

Decolonizing Food Justice: Naming, Resisting, and Researching Colonizing Forces in the Movement

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Abstract: Over the past 15 years social movements for community food security, food sovereignty, and food justice have organized to address the failures of the multinational, industrial food system to fairly and equitably distribute healthy, affordable, culturally appropriate real food. At the same time, these social movements, and research about them, re-inscribe white, patriarchal systems of power and privilege. We argue that in order to correct this pattern we must relocate our social movement goals and practices within a decolonizing and feminist leadership framework. This framework challenges movement leadership and scholarship by white people who uncritically assume a natural order of leadership based on academic achievement. We analyze critical points in our collaboration over the last four years using these frameworks. Doing so highlights the challenges and possibilities for a more inclusive food justice movement and more just scholarship.

Keywords: food justice, decolonization, feminism, anti-racism, reflexivity

Introduction and Problem Statement

In 1996, a group of academics and activists formed the Community Food Security Coalition (CFSC) as a response to race and class disparities in access to healthy, culturally appropriate, and affordable food in the United States. By many accounts, the CFSC played a critical role in uniting activists in alternative food systems fields (Gottlieb and Joshi 2010; Morales 2011; Patel 2011). In creating a national network of activists working in low-income communities, the coalition cultivated what we know today as the food justice movement. We open this paper with stories from Hank's experiences as a leader in the early years of the CFSC. These stories demonstrate the promises of the movement and its failure to meaningfully represent people and communities of color. Thus they also represent what we see as the colonization of the food justice movement and research about it.

The founders of the CFSC were all committed, passionate, brilliant, successful leaders—and all white. Two of these individuals, a graduate student at the time and his professor, participated in a seminal study of food insecurity in South Central Los Angeles (Ashman et al. 1993). Subsequently, they provided a preliminary explanation of community food security: "For one, food security represents a *community need*, rather than an individual's condition, as associated with hunger.

A definition of food security in this context refers to the ability of *‘all persons obtaining, at all times, a culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet through local, non-emergency sources’*” (Gottlieb and Fisher 1996:24, emphasis added to definition). They and several of their colleagues and mentors went on to successfully advocate for inclusion of the Community Food Security Act in the Federal Agriculture Improvement and Reform Act of 1996 and subsequent farm bills—landmark legislation that provided funding for 294 local community food projects in its first 10 years (Tuckermanty et al. 2007).

The founders of CFSC emphasized a focus on low-income communities. The Articles of Incorporation of CFSC stated as the first purpose of the organization:

...to increase the visibility and understanding of community food security, a concept *designed to ensure that individuals in low-income communities have access to food and nutritional information and that such communities are able to provide for a greater share of their residents’ food needs* through various efforts, including promotion of the urban retail sector and encouragement and support of local agriculture and family farming in order to insure the availability to such communities of fresh, nutritionally adequate food ... (Community Food Security Coalition 1997, emphasis added).

For Hank, as a person of color working in a low-income community of color to increase access to fresh, healthy, affordable local food that he and his fellow activists produced in their communities, these accomplishments and concepts ignited promise and hope that their work could gain widespread support. However, over time this promise and hope faded. While their work did gain broader support, their roles in local grassroots leadership, national movement leadership, and research about the movement also shrank.

For example, Hank vividly recalls the first annual meeting of CFSC in Los Angeles in 1997. One of the field trips went to a very large community garden in the heart of Watts, a largely African American community. The garden manager was a very pleasant young white man who had completed his apprenticeship at the UC Santa Cruz farm at the Center for Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems. As he described the gardeners, he talked about the Latino gardeners growing plants he did not recognize, that they then sold in street markets about which, he said, he knew nothing. His lack of knowledge of indigenous plants and markets while in a position of power at this garden represented a problem with the practice of food justice in this community and in the CFSC’s leadership’s understanding of food justice.

Other challenges emerged in the Coalition. Even spaces designed to foster leadership by people of color within the Coalition were not safe from troubling dynamics. Early in the history of CFSC, the Outreach and Diversity Committee (ODC) was charged with addressing race and class issues in CFSC and in the food system. A young white scholar who previously conducted research about the ODC and with their support announced her plan for another research project with Coalition members. Members of the committee asked to see her proposal, but she refused, insisting that it would compromise the independence of the research but maintaining that the research would benefit the committee. They barred her from any further participation in ODC activities, although she planned to use data she

collected during her earlier work with the committee. The committee then wrote to her and her department to request that she not pursue further research about them. Nevertheless, she ultimately did publish about anti-racism work within the CFSC using data she had collected in ways that benefited her personally but not the ODC, CFSC, or food justice movement.

At the Oakland CFSC meeting in 2011, the last meeting before the coalition's dissolution, Katie listened to a white CFSC board member adamantly insist that there was no need for a people-of-color breakout session. What Katie perceived as an entitlement to lead was just a more recent example of how the CFSC's original promise faded for Hank and other leaders of color. These stories represent colonizing, dominating, hegemonic propensities of white, patriarchal systems of power and privilege within the food justice movement and research about it.

In this paper, we explain the personal and theoretical ways we understand the colonization of food justice. First, we offer our own brief biographical histories, since our backgrounds shaped how we came to view and engage with the food justice movement. Second, we present our argument that the process of colonization unfolded in the food justice movement through the emergence of moralist food justice from the original notion of food justice. We link moralist food justice to the history of colonization of native foodways, which underscores the damage moralist food justice can do. Third, we review scholarship on decolonizing methodologies and feminist leadership. Fourth, we draw inspiration from this body of scholarship and apply it to our own collaboration. Ultimately, we show that applying these concepts to collaborative research resists some colonizing forces and fosters a more just form of scholarship.

The Problem of Problem Definition

As ... [people] define situations as real, they are real in their consequences (Thomas and Thomas 1928:572).

In this section, we identify aspects of our identities that shape our engagement with the food justice movement. The determinants of the ontological questions we undertake are complex, and the particular variations in how we define similar situations are consequences of these identities (Thomas and Thomas 1928). Despite shared interests, we come from different cultures, parts of the country, professions, and generations. Our different backgrounds and our common values are the foundation of our activism and scholarship.

Our experiences as people, one Native American-Chicano-Mestizo man (Hank) and one European American woman (Katie), shaped how we engage with the topic of the colonization of food justice and with each other. Hank has been involved in local food systems, community food security and food justice work for over 20 years. He has long recognized racist and oppressive forces at work in constraining opportunity for people and communities of color. His family made space for his education through constant struggle against poverty and racist stereotypes. He earned a medical degree, trained in psychiatry and served on the faculties of two medical schools. He participated in the civil rights struggles and eventually

committed himself to neighborhood and community development in oppressed communities, with a specific focus on what we now call food justice. The structural violence imposed on youth motivates him above all else. Katie has been assessing the influence of her race, education, and economic privilege on her capacity to contribute to social justice movements. At the same time she has critical awareness of how her gender can erase some of her power and privilege. More recently she has dedicated herself to the struggle against racism and oppression in the academy and the food movement.

We met in early 2010 when Katie invited Hank to speak to her Alternatives in Agriculture seminar, part of her graduate program in Community Development at the University of California, Davis. In our first meeting, we recognized many common interests and shared values. When Katie began studying food justice, she noticed many parallel ideologies and circumstances to the field of international development, which she studied as an anthropology major in college. In conversations with Hank, Katie shared her observation that the voices of the food insecure were largely absent from the academic literature on food security. Hank concurred. Indeed, frustration with this dynamic—the absence of the voices of people impacted by problems from the academic research on those problems—contributed to Hank leaving his academic career in order to pursue community-based work. It is through these histories that we understand the field of food justice and the problems that plague it.

We have worked together since 2010 in several scholarly and community-based food justice projects. Based on the common concerns, Hank invited Katie to intern and conduct her master's thesis research at Dig Deep Farms & Produce later that year. Dig Deep Farms & Produce is an urban farm that aims to create jobs, improve the quality and accessibility of fresh produce in urban, unincorporated areas of Ashland and Cherryland, CA and that Hank co-founded (Bradley and Galt 2014). At Dig Deep Farms & Produce, Hank worked as General Manager, supervising a team of employees who were new to farming, learning on the job, and responsible for promoting the farm and its Community Supported Agriculture program in the surrounding neighborhoods. Katie began her internship and research by working with the farm team, although she spent a considerable amount of time at arm's length before gaining their trust. As a supervisor and founder of the farm, Hank's relationship with the farmers differed greatly from Katie's. Whereas he was in a position of authority in their eyes, farmers came to see Katie as an ally and confidante. This gave us very different perspectives with which to examine leadership within the food justice movement.

“Original” and “Moralist” Conceptions of Food Justice

The food justice movement is fundamentally a social justice movement. It takes issue with inequalities in access to food, exploitive labor practices in the food system, and environmental degradation associated with conventional agriculture and environmental racism (Alkon and Agyeman 2011; Gottlieb and Joshi 2010). In both discourse and practice, early CFSC efforts de-emphasized individual responsibility in favor of systemic accountability. Many explain these priorities as

originating in the civil rights movement and the Black Panther Party (Alkon 2007; Green et al. 2011; McCutcheon 2011; Patel 2011; Slocum 2011; Sbicca 2012). These descriptions contribute to what we refer to as the original notion of food justice, in which struggles against racism, exploitation, and oppression taking place within the food system (Hislop 2014) are integrated with practical efforts to establish fair, equitable access to fresh, healthy, affordable, culturally appropriate food in vulnerable neighborhoods, especially low-income neighborhoods and communities of color, with ownership and governance of the means of production and exchange accessible to the people who eat this healthy food.

Alternative food movements, in contrast to food justice and despite similarities,¹ evince many primary concerns, from the environmental degradation associated with conventional agriculture to the health consequences of consuming industrial food. These concerns have a moral dimension, in common with traditional environmentalism in which engendering environmental protection relies upon environmentalists accepting a moral obligation (Taylor 2002). As with environmentalism, a moral component comes into play in alternative food movements in such a way that proponents see local, sustainable, environmentally friendly foods as universally good things to which everyone should have access. Implicit in this belief is the assumption that with access, people make the right, or moral, food choices. Thus, a moral imperative to establish “access” to local food without regard for the ownership and governance of the means of production and exchange represents a moralist notion of food justice. Although this work is carried out under the banner of food justice, it is distinct from the original notion of food justice.

The moralist notion of food justice is the most recent manifestation of a legacy of social reform and conservation practices. Social reformers and environmentalists have long used food and humans’ relationship with nature to reinforce white privilege. Before the advent of environmentalism and the alternative food movement, dietary practices and health more generally have functioned as markers of belonging, ability to work, and expressions of identity, religiosity, self-restraint, and morality (Berlant 2010; Coveny 2000; Crawford 2006; Farrell 2011). Indeed, today, within the alternative food movement, and including in the moralist food justice movement, eating more kale, for example, can mark one’s morality or sense of cultural distinction, and more specifically one’s sense of responsibility towards the environment, support for small, local farmers, and defiance of the power of corporate, fast food (Johnston et al. 2011; *The Economist* 2012). Members of social or religious movements usually make a deliberate choice to use food in these ways, yet, as Coveny (2000) explains, people still unintentionally internalize conflated conceptions of morality, science, citizenship, and health. And, more importantly, we assert that these internalizations are both reinforced by and reinforce the institutionalization of racism masquerading as scientific knowledge.

Conflating dietary advice and morality are quite harmful. Crawford (1994) explains, “health and its pursuit have become increasingly valued and thus have become a crucial terrain upon which contemporary, personal identity is fashioned ... the ‘healthy’ self is sustained in part through the creation of ‘unhealthy’ others, who are imagined as embodying all the properties falling outside this health-signified self”. These “unhealthy others” are often women, the poor, the colonized,

and conquered. Moreover, their non-compliance with nutritional advice offered objective evidence of their immorality and thus justification for denial of their rights (Farrell 2011). For example, Native American scholars contest the claim that western medicine improved the health of Native people, arguing that western medicine too often leads Native people to “neglect the social, the people, and their cultural models and their mental states when we clinically study foods” (Salmon 2012:80; Wilson 2005). This exacerbated the impacts of such colonizing acts as provisioning of tribes with US commodities, the industrialization of food, and the contamination of traditional food sources (Cozzo 2009; Mihesuah 2003; Norgaard et al. 2011). Thus, institutionalizing nutritional knowledge further institutionalized the marginalization of women, the poor, the colonized, and conquered.

The last quarter century has provided yet another layer to the morality-diet conflation. Under neoliberal capitalism, non-conformers to specific dietary and nutritional advice, even those who have been systematically excluded from complying (DuPuis 2007), are immoral because of their failure to participate in a market-based democracy (Guthman 2011b). As Guthman explains, under neoliberal capitalism, people are encouraged “to act through the market, or like the market, by exercising consumer choice, being entrepreneurial and self-interested, and striving for self-actualization and fulfillment”. Unfortunately, neoliberalism has permeated some food justice activities. This contributes to conditions that prevent the poor, colonized, and conquered from participating in these markets, and from redefining democracy and economy.

Access to leadership positions within the food justice movement have been similarly affected, with well educated, white people professionalizing leadership within food justice initiatives and programs intended to serve people of color. Indeed, a 2013 survey of food justice organizations confirms that only 16% of respondents work for organizations that “have policies that ensure representation of community members in paid and/or leadership positions” yet 79% of respondents indicated that issues of racial, ethnic, socio-economic, gender, sexuality, political, and generational inequalities affect their organizations (Hislop 2014:139). And, Porter and Redmond (2014:267) observe a “feminist erasure of women of color” in the context of a national food movement whose public leadership is male dominated. Despite these disparities, leaders of color do emerge but “individual examples do not necessarily reflect a structural whole” (Reynolds 2015:252).

While, there is no lack of integrity or good will on the parts of white people running the movement, the collective impacts of their whiteness in positions of power undermine the principle of food justice. Furthermore, despite exceptions to the norm, these disparities have significant ramifications. Kristin Reynolds (2015) found that white-led urban agriculture groups in New York City were able to attract more funding than their people of color led counterparts. One prominent leader, Malik Yakini (2013), has described this phenomenon on his blog in this way:

These [African American, Latino/Latina, Native American and Asian American] organizations are often under resourced and thus have significant capacity issues. This lack of capacity contributes to a self-perpetuating cycle that sees the lion's share of food movement funding go to larger, well-established, usually white-led non-profits. Of course, this is not the only factor in funding inequities. Non-profit funding is based, in

part, on relationships. Funders, who are overwhelmingly white, often feel more comfortable with people who look and speak like them, know people that they know and live lives similar to their own.

Yaikini's and others' success in defying the odds of white leadership does not mark the end of white supremacy or the challenges that stem from it.

Scholarly Colonialism

These two conceptions of food justice are mirrored in academic work on the topic. In the vein of original food justice, scholars of alternative food movements call attention to racial processes. They have described whiteness as including (though not limited to) the romanticization of agriculture (Alkon and McCullen 2010); racial exclusion in alternative food spaces (Guthman 2011a); assuming the right to speak for others or with authority (Pulido 2002); exotification of food cultures of people of color (Harper 2011); and widespread belief in meritocracy resulting from:

a set of structural advantages including higher wages, reduced chances of being impoverished, longer life, better access to health care, better treatment by the legal system and so on ... a set of cultural practices, often not named as "white" by white folks, but looked upon instead as "American" or "normal" (Frankenberg 1993, cited in Kobayashi and Peake 2000:394).

The cumulative effect of these manifestations of whiteness is structural racism and an unstated article of faith and nearly absolute certainty that the white way is the right way. Although these assessments are accurate, when they are used to generalize and essentialize food justice work, they are marginalizing the practice of original food justice work.

Some scholars respond to this outcome by describing the complexity of racism in the food system and focusing on racialized experiences of eaters, cooks, food service workers, and farm workers (Abarca 2006; Harper 2011; Holmes 2013; Williams-Forsen 2006) or highlighting food justice work carried out by people of color (Bradley and Galt 2014; Herrera et al. 2009; McCutcheon 2011; White 2010, 2011a, 2011b). These scholars and activists highlight colonizing forces within food justice and the strategies women and activists of color use to control their food and agriculture systems.

When the strengths of academic critiques of moralist food justice lie in the author's arguments more than in her research methods, she is shielded from having to examine how her own work reproduces white supremacy and knowledge hierarchies and scholarship mirrors colonizing aspects of moralist food justice. One element of colonization is especially evident in the case above involving the ODC. The researcher's assumption about the value of independent research is more in line with "individualistic careerism" than collaboration. Gilmore describes individualistic careerism as "the competition to know the most about some aspect of the politically and oppositionally 'new'" (1993:71). Critique and comment on the "oppositionally new" undermined the self-determination of ODC members. Although, in this example, activists contested her scholarship, this is not always possible.

For example, a different scholar discussed her work with Katie, explaining that the former's article critiquing moralist elements of the work of a food justice organization led to changes in that organization's priorities. However, allies and colleagues more intimately connected to the organization told Katie that the changes were in the works prior to the scholarship in question and independent of it. While academic work can and does contribute directly to social justice activism (Pulido 2008), many activists never hear of specious claims or contest them because they are made in "cloistered" academic settings (Gilmore 1993:72). Thus, scholarship critiquing moralist food justice does not necessarily constitute the original notion of food justice.

These examples highlight two shortcomings of conventional research practices—the lack of adequate means for research subjects to shape or respond to how they are represented and very limited transparency about research methods and the nature of researcher–subject relationships. This facilitates colonizing tendencies. And, it undermines the value of the research and academic publications for research subjects. These scholarly practices bear much in common with other colonial forces that emerge from the dominant culture with roots in western European Enlightenment rationality, science, and patriarchy. They persist because it poses no threat to the power of highly educated, mostly white people who direct and do research on food justice work nor to powerful economic interests that create conditions of food injustice. In the next section, we align and integrate a decolonizing framework with the original conception of food justice.

Decolonizing Food Justice Research

From the vantage point of the colonized, a position from which I write, and choose to privilege, the term "research" is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism (Smith 2012:1).

With these words, Linda Tuhiwai Smith begins a powerful, incisive and comprehensive analysis of the social, cultural, spiritual, and physical violence perpetrated by Northern European colonialists and imperialists over the past five centuries. The purpose of her analysis is to identify and name as much of the damage as possible. Doing so is to decolonize, that is, to begin the painful, agonizing process of at least mitigating if not healing the historical trauma caused by this violence (Brave Heart 2004).

Decolonizing food justice and food justice research must emphasize praxis because of the ways theory and practical action can be used iteratively in social change. Frameworks of explanation and on-the-ground strategies inform each other. Indeed, as Smith observes, research has been "inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism" (2012:1). Over five centuries colonizing forces have included many forms of destruction, for example, through disease; economic exploitation; subjugation and enslavement of indigenous people; enlightenment notions of rationality, science, dominion, and civilization; the positional superiority of European knowledge; the dismissal of indigenous spirituality; and imposition of what is "human" and what is "Other".

Colonizing forces go deeply into the research enterprise and have been normalized within definitions of the constitution of legitimate research, theory, and written documentation, for example, "... systematic note taking, checking and rechecking of sources, interviews with informants and, eventually, publication of results" (Smith 2012:87). An all too common consequence of colonial nature of much research is the dismissal of all other forms of knowing as primitive, inferior, and illegitimate. Of course, these forces and power dynamics are racialized in the most fundamental way: the white way is the right way.

In contrast to colonized forms of research, decolonization research is about understanding the world "... from our own perspectives and for our own purposes" (Smith 2012:41). Decolonizing food justice, we argue, also must take shape and develop from our own perspectives and for our own purposes, and based on our own stories and the theories used to explain them. We use the phrase "our own" to refer to indigenous peoples, people of color, allies, and all marginalized and oppressed peoples.

Indigenous people must struggle "... to make sense of our own world ... Part of the exercise is about recovering our own stories ... inextricably bound to a recovery of our language and epistemological foundations" (Smith 2012:40–41). Over the past six or seven decades, decolonization has involved the development of radical social movements, for example, the Black Panthers, the Brown Berets, the American Indian Movement in the US and others globally. Indigenous peoples have struggled to regain land, language, culture, human rights, and civil rights. Decolonization has involved the formation of an indigenous research agenda, based on mobilization, healing, transformation, and decolonization—all with political, social, spiritual and psychological dimensions—and moving in waves from survival to recovery, development and ultimately self-determination (Smith 2012). Ethical research is an essential element of the decolonizing research agenda and involves respect; face-to-face engagement; looking and listening before speaking; generosity; cautiousness; respect for the people's knowledge; and humility (Smith 2012:9). The indigenous research agenda brings to the center and privileges indigenous values, attitudes and practices rather than "... disguising them within Westernized labels such as 'collaborative research'" (Smith 2012:128). It is grounded in indigenous constructions of community and group identity, interests, and needs.

Decolonizing methodology and radical social movements teach that theory and methodology are intimately connected. Retelling a story, or in this case, multiple stories about the CFSC and academic work is part of a healing process that reframes the history of the CFSC as a process in which activists of color were deeply invested and disappointed. This perspective serves as a reminder that a critique of moralist and colonizing practices must also honor the efforts of the oppressed to resist colonization. This demands a new theoretical explanation.

We contend that the original and moralist conceptions of food justice offer this. Furthermore, the perversion of the original notion of food justice and the emergence of a hegemonic moral imperative in the guise of food justice are not merely structural phenomena. Individuals operating in universities, governments, and non-profits internalize values and recreate stories like those told in the introduction. After all, Smith argues that we are "all inheritors of imperialism" (2012:9).

Given how historically entrenched this set of problems is, we are also interested in the power of decolonizing methodologies to transform research about food justice. We contend that by honoring experiences of the oppressed, research can embody decolonizing values and support the original notion of food justice rather than merely capitalizing on the moralist notion of it.

This section touches on a limited number of essential elements of the decolonizing process, which is complex, nuanced, multi-faceted and specific to oppressed people in their communities. Nevertheless, the implications for food justice and food justice research are many. The definitions, the practice, and the study of food justice must center and privilege indigenous knowledge, values, beliefs, interests, needs, hopes, and dreams. The food justice movement and food justice research require leadership from indigenous communities. When a formal research endeavor ignores the original notion of food justice, it is complicit in a colonizing process. Therefore, we look to other processes of social change for new definitions of research.

Feminist critiques of western science have contributed important frameworks for promoting social change through research. According to Smith, feminism has opened up significant spaces “within the academy and some disciplines to talk more creatively about research with particular groups—women, the economically oppressed, ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples” (2012:9–10). A major way space “opened up” was through the coincidence, in the sixties, of activists and academics asking questions about power and research. Feminism took on the considerable task of “undoing or deconstructing dominant paradigms by which most scientific research was bounded” (2012:168).

Feminist leadership, according to Batliwala (2010), provides a complementary frame with the potential to correct the flaws and distortions of power and privilege resulting from colonial forces acting within food justice research and activism. Based on an extensive review of leadership literature, Batliwala offers several elements of feminist leadership that, we contend, are highly relevant to the formation of a decolonized research agenda for food justice. They include making “the practice of power visible, democratic, legitimate and accountable, at all levels, in both public and private realms” (2010:18); “an active participatory attitude, and inclusion, at all levels of the organization”, particularly of people from marginalized groups (2010:26); an intervention “in structures of power that keep the world unjust” and a challenge to multiple, intersecting oppressions (2010:26); creating a “more gender and socially equitable architecture” (2010:27); and, ultimately, it must connect practices of power, politics and values.

Batliwala usefully identifies leadership practices and experiences that feminist leaders use to uphold a socially just research agenda. Whereas some are useful in terms of strategizing, others serve as comforting reminders about the normative and problematic nature of undertaking a feminist or decolonized research agenda. For example, operating within these frameworks requires agility and resilience, since the mainstream often penalizes efforts to upheave the status quo. Batliwala reminds us that introspection and critical appraisals of our own leadership efforts must be ongoing and integrated into every undertaking. Often activists undertaking these charges do not see themselves as leaders, but rather as part of a group,

and they are uncomfortable with power. Relatedly, they see the creation of new and equitable research paradigms and social institutions as fundamentally about relationship building (Batliwala 2010:34–35).

While the academy can offer resources and training for the practice of food justice and food justice research, it rarely encourages many of these characteristics. Smith argues that struggling to integrate indigenous and feminist values and epistemologies into a research agenda is an alienating “occupational hazard” that can have a negative impact on the “perceived expertise and intellectual authority of the researchers” (2012:206). The academy must learn to subordinate its interests, control and ownership to the indigenous communities striving for their own self-determination and emancipation. While we aspire to change these institutions, we have begun by applying these principles in our own collaboration on food justice activism and research. We offer the following stories in an effort to personalize decolonizing methodologies and to make visible this struggle for power.

Personalizing Decolonizing Methodologies

Theorizing the decolonization of food justice research and decolonizing ourselves as we collaborate in food justice activism and research are very different types of challenges to us as individuals and as two colleagues working in solidarity. While theory is often applied to case studies, it is far less common to read in peer-reviewed work how scholars make meaning of theory in personal ways. Although we fundamentally want to see structural changes in food systems and food systems governance, we believe individuals play crucial roles in pushing this agenda. Furthermore, the tendency of academics to call out racism and oppression in the food system without also reflecting on the ways scholarship and scholars re-inscribe oppression merely buttresses the academy’s power. Therefore, we also turn a critical gaze upon our collaboration in an effort to be the change we want to see in the world and to foster a community of praxis with others activists and academics struggling to decolonize food justice.

Collaboration requires that we accept each other’s faults, are willing to acknowledge when we are wrong, and trust each other’s commitment to justice. This is sometimes frustrating and challenging because, despite shared commitments, we are also entrenched in, and have internalized aspects of the cultures of movements and institutions that have colonized food justice. Within this context, we question the limits of what we each contribute and value the unique perspectives each of our backgrounds affords. Thus, we are well positioned to study how racism permeates food justice activism and scholarship and to propose strategies for combating racism in these fields. In doing so, we hope to deepen this body of scholarship that gives voice to groups who are too often silenced by or erased from food justice scholarship.

Several examples, ranging from quotidian interactions to epistemological questions, provided opportunities for us to reflect on, dispute, and create resolutions about how we personalize theories of decolonization and feminist leadership. The first story is of how we came to work together. Following up on Katie’s invitation to Hank to be a guest lecturer at UC Davis, we met for coffee. At the time, Katie

was a first-year graduate student with no experience as an activist and almost no credentials as an academic; however wanting to be more involved in food justice activism, she used her status as a graduate student to initiate a conversation with Hank. She was nervous to meet Hank because of his reputation as a committed activist but told him about parts of her history that led to caring about food justice—learning to cook with her parents and aunts, visiting rich kitchens in poor households around the world, and ultimately overcoming depression by becoming a professional pastry cook. In reflecting on this meeting, Hank observed, “Your heart was right there and I connected with *that* because to me, that insight into that learning that happens, that emotional experience in the kitchen, is so deep. It puts aside all intellectual considerations.”

In this situation, we both lowered our guards and refrained from using power we each held over the other. Katie did not draw on her connections to academic institutions. Hank did not draw on power derived from his status as an elder, a man, or veteran of the food justice movement. Therefore, with this type of interaction, we forged a connection that can and does bear stress.

And indeed, it has. In our first effort to co-author a story, we struggled to come to a shared understanding. The story was about Dig Deep Farms & Produce (DDF), the above-mentioned urban farm. We planned to tell the story at the Society for Applied Anthropology annual meeting in 2011. We decided to present because, as Katie wrote in her notes at the time, we wanted to critically examine academic storytelling, the appropriation of knowledge, and to share lessons from DDF on these matters.

To prepare, we reviewed PowerPoint slides Hank and DDF co-founder, Lieutenant Neideffer previously prepared as part of the official story. We agreed to use some of them in our presentation. Reviewing the slides sparked a rich conversation about the social construction of knowledge and the limits of knowledge. Despite some common ideas and values, we also had different loyalties. Having spent months earning the trust of the farmers at DDF, Katie felt compelled to tell a story that they would approve. And, such a version of the story had to, Katie felt, acknowledge the farm crews’ frustration that they were not given adequate training and support to succeed in their new jobs. Meanwhile, Hank was wary of the possibility that any sign of trouble at DDF could attract criticism from academics who would only know what we told them, and that such criticism could make its way to financial and political backers of DDF. He therefore wanted to tell a story that Lieutenant Neideffer, would approve and that would protect DDF in its first year of operation.

Katie developed a first draft outline that incorporated the PowerPoint slides. As she worked, Katie thought that a more provocative presentation would explore tensions between farmers’ experiences and DDF’s overall objectives. In part, she was inspired by a recent keynote talk at the Dimensions of Political Ecology conference in which Paul Robbins emphasized the importance of tensions and contradictions in political ecological analyses.

Upon reviewing the first draft, Hank was disturbed by Katie’s portrayal of conflict within DDF and by the way she deviated from the official storyline. Katie was disturbed by Hank’s insistence that only one version of DDF’s story could be told

publicly. But, as we explained to each other why we wanted to tell the stories we did, Katie began to acknowledge that her search for tension instantiated a neocolonial and objectifying tendency of academic inquiry. Emphasizing conflict between values, objectives, and social relationships might have made for rich analysis of race and class dynamics in urban agriculture; but it would have wrenched control from members of DDF and subjected the organization to outside critique and possibly even loss of funding before farmers and founders could address the issues internally, which they subsequently began doing. This conflict demonstrates that academic endeavors can lead to appropriating stories, removing them from context in such a way that they do not serve the communities in which they originate. Over time, it became our practice to resolve any conflicts privately before subjecting them to public scrutiny through presentations or publications. This has the effect of promoting inclusiveness in shaping a living story. Batliwala encourages making “the practice of power visible”, however we also believe making difficult or messy situations visible prematurely can undercut the efforts of activists (2010:18). Dealing with such issues using a decolonizing framework requires honesty, humility, and patience. We have yet to deal with irreconcilable versions of a story, but we have agreed that if this happens, we will share neither or both versions.

This paper is another product of our collaboration that demonstrates the importance of using decolonizing and feminist principles in food justice scholarship. We began writing this paper by discussing what arguments and stories we wanted to share and then taking turns writing and building on the other’s work. Katie used this strategy successfully in an article co-written with her advisor. It requires trust that errors will be forgiven and, even more than that, trust that one author will protect the other author’s ideas. After several revisions, it was Katie’s turn to write. She read some of Hank’s work, did not understand an argument, and deleted parts of it. She thought, if it did not make sense to her, it would not make sense to readers. She made other additions and edits as well and sent the revisions to Hank. Hank did not respond except to say that he was busy and he’d get to it.

A month later, we met to discuss the next steps. Here, Katie learned that Hank had not worked on the paper. Initially, Katie felt disrespected by Hank not working on the paper in the month since she sent him the draft. Gradually, Hank shared that he was so troubled by what Katie wrote, or more specifically, the absence of his words from our argument, that amidst his many obligations, he could not find the energy to address this silencing. Hank felt betrayed by Katie. And, it was a very frustrating and saddening experience for both of us.

Over 90 minutes of what seemed (to Katie) a very unproductive meeting and (to both of us) a very frustrating meeting, the seed was planted for a very important lesson. To maintain the trust that inspired us to collaborate, and for collaboration to be a meaningful tool of decolonization, Katie had to take all of Hank’s ideas seriously, especially the ideas that did not obviously make sense. After leaving the coffee shop where this frustrating and saddening meeting took place, Katie went back to work. She restored the paper to the draft that preceded the problematic one. Focusing on what did not initially make sense to her, Katie spent time considering why Hank would choose the arguments and examples he chose. She considered these confusing ideas in the context of Hank’s history, to the extent she was familiar with

it, and in doing so, realized the shortcomings of her frameworks for thinking and writing about food justice and academic scholarship. It was embarrassing, as being wrong often is. Yet, it was this act of contemplation that helped Katie achieve greater understanding. And, it was the confluence of our ideas, on top of the trust we share, that enabled us to share these ideas with you, our reader.

If the process of writing a paper about decolonizing food justice has taught us anything, it is that the process of decolonization requires us to embrace what we don't already know or understand. The academy encourages particular ways of presenting ideas. From discouraging the use of the first person, assigning jargon-laden readings in courses, and feedback on student work, to pressure to publish as a sole author, these expectations help define knowledge and success in academia. To decolonize food justice scholarship, we must welcome, humbly, and perhaps even embarrassingly, age-old yet alternative methods of sharing knowledge. From a scholar's perspective, trust can ease the discomfort of humility and embarrassment. From an activist's perspective, to decolonize food justice scholarship, fortitude and patience can be invaluable tools. But that is not all. Next, we discuss several strategies Hank uses to ensure that his lessons fall upon open, humble minds and loving hearts.

In the course of our collaboration, Hank began learning about his Ohlone heritage. This was part of his family's history that was rarely discussed but of great significance and interest to him. One afternoon, we met to discuss DDF and the Food Dignity Project, a collaborative research project. We began reflecting about Native American history in the Bay Area and quickly realized we knew very little. Hank suggested we do some internet research together on the spot. As we sat over our laptops, sending each other URLs, looking out the window to a busy Oakland street, what we learned horrified us. Bounties were placed on the heads of Native Californians in what amounted to both physical and cultural genocides. As we read detailed accounts of this history, Hank imagined his forefathers hiding these stories inside themselves. He began to understand the weight of the burden his father carried his entire life and began to cry. He cried in empathy with their suffering. And, he cried because he knew then that it prevented him from knowing his ancestry and his father's struggles better.

In the months that followed, we realized that being open about pain and trauma is very important to our collaboration. Hank's willingness to share his feelings modeled the type of honesty he expects of his academic collaborators. This situation demonstrated the importance of acknowledging the overwhelming, present-day impacts of historical trauma and of chronic stress. It takes confidence, patience, and generosity to be as open as Hank was in this situation, and these are both privileges and burdens he possesses.

We are not calling on people who have suffered from racism, historical trauma, and other forms of oppression to bear the burden of educating people with more privilege. And, Hank takes important precautions before sharing his wisdom and welcoming scholars into his activism. Hank is a well known activist and as such students and scholars often request that he participate in research about food justice. In his time as general manager of Dig Deep Farms & Produce, Hank required any potential researcher to share a research protocol, work on the farm, and earn the

approval of the farmers before beginning research. These requirements “make the practice of power visible” (Batliwala 2010:18), challenging the power of academics and helping activists to claim power in a relationship in which they often lack it. Such structure goes a long way in creating a space in which Hank is safe to teach and share in personal, vulnerable, and emotional ways, as described above.

Hank is not always the teacher in our collaboration. Although our working relationship began in a very unbalanced way, the power dynamic slowly shifted. Initially, the power and privilege of male teacher accrued to Hank, and Katie was in the vulnerable position of student and female. The power dynamic became more balanced through our intention to learn from each other. Initially Hank was driven to learn from Katie about her life experiences, cooking with her family, her international travels, and her academic work. He learned about her heart in the kitchen—an insight that went historically, intellectually, and emotionally deeper than his previous association with kitchen and cooking as merely a congenial and convivial experience and which helped him to identify parts of his heritage and upbringing that influence his activism. Through this process, we began articulating the importance of a reflective and personal agenda for food justice research, which this article represents.

Gradually, Hank learned about Katie’s struggle to gain acceptance from the farm team at Dig Deep Farms & Produce. He witnessed the attachment between the farmers and Katie becoming powerful as trust grew. As hard as it sometimes was for him to hear, he learned about thoughts and feelings of the farmers—thoughts and feelings that they would never express directly to him as “the boss”. In this way, Katie’s lack of power allowed her to become an authority on matters that Hank’s power precluded him from fully understanding without her input.

We have worked hard, with a fair degree of success, to pull away the accouterments of patriarchy and privilege that ensnare us all if we allow them to do so. Most importantly, we did not learn from each other in contemplative isolation. We talk to each other frequently, honestly, and fearlessly. Our collaboration has thrived on each of us acknowledging our ignorance, appreciating the other’s ability to constructively question each other’s assumptions and attitudes, and aspiring to collective and emergent insights.

Conclusion

We offer this window into our collaboration to highlight ways we have tried to decolonize research about food justice and to invite other scholars and activists to do the same. Hank’s generosity and vulnerability strengthened already existing trust. Furthermore, making time to research and discuss the history of Native Californians, as well as the history of CFSC’s ODC, provided a broader perspective about the history of oppression that Hank brings to his activism and with which he makes sense of food injustice. These are processes Smith highlights as critical to decolonization. Yet, Hank’s honesty and vulnerability, which fomented the situation, are not attributes that are promoted in academics broadly, or food justice scholarship specifically.

Integrating the qualities of feminist leadership, the imperative of decolonization, and original and moralist conceptions of food justice provides us with critically important markers for countering the injustice imposed by colonialism and white

patriarchy, while building food justice within sustainable community food systems, and doing so with the support of academic research. These frameworks point to the pervasiveness of patriarchy, white supremacy, and colonialism in institutions of governance, including the academy, and thus the need to remake these institutions.

These frameworks also point to the critical role individuals play in remaking these institutions, and thus to the need to make these frameworks personal. We hesitate to suggest a prescriptive course for collaboration, except to say that multiple social, cultural, and political positions and unique personalities that academics and activists alike possess and the unique settings and contexts in which we work matter greatly. Our collaboration has worked well because we give weight to specific aspects of our own and each other's backgrounds and the circumstances that define our work. We grapple with how these factors impact and colonize our own thinking, within and outside of the bounds of traditional academic discourse. We attempt to step outside of—and indeed explicitly reject—those boundaries we find unrealistic and detrimental to just scholarship.

Understanding and decolonizing research about food justice will require considerable reflection, primarily on the part of academics, but also with support from activists. Collaborative reflection has enabled us to understand and begin to decolonize our own research. Therefore, we call on other academics to engage in similar reflection, and eventually to make these reflections public. We also encourage honesty about what shapes the research, especially personal connections and networks, emotional and interpersonal challenges, and skill sets. This, we contend, constitutes meaningful resistance to the academic and educational privilege, racism, and moralism. In our efforts to decolonize our research, we have often had to leave our comfort zones. We hope the above stories of frustration, collaboration, humility, and compassion will serve as reminders that this can be a fruitful endeavor.

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Endnote

¹ There are important similarities. For instance, alternative food and food justice movements share an interest in re-embedding local economies within local food systems.

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