emphasis on racial equity and food justice in food system work in 2013 is indicative of our transformation as a region, and of the larger national discourse on the need for structural changes that dismantle racial inequalities and injustice across the American social, political, and economic systems.

### Historical Context and Implications

The American food system has been defined by its exploitation of Native American lands, development of an agricultural trade system built on the backs of slave labor, and a lack of appreciation for farmers and farmworkers. Unfortunately, from farm to fork, to health and nutrition outcomes, food system inequality persists nearly 150 years after the end of the Civil War and over 50 years after passage of “landmark” civil rights legislation. Though the need for food unites us all, access to healthy food and the ability to fully participate in the food system is often divided along racial and ethnic lines. As we commit to designing a more equitable food future that supports a high quality of life for generations to come, we are compelled to address the pervasive systemic racial disparity operating at all levels of the food system. There is increased awareness by non-Hispanic Whites (and a lived experience by others) that White privilege and structural racism are actively and insidiously at play. According to Lawrence and Keleher (2004):

Structural racism in the U.S. is the normalization and legitimization of an array of dynamics

<sup>1</sup> See the *Voices from the Field* video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=igb2VHAtx5M>

—historical, cultural, institutional and inter-personal—that routinely advantage Whites while producing cumulative and chronic adverse outcomes for people of color. It is a system of hierarchy and inequity, primarily characterized by white supremacy—the preferential treatment, privilege and power for White people at the expense of Black, Latino, Asian, Pacific Islander, Native American, Arab and other racially oppressed people. (p. 1)

For instance, if you are Black or Hispanic in the United States you are less likely to own farmland (U.S. Census of Agriculture, 2012), to be able to procure healthy foods (Coleman-Jensen, Gregory, & Singh, 2014; Coleman-Jensen, Rabbitt, Gregory, & Singh, 2015; DeNavas-Walt & Proctor, 2014), to have a livable wage income (Restaurant Opportunities Centers United, 2013; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014a, 2014b; U.S. Census Bureau, 2013), to have adequate access to money (Sommeiller & Price, 2015), or to have health outcomes comparable to White, non-Hispanic individuals (Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, 2014). Table 1 displays how food insecurity, poverty, and unemployment disproportionately affect Blacks, Hispanics, and Asians, compared with non-Hispanic Whites.

Indeed, many of the food system indicators of inequity are related and virtually inseparable. Under- and unemployment leads to poverty and

food insecurity. Higher paying jobs often require a college education. Given the high cost of a college education, many students from Black and Hispanic families are not in a financial position to attend college, thus limiting earning and wealth accumulation opportunities. But even when employed in similar food system jobs, People of Color tend to earn less than Whites (Sommeiller & Price, 2015). Likewise, when one lives in poverty, defined as an annual income of US\$24,250 for a family of four (Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, 2015), the ability to choose healthy food (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015) and to engage in preventative healthcare is severely compromised.

### Emerging Food System Strategies

Often when we think about racism, we focus on individual attitudes or behaviors, which is important. Sometimes, we look at how particular institutions treat people of different races differently, which is also important. But to truly understand the root causes of racial inequity and thereby produce solutions that work for everyone, we need to take a structural race approach. That means looking at the food system through the lens of policies, institutions and people-together. (Gaincatarino & Noor, 2014, p. 6)

**Table 1: Food Insecurity, Poverty, and Unemployment by Race and Ethnicity**

Race and Ethnicity	% Food Insecurity (a)				% of Total U.S. Population (b)	% Below Poverty (c)	% Unemployed (d and e)
	% Food Secure (a)	% Total Food Insecurity	% Low Food Security	% Very Low Food Security			
White, non-Hispanic	89.4	10.6	6.0	4.6	64	9.6	5.3
Black, non-Hispanic	73.9	26.1	15.9	10.1	14	27.2	11.3
Hispanic	76.3	23.7	17.0	6.7	17	23.5	7.4
Other (a)	88.3	11.7	6.5	5.2			
Asian (b)					5	10.5	5.0

<sup>a</sup> Coleman-Jensen et al., 2014: The USDA includes food security data for the Asian population in the “other” category

<sup>b</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, 2013: provides specific data for the Asian population in its demographic and poverty datasets.

<sup>c</sup> DeNavas-Walt, C. & Proctor, 2014.

<sup>d</sup> U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014a.

<sup>e</sup> U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014b.

The food system is a microcosm of larger social systems that exist nationally and globally, but is one that people interact with intimately on a daily basis. The extreme complexity of the food system, coupled with the intricacies of the social, environmental, and economic systems in which it operates, demands complex, long-term skills and strategy development to ensure that the voices and needs of all food consumers are addressed now and into the future. It is no longer sufficient to demand expansion of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), a program that now serves nearly one in seven Americans (over 46 million Americans) who exist in poverty. In addition to securing immediate food needs, we need to interrogate why there are so many Americans who must rely to SNAP in order to provide food for themselves or their household members, and why are People of Color more apt to require SNAP assistance (Gray, 2014)? As proposed by Eric Holt-Giménez (2015):

Activists across the food movement are beginning to realize that the food system cannot be changed in isolation from the larger economic system. Sure, we can tinker around the edges of the issue and do useful work in the process. However, to fully appreciate the magnitude of the challenges we face and what will be needed to bring about a new food system in harmony with people's needs and the environment, we need to understand and confront the social, economic, and political foundations that created—and maintain—the food system we seek. (p. 25)

### **FSNE's Commitment to Addressing Racial Equity and Food Justice Explicitly in Food System Work**

As we consider selected examples of FSNE's commitment to addressing racial equity and food justice explicitly as central to its efforts, we do so in the spirit of knowing full well that we are not working or learning alone. Rather, it is the collective efforts of multiple regional and national partners, organizations, and activists who are committed to using food as a driver for greater social justice and racial equity.

During the first FSNE summit in 2011, we posed the question, "Would the New England states benefit from coming together and working on food system issues in a more collective and concerted manner?" With the recent convening of Summit Five in 2015, this six-state regional network has unequivocally answered that question in the affirmative. During our first summit, Vermont shared its newly released *Farm to Plate Strategic Plan* (Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund, 2011) and offered assistance to the other states working on food system planning. Presently, all New England states either have statewide food plans or are drafting statewide plans or strategies. The initial concept call to examine New England's food production and fisheries capacity was also proposed in 2011; in Spring 2014, the report *A New England Food Vision* was released (Donahue et al., 2014). During the three-year, highly iterative process of developing this aspirational document, which initially focused on New England's production capacity by land and by sea, the conversation and focus of the Vision expanded. Input by diverse partners, organizations, and summit attendees informed our collective thinking and consciousness. *A New England Food Vision* proposes that New England could produce 50 percent of New England's food needs by 2060, and nearly two-thirds of its food requirements if we needed to move towards greater regional reliance. *A New England Food Vision* calls for access to healthy food to be considered as a basic human right (Anderson, 2013; Donahue et al., 2014). As noted by Tom Kelly, in the introduction page,

This vision is bold in scope and aspiration. It reflects a point of view informed by two principles: first, food is a powerful determinant of all aspects of quality of life the world over, including New England. Second, New Englanders can and should pursue a future in which food nourishes a social, economic, and environmental landscape that supports a high quality of life for everyone, for generations to come. So this vision is all about our choices and the conversation, learning, and purposeful decision-making in which we as a region can participate. (Donahue et al., 2014, front cover)

In March of 2015, FSNE hosted a webinar to explore how *A New England Food Vision* could be put to work in communities and the region (Kelly, Donahue, Spiller, Bourns, Burke, & Beal, 2015). With the UNH Sustainability Institute functioning as the backbone organization, using collective impact as a model (Kania & Kramer, 2011), taking the time and energy to build relationships, engaging highly skilled professional facilitation staff, building collaborative and diverse teams, and having public and philanthropic support (FSNE, 2015c) has shaped us as individuals and as a regional network. FSNE now defines itself as:

A regional, collaborative network organized around a single goal: to transform the New England food system into a resilient driver of racial equity and food justice, health, sustainable farming and fishing, and thriving communities. (FSNE, 2015d)

In addition to an expanded goal statement and the release of the *A New England Food Vision* report, and in service of increased racial equity in food system transformation, we continue to seek ways to increase diverse active participation. During this past year, we have launched an Ambassador program in the three most populated and racially diverse New England states: Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island. Our three ambassadors have reached out to diverse audiences, and have engaged with and brought in additional people of color and organizations committed to comprehensively addressing the role of race and food justice in the food system. When funding permits, we anticipate our pilot Ambassador program will be expanded into the remaining New England States (Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont).

As we expand the voices at the food system transformation table, our food system conversations are more rich and diverse. For instance, at summit number five in June 2015 individuals directly engaged in food service work were invited as a new delegation to the summit. Our participants were far more diverse by age and race than other summits. We remain committed to building

diversity into our work and extended networks, as do our existing network partners.

In addition to our broad-based community and regional engagement, we have made a commitment to our food system planning teams and regional team partners to provide opportunities to help build our own internal capacity to thoughtfully address the subject of racial equity and food justice. Our regional facilitator, Curtis Ogden, from the Interaction Institute for Social Change, has worked with us for over three years and has extensive expertise in food system and racial equity work (Ogden, 2015). Our planning team meetings have included training sessions with national experts as well as with members of our extended New England network. FSNE also has started to develop working groups, including the Racial Equity and Food Justice working group. A major accomplishment of the working group this year was to expand upon the work of Moore and Irving to develop guidelines and resources for our first annual 21-Day Racial Equity Habit Building Challenge, launched in March 2015 (Moore & Irving [adapted by Spiller, Ogden, & Burke], 2015).

As FSNE continues on this journey, we will lift up our voices and use our collective power, of all races, to increase racial equity and food justice as a model for successful replicable system change. Racism and injustice are not unique to the food system. But the daily requirements for nourishment, the enormous work force that is involved directly and indirectly in the food system, and the extensive environmental and economic implications of food system injustice combine to provide compelling multi-sector opportunities through which transformational change can be realized.

Now our struggle is for genuine equality, which means economic equality. For we know now, that it isn't enough to integrate lunch counters. What does it profit a man to be able to eat at an integrated lunch counter if he doesn't have enough money to buy a hamburger? (King, 1968)



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## Privilege and allyship in nonprofit food justice organizations

COMMENTARY ON RACE AND  
ETHNICITY IN FOOD SYSTEMS

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### Abstract

Nonprofit urban agriculture organizations are a key component of the food justice movement in U.S. cities. As the movement grows, an increasing number of allies will perform community food work and take leadership roles in nonprofit food justice organizations. One key to the ongoing growth and success of the movement is how allies transform their privilege into empowerment at an organizational scale. This commentary provides insight on how certain organizational policies and practice can lead to better allyship.

### Keywords

food justice, community food, food movement,

allyship, privilege, empowerment, organization theory, shared leadership, social movement, nonprofit organizations, professionalization, urban agriculture

While many highly visible, effective nonprofit food justice organizations are led by members of underprivileged social groups, a great number of nonprofit food justice organizations are created, led, and staffed by allies. By definition, allies are individuals from dominant social groups who work “to end the system of oppression that gives them greater privilege and power based on their social-group membership” (Broido, 2000, p.3; see also: Washington & Evans, 1991). When doing social justice work, allies must firmly grasp their own positionality and constantly engage in self-reflection in order to identify ways in which their biases and approaches may be leading to counter-productive efforts (K. E. Edwards, 2006). Allyship’s built-in self-reflection on one’s unearned privileges closely mirrors the practice of cultural humility, i.e., a “lifelong commitment to self-

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### Note

This commentary is based on the author’s ongoing dissertation work.

evaluation and critique, to redressing power imbalances...and to developing mutually beneficial and non-paternalistic partnerships with communities on behalf of individuals and defined populations” (Tervalon & Murray-Garcia, 1998, p. 117). Of interest here is how ally-led or ally-heavy urban agriculture organizations in U.S. can pursue nonpaternalistic and mutually beneficial work.

Much of today’s food justice ally work in U.S. cities is encouraging, although some of it is met with skepticism from academics, activists, and others within the food justice movement, including members of the social groups whom allies seek to support. Some of this skepticism deals with the whiteness of alternative food (Alkon, 2012; Guthman, 2008, 2011; Slocum, 2006), with particular emphasis on the lack of People of Color in organizational leadership positions (Slocum, 2006). Ally-led or ally-heavy organizations will always be fighting the perception that they are outsiders imposing their ideas on a local population. Even if an organization gains the formal support of a local community group or community leaders, there will always be other local community stakeholders who remain suspicious of the ally organization’s presence. With increasing institutional support for food justice, especially in the form of new or bolstered academic programs and policy institutes focusing on critical food studies and social justice, there will be an even greater influx of individuals from privileged backgrounds seeking community food jobs. This influx of outsiders with formal credentials that designate them as “qualified” in their field of practice will lead to an increasing professionalization of community food work, which if left unchecked can lead to food justice nonprofits settling for more moderate political goals (Jenkins, 1998) and centralizing decision-making authority (B. Edwards, 1994). It is important, then, that we closely examine both the concept and practice of food justice allyship so that current and future allies can avoid causing unintentional harm and creating trajectories leading to further exclusion of the social groups they are trying to support.

To re-emphasize, *privilege or the lack of it* is what separates allies from members of social groups that allies seek to support. It is often said in the food

justice community that allies must start by first “acknowledging their privileges.” Yet there is a great disparity between allies being aware of their privileges and their nonprofit organizations operating in a manner consistent with said level of awareness. Newman and Lake (2006) explain this disparity from a systems perspective, noting that the neoliberal framework in which today’s community-based organizations function limits their potential for political militancy and also allows them to avoid accountability to the communities in which they operate. From an organizational behavior perspective, concepts such as mission drift (see Ebrahim, Battilana & Mair, 2014; Jones, 2007; Weisbrod, 2004), autocratic decision-making processes, and groupthink (Janis, 1982; Nemeth & Staw, 1989) are common explanations for why organizations might cause unintentional harm. While understanding that all of these explanations are very important, this commentary is focused on how allies can transform their privilege into empowerment through organizational policies and practice.

With respect to food justice, privilege is commonly discussed in terms of food access. For example, someone living in a middle class suburb has easier access to affordable, fresh, healthy, and culturally appropriate food than someone living in a poor urban area or remote rural town. When placed within the context of nonprofit organizations, however, privilege denotes *control over resources*. While there are several factors that determine a nonprofit’s ability to thrive, the lifeblood of formal nonprofits consists primarily of financial, human and social capital. For allies to share and eventually relinquish access to these resources in a resource-scarce environment seems like a counterintuitive strategy, for on its face it is threatening to the survival of one’s career and organization. My response to this concern is that it is important for allies to reclaim the initial spirit of community-based organizations, that is, to shift accountability and stakeholdership from external funding institutions back to the community, to grow local leaders capable of accessing the necessary resources to build community, and to collaborate more effectively with other community-based organizations that share common goals.

The two cases below document organizations<sup>1</sup> that have taken steps toward transforming their privilege into empowerment; in the first case, the transformation has been in an *intra*organizational manner, and in the second case has been in an *inter*-organizational manner.

### **Intraorganizational Empowerment: Organizational Policy and Structure**

One ally-led community food work organization distributes the power of privilege by implementing horizontal organizational governance practices. More precisely, the organization devolves key decision-making authority over program implementation from upper levels of management to the relevant program staff. In this case it is particularly important to note that some program staff are members of the disenfranchised social group that the organization supports. This organizational practice provides valuable program management and leadership experience to people who might not otherwise have opportunities to lead others and make important decisions in a formal organizational setting. This practice might also be an important stepping-stone toward increased responsibilities, allowing for the development of higher-level management skills that could transfer to other fields and enhance these individuals' social mobility and economic security. In the best-case scenario, this job experience leads to each individual's self-determination as a socially conscious, politically active, and productive member of society.

To institutionalize this empowerment strategy, boards and upper-level management together can formulate a vision and implement organizational policy that commits to the idea of homegrown succession, wherein the organization must (1) meet a quota of paid employees who come from within the community that the organization serves, and (2) train these employees to become leaders of the organization or leaders of new spin-off or partner organizations. Such a policy will both address the immediate need for living-wage jobs in a distressed community, as well as commit the organization to a future in which allies are willing to share authority

and allow homegrown leaders to more fully determine the trajectory of food and social justice work in their communities.

Critical to the success of this homegrown succession policy are some important factors. One of the most important is that an organization must have the organizational culture, structure, and capacity to accommodate shared leadership (see Pearce & Conger, 2002). In an ideal situation, directorship is shared between multiple staff. Some executive-level decisions with major ramifications are made by consensus, while the power to make less important executive decisions are distributed among co-directors. To build towards this leadership model it is vital to find resources to invest into developing the managerial competency of staff. The organization must possess the savvy to sell to their funders the importance of building the organization from within, or else seek other sources of revenue that do not restrict the organization's restructuring and political activity. In regard to actual empowerment tactics, allies must acquaint their future co-leaders with the relevant philanthropic, nonprofit, and community-development worlds. For example, allies can engage their future co-leaders in the grant-writing process and encourage them to participate in settings where greater decisions about our food systems occur (e.g., on food policy councils, at city planning meetings, and at meetings with legislators).

### **Interorganizational Empowerment: A Programmatic Approach**

The second organization acts as the city's one-stop shop for garden resources, but creates its most sustainable impact by developing the capacity of its gardeners to facilitate change in their own communities. Affiliated gardeners who demonstrate a certain level of competence in horticulture and express a serious interest in taking on greater responsibility in their communities can attend a training program that provides trainees with the necessary resources and horticultural and community-organizing skills to become community leaders. The aspects of this training program specific to community organizing include strategies on how to engage neighbors, build community support, and entrust others with leadership

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<sup>1</sup> Identifiers were removed to protect the identity of these organizations.

responsibilities. The training program also instructs its participants on some important financial management competencies such as identifying sources of funding, grant-writing, budgeting, planning, and reporting.

Many graduates of the program have gone on to build community gardens and lead their own gardening workshops, while some have started their own nonprofit organizations. One of these nonprofits has addressed serious public safety concerns in its neighborhood by organizing community patrols and utilizing an array of urban greening efforts, including community gardens, market gardens that employ youths, and vacant-lot clearing and maintenance projects. Another training program participant went on to transform her organization from a small youth-development program into a community food hub that now runs a farm (composed of multiple affiliated market gardens), farmers market, shared commercial kitchen space, and resource center for local neighborhood gardeners.

Underpinning these transformative approaches to community-building and food justice is the philosophy that professionalized nonprofit organizations should do things “with” and not “for” their communities (Skocpol, 2003). Instead of building the community gardens or completing the urban agriculture–related projects for others, this case organization provides the necessary resources and technical support for those communities to organize and build these projects themselves.

## Discussion

The ally’s position in the community becomes more genuine and less impeachable when they are actively sharing their control over resources with members of the social group they are supporting. It also helps both the perception of the food justice movement as well as its outlook if its leadership is more diverse. Ally-led organizations doing community food work will always face issues of perception from critics and be met with suspicion by members of local disenfranchised communities. Well informed allies already understand that their presence as outsiders in disenfranchised communities represents a threat of displacement. Real or not, these perceptions are damaging to a food justice

movement that is already trending toward increased professionalization. Despite the highest levels of self-awareness and self-reflection, it will always be hard for a strong ally to recognize when he or she is becoming part of the problem.

Scholars should also to continue to critically re-examine the role of nonprofit organizations in the food justice movement altogether. The ways that nonprofit food justice organizations are being funded and hence operate are becoming more homogenous and coherent with the way nonprofit organizations in different social service arenas operate (see Hwang & Powell, 2009). While there is ample evidence to suggest that nonprofits can induce policy change through practice in the manner of policy entrepreneurship, a compelling argument can be made that some of these policy innovations are neoliberal in nature and ultimately come at the expense of building social movements and making greater systems change (DeFilippis, Fisher, & Shragge, 2010). This is not to suggest that nonprofits should pursue monumental social change completely at the expense of short-term poverty alleviation efforts. Instead, nonprofits could perhaps build more constituent mobilization efforts into their current work. 

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## Concerning the unbearable whiteness of urban farming

COMMENTARY ON RACE AND  
ETHNICITY IN FOOD SYSTEMS

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### Abstract

Based on the author's experience in urban agriculture projects and organizations in the United States, this commentary offers some basic, initial, and practical suggestions for how activists who are white or otherwise of relative privilege can approach "food justice" activism in ways that avoid re-inscribing white supremacy, and can more likely achieve the potential of transformative and multi-racial urban agriculture movements.

### Keywords

urban agriculture, race, identity, strategy, practitioner reflection

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First off, let me start by stating who I am. I am a native of San Francisco, California, born to two U.S. citizens. My ethnic background includes Mexican Mestizo, Eastern European Jew, and (like many younger people) smaller parts from all over the world. However, from an outsiders' perspective, I could easily be considered "white." This is the frame that I bring with me: growing up as Latino in a Latino neighborhood, but losing much of that background to the ease of being white. I have, in part, grown into my name being pronounced "Ant-oh-knee-oh" instead of "Ant-ohn-yo."

That said, I identify strongly as an antiracist activist. Not meaning that I am not racist, or still struggling with issues of race, but that I strive within my life to question, address, and confront the ongoing oppressions we all experience in a white supremacist world.

My entry into the world of food justice organizing, through my work at Alemany Farm (in San Francisco), was unavoidably steeped in these sorts of issues. But how I go about my work, and

my perspective on the complexities of race politics, have changed much since that period. I now see a much more complicated picture, and not one that is simply rosy when it comes to being a white-identified person working for justice with or in communities of color. And it seems like an increasingly unfunny joke to note that most people working in the sustainable/fair/green/organic/local/urban food production world are white.

There is no way I could posit a solution to this joke, or make it somehow funnier, but I hope to at least offer one perspective on it.

What guides me still are words attributed to Aboriginal artist Lilla Watson:

If you have come here to help me, you are wasting our time.

If you have come here because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.

Black, White, Latino, whomever: we are all subject to the whims and injustices of an exploitative, inhumane, and grossly unsustainable capitalist system. While in the present moment, we must acknowledge that having certain attributes (lighter skin color, upper class status, higher education, male gender) can lead to more resources and opportunities (and that the long-touted American Dream is but a mirage for many sectors of the U.S. population), we must also see that “No one is free when others are oppressed.” This goes for the “poor” folks in West Oakland as well as the “middle class” folks attending the University of California at Berkeley. Besides a minute percentage of the population who do not have to work for a living, we are all survivors of a broken system, and it is incumbent on us to find ways to challenge this system *together*.

I prefer not to blame anyone who has started on a path towards food justice activism, simply because they are white. The important question is how they go about that activism. What are some methods and strategies for being an antiracist food justice activist, working to change the norm of a white-dominated food sustainability scene? Here are some ideas to start with:

1. *Go to where people are at, not where you want them to be.* Stay far away from “knowing what is best for people.” If people in your neighborhood don’t care about growing food, don’t force it. Maybe people feel more excited about an after-school program teaching photography to youth? If so, try to integrate your food-based ideas into programs that the community actually wants. Unite your interests with those of whom you work with; don’t patronize.
2. *At the same time, don’t accommodate people to the extent of ignoring your own needs, desires, strengths or personal mental health.* While we must acknowledge the role of people’s internalized oppression and racism, and the “problem” behaviors that come from it, giving license to someone to act anti-socially, *because of their skin color*, is just another form of racism. Likewise, do not deny that you want to address food issues, if that is your passion.
3. *Don’t operate from assumptions.* This is general life advice, of course, but goes especially for activism. For instance, the naïve notion many new food justice activists have that “if only they [read: poor, black/brown people] knew about where their food came from, they would make better choices.” *Maybe* this is true, for some people. But if your goal is to change and improve people’s lives, you must start by asking folks what that change would look like, and what it might take to accomplish it. Maybe a central concern is not for organic food, but for having more time to cook? Maybe having a better income would allow for more freedom in food spending habits? Consider the possibility that a local grocery store might be more helpful than 15 community gardens...
4. *Always be focused on leadership development.* One of the main problems for antiracist whites is that they do not like being treated as, well, white people. In many marginalized communities and communities of color there can be a lot of (justified) resentment and distrust of outsiders (those seen as “others” or part of the dominant elite). While we should work to break down these barriers over time, perhaps more importantly, we must use whatever privilege we have to support the capacity of these communities to

work *for themselves*. Youth especially love to be taught by someone who looks like them, and so, if you are interested in being of service to a community that doesn't look like you, *train the trainers*. Work toward your own position being obsolete.

5. *Within group processes, always be conscious of how privileges may be affecting group dynamics* (but once again beware of overaccommodation to the point of being patronizing). Simple strategies like effective, shared facilitation, and checking in with each participant to make sure they feel heard, do wonders for the efficacy and longevity of any project. The operative words for white, male, rich, or otherwise privileged activist: *step back*.
6. *Do not downplay, and even more, CELEBRATE non-white contributions to food justice*. Many events that I go to about urban farming tend to be homogenously white. But I know that, around the country (and of course the world!), people of color are leading the charge for socially

relevant farming. Growing Power's Will Allen is a beacon; as is Boston's Food Project, whose leadership over time came to better reflect the populations it served. Los Angeles's South Central Farmers represent the agrarian vitality of Central American migrants to the U.S., while in the Bay Area People's Grocery and the Richmond Eco-Village are both led by people of color. We can also learn something from the Asian immigrant community, some of whom (the Hmong) are among the best urban farmers in California. In many cases, Asian neighborhoods (with just as low incomes as other "food desert" areas) manage to have thriving food markets and healthy family diets. We all have something to learn from each other, and we must be careful not to downplay or denigrate any particular ethnic or racial group's ownership over the concept of universal access to food that is good, clean, fair, affordable, and delicious.





## Three strategies to foster diversity in the food movement

COMMENTARY ON RACE AND ETHNICITY IN FOOD SYSTEMS

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### Abstract

This commentary explores strategies for coalition-building and reallocating resources across racial divides within alternative food systems. Following analysis of a set of public conversations held in Atlanta, Georgia, in spring 2015, I identify three strategies that may promote greater diversity: (1) the allocation of institutional and academic resources beyond historically privileged spaces; (2) the development of a shared historical context for framing and shaping collaborative, antiracist work; and (3) the commitment of policy-makers to execute the ideas of food producers. These

strategies, pursued in conjunction, may aid in addressing regional and neighborhood discrepancies in representation in food system leadership and also foster a stronger, antiracist alternative food system.

### Keywords

alternative food systems, Atlanta, coalition, collaboration, diversity, inequity, farmers, food justice, race, racism, strategies

### Introduction

In Atlanta, Georgia, no shortage of racialized history shapes our existing food system. This same history shapes the alternative food systems through which practitioners and academics seek to address the inequity in food access, economic development, and sustainable food production that is disproportionately borne as a result of one's racial identity (Alkon & Agyeman, 2011; Block, Scribner, & DeSalvo, 2004; Franco, Diez Roux, Glass, Caballero, & Brancati, 2008). Evidence demonstrates that discrepancies in access to resources

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### Disclosure

Hilary King, primary author and applied anthropologist, works part-time with Community Farmers Markets, one of the organizations that sponsored the event with Eric Holt-Giménez and Grow Where You Are at the King Center in March 2015.

correlate with histories of injustice and racism. In the spring 2015 issues of the *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, Tanaka, Indiano, Soley, and Mooney (2015) examine regional discrepancies in the funding of USDA Community Food Projects Competitive Grant Program (CFPCGP). They find that there is a large regional discrepancy in grant allocation, leaving the Southern region of the U.S. particularly under-represented in terms of funded projects.

Their findings encouraged me to examine how similar disparities in access to resources may operate on and be addressed on smaller scales, particularly on a citywide level. My analysis of a series of conversations and events held in Atlanta in spring 2015<sup>1</sup> led me to identify three major strategies to respond more comprehensively to the discrepancy highlighted by Tanaka et al. They are: (1) the purposeful allocation of institutional and academic resources beyond historically privileged arenas; (2) the development of a shared historical context in framing and shaping collaborative, antiracist work; and (3) the commitment of those of us in policy-related positions to act on and execute the ideas of food producers. Cities suffer from many of the same racial and cultural inequities that regions often do. The pursuit of these three strategies, in conjunction, may further the development of a shared system from which to address disparities like those identified by Tanaka et al. (2015).

### **1. Allocate Institutional and Academic Resources Beyond “White Space”**

To address racism in our food systems, it is necessary to bring to light the historical and contemporary inequities that exist. It is critical to undertake this project in spaces where people of color and white people can come together to explore this history and confront its ramifications. The spaces that facilitate these interactions may not be within the

institutions that support such explorations. It is critical, therefore, to use institutional and academic resources to bring events, conversation, and explorations beyond the boundaries of those institutions.

In March 2015, Emory University hosted Eric Holt-Giménez of Food First for the lecture, “Dismantling Racism in the Food System.” Rather than running a single event, activists at Emory partnered with food system organizations to do an additional version of this event at The Martin Luther King, Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change (the King Center), an educational memorial and social change center honoring Martin Luther King, Jr. Though both events were widely publicized, the event at the King Center received much more media attention and a very different spectrum of attendance. The Emory event was attended primarily by students. In contrast, the King Center event drew more than 80 people from across the city. The Emory event was scheduled as a lecture followed by a question and answer period. The King Center event was a short lecture followed by a community discussion. The racial makeup of the audiences differed greatly; at Emory, attendees were primarily white. Attendees at the King Center were primarily people of color, including activists, farmers, academics, community members.

To understand the difference in attendance at these two events, it is useful to examine Anderson’s (2015) ideas of “white space” and “black space.” Anderson puts forth the idea that although racial integration has progressed since the civil rights movement, overwhelmingly white neighborhoods, schools, restaurants, and public spaces remain. Blacks, and other people of color, may perceive these to be “white spaces” informally off limits to them. To engage in racially inclusive ways, it is critical to move conversations beyond the “white space.”

<sup>1</sup> The identification of these three strategies followed a set of public conversations held in Atlanta in February and March 2015. These consisted of a participatory workshop, “Food System Alchemy,” facilitated by Eugene Cooke and Nicole Bluh, hosted at the 2015 Georgia Organics Conference in Athens, Georgia, and the lecture and community discussion, “Dismantling Racism in the Food System,” hosted by Eric Holt-Giménez of Food First and the activist growers of

Grow Where You Are, an agricultural social enterprise located in Atlanta. These discussions were small steps in a long history of struggle, intervention, and action by food system activists of color in Atlanta, supported in this instance by the Black Heritage Museum and Cultural Center, Community Farmers Markets, Georgia Organics, Emory University, Food Well Alliance, Grow Where You Are, and Slow Food Atlanta.

The commitment to follow-up and partnerships following the events also differed. While the Emory event seems not to have produced great further engagement, the King Center event strengthened new partnerships. One example includes a new market being piloted at a public transit station in a historically black neighborhood. This project brings together Atlanta's public transit authority, MARTA; the South West Atlanta Growers Cooperative, made up of primarily black urban farmers; the Atlanta Community Food Bank; and Community Farmers Markets, which is a farmers' market umbrella organization in Atlanta.

The event at the King Center would not have been possible without institutional support for Holt-Giménez's honorarium and travel. However, Holt-Giménez was eager to share his expertise in an alternate setting. Planning community events that take place outside of the traditionally "white spaces" that have financial resources is an important strategy for building relationships and shared knowledge bases across racial and ethnic boundaries in the food system. Such pairings build institutional support and personal collaborations that create more inclusive spaces wherein institutional privilege can and should be challenged.

## **2. Build a Shared Historical and Analytical Framework**

Within community discussions that have brought race and racism in our food system to the forefront, many people have lauded an expanded historical context. As stated before, hosting conversations and events that provide this foundation can be fundamental for building partnerships with systemic potential. Holt-Giménez's lectures in spring 2015 reported the problematic history of agricultural industrialization on a global scale. The lecture focused on the fact that current global agricultural systems have largely been built on the backs of people of color and women. Through charts and narratives connecting food riots, stock prices of agroindustry corporations, and profits, the lecture provided an historical and analytical framework that situated existing divisions based on race within the global food system. This context made space for participants in the community discussion to flesh out how such divisions are

manifest within Atlanta.

Participants in this discussion expressed empowered sentiments following the examination of this history. One participant observed that, "the majority of the food grown worldwide is grown by people who are not educated through the formal system. They often grow food for other people, on land that used to be their own." This observation was coupled with outcries related to the lack of land available particularly to black farmers in Atlanta. Another participant asked, "What of what we have seen [in the lecture] is being replicated from the global food system here in Atlanta?" This led into a tense discussion about recent grant applications, funded and unfunded. Although these questions were not resolved, the contextualization of these issues in Atlanta within a global context seemed to generate a space to discuss the disparities that underlie some disputes about the allocation of resources and funding that correspond to existing marginalizations.

Kwabena Nkromo, executive director of Atlanta Food and Farm, eloquently expressed this idea, stating,

There is a fundamental need to have an understanding of this history... If we don't have an understanding of this history, then we will always be working from different foundations. We have to work on structures, because it is the structures that oppress us. If we just throw down our hands without understanding the structure, the work that we do will feed into that system.

It is pivotal that we work from a foundation that accounts for the historical contexts in which current food system inequities manifest.

## **3. Commit Analysts to Develop and Implement Food Producer's Ideas**

Within the food movement, I am currently given a stipend to work in front of my computer, analyzing inequities in the food system and working to build programs. In Atlanta the paid work of analysis and policy creation within the food system is disproportionately white. My work, however, is also built on the work of the people in the alternative food

movement who actually grow food and run food-related businesses. It is critical in my view that my work as an analyst be grounded in the solutions developed by the people producing the food in the food movement. Many are people of color. To know their ideas, it is necessary for me as an analyst to follow the two steps above to build relationships. The next step is to follow through on using my position to advance ideas that they deem most useful and which may produce some structural change.

During the conversations that are the basis for this commentary, Eugene Cooke, activist farmer at Grow Where You Are, a social-enterprise educational farm in South West Atlanta, called for microscale structural reforms. He asked young people who are salaried and working in advocacy and policy-based organizations to develop their own microgrant programs by pooling and allocating 3 percent of their incomes to support a farmer, provide grant-writing assistance, or address another need outside of bureaucratic or competitive funding opportunities.

Cooke also advocated for expanding the HUD Good Neighbor Next Door program, which makes certain single-family homes available to law enforcement officers, public school teachers, firefighters, and emergency medical technicians (EMTs) at a substantial discount, provided they agree to live in those homes for at least 36 months. Atlanta had more than 30,000 vacant homes in 2012—homes that could be made available to farmers through an expanded Good Neighbor Next Door program. Cooke and others like him are busy farming and do not have time to do the logistical work to submit these types of ideas to the USDA's competitive funding program that was analyzed by Tanaka et al. Ideas such as these come out of the needs and work of the people building our alternative food system. Many of the best ideas come from those who are most marginalized within both conventional and alternative agricultural systems. Many of us who have salaried work come from backgrounds of privilege. It is our responsibility as people with analytical jobs aimed at building a more just food system to bring ideas such as these, offered by people whose positions are more precarious, to fruition.

A unique limitation of working with farmers is that they want to be farmers; they lack time to develop programs that may best serve them. It is the responsibility of those of us who work to systematize and develop policy to connect with and pay attention to these food producers, and to shape our analyses and programs accordingly. Many people who work in the food system, as producers or food workers, continue to be people of color and those who are historically marginalized. Those of us who are paid to think about food systems have the privilege of doing so because of their work. It is therefore critical that we know them, and work from their knowledge and observations. If we fail to do so, we cannot build the more just, inclusive food system that we hope to build.

### Conclusion

The three crucial actions above are interrelated processes that build on each other to strengthen and implement the most innovative ideas in alternative food systems. These approaches work to connect policy-makers, resources, and food producers in our cities and our regions, sharing expertise while addressing the racialized and marginalizing context in which alternative food systems must function. Such approaches may aid those of us in the U.S. South to garner the greater institutional support that Tanaka et al. identified as lacking. Such support will facilitate building on the antiracist, socially embedded, engaged work that is already being done in our region, and lead us toward a more just and sustainable food system for all.

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## Engaged advocacy and learning to represent the self: Positioning people of color in our contemporary food movement

COMMENTARY ON RACE AND  
ETHNICITY IN FOOD SYSTEMS WORK

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### Abstract

Issues with access to food access are not solely that people of color are not included in the happenings of the food movement; it is also problematic just how our inclusion happens. Our issues within the movement are as diverse as we are, and there is no one particular narrative that can illustrate these sets of dilemmas easily. The solutions are even more difficult to generate and institute. Within these many complexities, however, both in addressing the problem and in finding positive results, there is also the problem of the lack of involvement within the community in a critical dialogue. Without a dialogue about these diverse sets of problems, working together to solve them seems a distant possibility.

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### Keywords

food access, self-help, food sovereignty, people of color, culturally appropriate foods

### My Background in the Food System

I was born in New York City of Guyanese heritage and am currently an associate professor in Black and Latino Studies at Baruch College, City University of New York. But anyone who knows me also knows that my personal narrative related to the food system usually begins with the phrase, “growing up in Hell’s Kitchen in the 1970s.” In my Hell’s Kitchen neighborhood we had access to pizza, Chinese food, Afghan kebobs, and an enclosed farmers markets operating out of a parking garage. (It was not until the early 1990s that the neighborhood had its first sidewalk open-air farmers market that are now so commonly seen in the city.) We also had the choice of two major supermarkets: the A&P supermarket (Atlantic & Pacific Tea Co.), whose building is now a Citibank branch, and Red

Apple Grocery, now Gristedes (another super-market chain). Even with such a reasonable amount of access and despite people knowing how to cook and what to do with fresh vegetables, food struggles were not foreign to people in our neighborhood. Each month, west of our building a food pantry was operated in a church. The “cheese line,” as it was called by the neighborhood children, was where extremely poor families acquired basic food staples. Although our family did not qualify for this food benefit, I had many schoolmates who stood on that line for hours for groceries like powdered milk, cheese, canned fruits in heavy syrup, potatoes, and other items. Receiving families would always share their food with families who did not qualify for the benefit. This provided a great opportunity to organize around the topic of food access. Families never complained about the quality of their food items, although sometimes the quantity was disputed between distributor and recipient. Accepting their free groceries without hesitation or further inquiry is an attitude toward food benefits that is also seen in recipients today.

However, in addition to the food offerings within short walking distances, I also had access to the tradition of a home-cooked meal, Guyanese style. Every day I watched my working mother come home from work and wash her hands before washing every leaf in a bunch of callaloo. She stripped potatoes of their skin with a knife, not a fancy peeler, and measured dry rice with her hands, not a measuring cup. She even soaked dry beans overnight after working a 40-hour-a-week job and attending school three nights a week. Every weekend while most children were outside playing, I and sometimes my older siblings accompanied my parents out on a food-shopping trip. Sure, there were cans of Campbell’s soup in our shopping cart, but that was considered “emergency food.” Every single day, my mother made a fresh and hot breakfast of eggs, toast, juice, and hot chocolate (on winter mornings).

### **My Foray into Changing the Food System**

About a year ago I founded a farm-share program in Corona, Queens. It began very small, with just four members and an undergraduate student of mine alongside my husband and myself delivering

the shares from Manhattan to Queens on a weekly basis. It was not long before I realized that families and other community members were not only unable to participate because of the price, but they had no real understanding of what a farm share meant as a larger community responsibility. In addition, farm shares and community supported agriculture (CSA) programs have been identified mostly in white, affluent communities and therefore are aligned with being one of “their” social programs of community rather than need. For low-income communities, CSAs and similar program models are recent attempts to change the food access problem while signaling gentrification, a change that could mean their expulsion from the community. Shopping at the low-end chain supermarkets and the “fruit guy” at the train station’s corner leads to a perception of access that seems to quell any desire for more by most residents. This version of access remains popular because many of the members in the community are not yet being given examples of how the entire neighborhood could be reignited, reawakened, revamped simply through the distribution of food by the person who actually grew it. There was and still is a gap in understanding why a pesticide-laden bunch of cilantro is different from the bunch that a 100% organic farmer offers.

In many communities that are lacking in better food choices, there is, no doubt, a lack of conversation as well. Among all their pressing and pending life issues, quality of food just is not ranking high enough on the list of important struggles. Residents of affluent communities already have access to successful schools and better opportunities for work. They have careers in place, not just jobs, and an overabundance of access to life’s basic necessities. In low-income communities, these struggles stem from economic issues that rear their heads in every decision the family has to make, including food choices and whether or not critical thought is put into that decision each and every time food is consumed. This problem cannot be remedied by sending “organizers” into communities. There must be work on the part of the community itself to create its own organizers from among them. Only then can the problem be defined accurately and authentically. Only then can

valid and unique solutions be found that address specific and diverse needs, rather just challenging global food access issues. Understanding the challenge requires an understanding of what set of information people have access to. The fight cannot be simply about making sure organic kale is in the Black neighborhood, but rather why it should be available in the Black neighborhood as well. What is the larger point behind having this access, rather than just increasing access? As we can see, simply bringing it to the community without discussion and inclusion leads to wilt, among the produce and the members of the neighborhood.

### **Food Access Re-Evolution**

It is important to understand that food access for people of color has several layers, and these can be unpacked as we begin to regain our consciousness about our access and what we are eating on a regular basis. It is a common narrative in the larger public that people of colors' relationship to food is grounded in the overconsumption of fast food. However, many chefs of color are rewriting Black food history to reshape the dishes and recipes with more healthy ingredients. For some of us, if we were to consciously consider and study our Caribbean heritage, we would see that those diets historically were very green and largely about root vegetables. Critical but simple questions might arise, such as (1) if our diets were historically inclusive of spinach and sweet potatoes, then how come we are not eating them now? (2) Why can't we access them regularly? (3) Why are the big health-food stores monopolizing these groceries and making them largely unaffordable? (4) Why is there so much bureaucratic red tape in getting a farmers market to Black and Latino neighborhoods? (5) Why are we still very accepting of these circumstances?

The first step in the re-evolution has to be rethinking how we want to identify our relationship with food. There is a reason none of the fast-food restaurants in low-income Black and Latino neighborhoods are going out of business, but the libraries are losing funding. Perhaps through the redefinition of ourselves, we can change the dialogue in other groups about what they think they know about our history. Consider that the vegan

diet, with its affluent subscribers, is the original diet of the Rastas. Yet veganism has become synonymous with Whiteness, affluence, and privilege, particularly in a big city like New York. We have become so dependent on television to teach families how to cook that we do not realize that those who are on TV mostly do not resemble us, and they use ingredients that we may have to work very hard to find. We have lost our will to ask the big and simple questions about the dishes that not only we are cooking, but that others are cooking and claiming as their own or as legitimate reinventions of the food wheel. It is really a stab in the heart to hear a beloved TV chef say, "You can find this in your local supermarket," and you know immediately that they are not saying this with you in mind. For if they did, they would know that a good portion of their viewers in low-income communities cannot access most of those basic ingredients, let alone tomato paste in a tube. What we need urgently are a new articulation of demand, a reintroduction to cooperation, and an updated model on collectively working for change. The need for valid inclusion in the food movement has to happen in steps, and has to have the very people being advocated for at the center of the table. How else can any of us know the true problems that need addressing?

As part of this first step we need to begin developing a new vocabulary that can critically define the existing problem, as opposed to using popular phrases that do not necessarily qualify a universal experience. For many of us living in a place like New York City, we are not struggling with food deserts. Actually, there is an overabundance of food in many of the neighborhoods that are identified as being "in trouble." The problem is that a lot of the food that is available should also be considered slow-kill poison; it is sold in the same aisle as pest killer at some of the neighborhood bodegas. If families make a proactive decision to skip past the burger chains, fried chicken restaurants, and, in some neighborhoods, ethnic-specific fast food, then the dependency immediately falls onto the neighborhood supermarket. The people who work at the supermarkets, both behind the register and stocking the shelves, are usually Black or Latino and are sometimes recently arrived

immigrants. They reflect the shoppers in the community as well, so there is trust behind the purchasing experience. The owners however, are usually not from the neighborhood, do not speak the language of the shopper fluently, and are a different race altogether. They are marketing what they believe Black and Brown people use, eat, and enjoy. To some degree they must be right in their assessment, as items like canned food, frozen food, alcohol, salt, generic cold cuts (bits), soda, and fruit punch fly off the shelves. Many of the owners do not consider that the sincere “enjoyment” of these products comes from overconsumption and addiction to them, enabled by the very stores that sell them in plentitude. The fruits and vegetables at these supermarkets, when available, are waxy and shiny, and have colored lighting shining above them so they look fresh, farm-delivered, and ready to eat. It is not often you see a shopper at the local C-Town supermarket in Corona, Queens, using a smartphone to track the PLU code of a vegetable. There is not a single label in the supermarket that would be encountered in the supermarket of the affluent. No “non-GMO,” “vegan-friendly,” “allergen-free,” “rBGH-free.” But the time saved in not reviewing labels lets the shopper catch the bus and save a 20-minute walk home from the supermarket with heavy bags.

If we can begin to shift our vocabulary, we might be able then to engage in a better understanding of what we are actually accessing. The community most targeted for having a lack of options does not just need the option; it needs to rehabilitate the dialogue. The simple appearance of vegetables and fruit could signify gentrification. Everyone should be able to remain in their community but have access to quality food nearby as well. Healthy foods’ appearance should not just be due to new, affluent residents.

The second step in the food access re-evolution is using critical dialogue about better access as a pedagogical tool. Simply placing a salad bar in a school cafeteria is not going to make long-term changes if the child cannot access a bunch of carrots outside of the cafeteria. The pedagogical tool that is designed must be useful for everyone in the community. Existing “community workshops” around the food issue(s) are usually introduced to

low-income Black and Latino communities in a less-than-rewarding way. The same White, non-threatening faces that are repeatedly cast as “food heroes” are the same faces that shows up to teach these communities about “eating properly” and how to consume fruits and vegetables. Adult members of families who are solely responsible for the food choices in their home do not want to be patronized, or reprimanded, and do not want to feel like they are being taught what is obviously best for their families, including their children. This is not to take away credit from programs that have the best of intentions in their outreach practices, but I have been witness to several surveyors and outreach coordinators who (1) do not understand the community they are reaching out to; (2) have no long-term investment in the community they are working in; and (3) take outreach to mean tacitly dehumanizing members of the community they are serving. People should be offered culturally appropriate tools to actively engage in the pursuit of their own change.

Aligned with the second step is the reshaping of our image as people of color and our involvement in the food system and food movement. We have become the visually illustrative example of the nation’s “hungry.” Having this label hanging over our experience with food does not invite humanizing opportunities for change. Neither does it beckon us to consider and research our cultural food history, and it certainly does not hold anyone else to a standard when invited to our communities to “advocate.” Being identified as needy, be it due to unequal food access, inadequate or racist housing practices, or employment issues, detracts from the actual problem of inequality and economic disenfranchisement. Most of us in New York City and the outer boroughs, especially Queens, are not dying of starvation, although many of us fall weakness to atrocious food and are thus dying from our actual food consumption and choices. There is a desperate need to change our involvement in the food movement.

The third and final step of the re-evolution of food access is to promote leadership from within, even if it means alienating government officials, “do-gooders,” and our neighbors. Brazilian philosopher Paulo Freire has always argued that the

oppressed must wage their own war, and that their teachings to each other must also include teaching the oppressor as well. To teach the oppressor (whomever and whatever that representation) is to begin freeing the oppressed. To engage in change any other way, or to be dependent on anyone else for a glimpse of liberation, might be to engage in a struggle for a reward of which we do not really understand the value. Organizers who do not

represent the communities that they advocate for and within cannot assume that everyone in those communities knows nothing about the change they wish to see. There are heroes and staunch community fighters living among those who are silent. If we are to own the re-evolution and lead in organizing, in defining change, and in articulating a positive act of inclusion, *those* heroes and fighters have to be actively sought out from our own ranks. 