

# RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

## Radical Teaching and the Food Justice Movement

**Introduction**

By Pamela Annas, Sarah Chinn, and Susan O'Malley



FOOD INSECURITY RATE

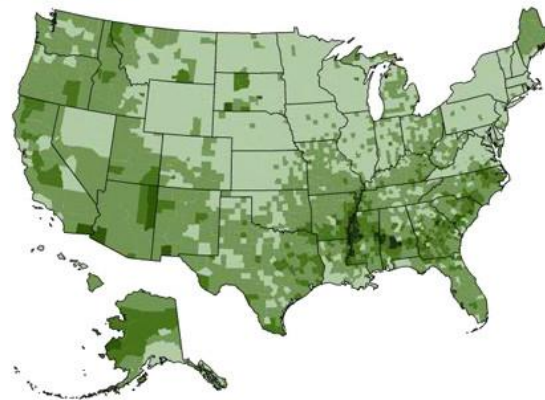


AVERAGE COST OF A MEAL

**\$2.67**

INCOME BANDS WITHIN FOOD INSECURE POPULATION

CHARITABLE RESPONSE	26%	Above 185% Poverty
REDUCED PRICE SCHOOL MEALS, WIC	18%	130% to 185% Poverty
SNAP, FREE SCHOOL MEALS, CSFP (SENIORS)	57%	Below 130% Poverty



Hunger exists in every corner of the United States, but as Feeding America's Map the Meal Gap study shows, food insecurity looks different from one county to the next. In addition to providing data about the prevalence of food insecurity at the local level, Map the Meal Gap estimates the share of food insecure individuals who are income-eligible for federal anti-hunger programs and provides local variations in food costs. The study finds that many food insecure individuals do not qualify for federal nutrition programs and must rely on charitable food assistance, suggesting that complementary programs and strategies are necessary to reach food insecure individuals at different income levels. By providing information about hunger at the local level, Map the Meal Gap can help policymakers and service providers identify strategies to best reach those in need of assistance.

Visit [feedingamerica.org/mapthegap](http://feedingamerica.org/mapthegap) for more information.  
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Source: USDA  
\*Due to rounding, totals range from 99-101%

FOOD INSECURITY CHART

When we first proposed an issue of *Radical Teacher* focusing on food, we had no idea how much interest there would be, or how much radical politics has found a home in the food movement. We knew from the beginning that assembling articles on this topic would be challenging, since so much of the writing and thinking on food studiously avoids radical analysis of the human, environmental, and social costs of the corporatization of food production and the alienation of Americans from the food they eat. The dream of the natural food movement has been realized not by the toppling of agribusiness, but by the Walmartization of organic farming. And while organic factory farming is an improvement over its conventional counterpart – less pollution of waterways by fertilizer runoff, less poisoning of farmworkers by pesticides, and less injection of antibiotics and hormones into the food chain are certainly positive developments – it hardly addresses the interlocking injustices endemic to the food industry.

We tested the waters with a panel at the Left Forum entitled “What is Radical About the Food Movement?” which attracted a large and enthusiastic crowd, and from which two of the articles in this issue – Nancy Romer’s and Doris Friedensohn’s – originated. Once we sent out the call for papers we were stunned by the volume of response: more than thirty proposals for an issue we envisioned comprising five or six articles. And we were heartened by the range and engagement of the proposals, which came from a broad diversity of writers. Many were from people of color, many from the young, several from older writers, several featured grassroots movements and organizing, including union organizing, several from an international perspective, written with an energy and passion that was refreshing. At the same time, we also saw how dominant the liberal analysis of food systems has become in the discourse on food justice, implicitly arguing that community gardens and school mini-farms and organic produce are, in and of themselves, radical interventions. Certainly, creating a venue for fresh fruit and vegetables in food deserts and teaching children where their food comes from are palliatives to the brutal economies of the food systems in which McDonald’s double cheeseburgers are cheaper than apples. But what we were looking for were articles that did more than offer a bunch of collard greens in place of a systemic critique. As you will see, the articles we selected for this issue do the difficult work of engaged political analysis of a broad array of places where food is grown, processed, prepared, marketed, and consumed, and recognize the complex connections among and between those various sites.

Too often, the various actors in food politics and culture, let alone food activists and political radicals, do not talk directly to each other (although, as Nancy Romer points out in her article in this issue, the food justice movement “can be transformative for people who begin to engage politically, often for the first time in their lives”). Ironically, the organization that seems most aware of the intimate interconnections between artificial supports to agribusiness in rural America; the immiseration of the urban and rural poor through disinvestment, deindustrialization, and neoliberal economic policies; and

the triumph of food chemistry is the U.S. Congress. The most recent Farm Bill, still languishing in the Republican-dominated House as of this writing, implicitly links subsidies to agricultural conglomerates, with 75 percent of all subsidies going to the biggest 10 percent of producers, to deep cuts in food stamp programs of about \$25 billion over ten years. All this at a time when disparities in wealth between rich and poor and the shrinking income of the amorphous population we call (with increasingly bitter irony) the middle class are the most distinctive features of the US economy.

It is a truism that poverty too often goes hand in hand with lower-quality, less nutritious food. As Michael Pollan noted in a 2010 article in the *New York Review of Books*, the control of both the job and food markets by behemoths like Walmart and McDonald’s leads to a kind of reverse Fordism: “instead of paying workers well enough to allow them to buy things like cars, as Henry Ford proposed to do, companies like Wal-Mart and McDonald’s pay their workers so poorly that they can afford *only* the cheap, low-quality food these companies sell.”<sup>1</sup> Doris Friedensohn’s article points out a similar phenomenon, in which many of the young people trained at the Food Service Training Academy of the Food Bank of New Jersey will not earn enough to eat at the restaurants at which they hope to be employed.

***It is a truism that poverty too often goes hand in hand with lower-quality, less nutritious food.***

At the same time, Pollan’s argument points to one of the shortcomings of the leading voices in the food movement. Fordism itself was based on the subordination of the worker to the needs of the corporation, and required the steady drumbeat of consumerism to keep the factory gears moving. Moreover, the establishment of the living wage in manufacturing was not the magnanimous policy of Ford and his ilk, but rather the result of years of hard struggle by union activists. Jennifer Gaddis’s article about organizing work among school lunch-room employees provides a current example of this fact: after all, one of casualties of the massive cuts to school food programs has been a living wage for food workers.

Hence our use of the term “food justice” in the title of this cluster and our orientation towards selecting the articles for it. Food justice has been defined in a number of ways, but most often recognizes what the Northeast Organic Farming Association of New York calls the “legacy of historic racism and the structural inequities created by decisions that were made in the food system.” Moreover, food justice resists the seductions of libertarianism and cultural conservatism, whose arguments (voiced most strongly by celebrity farmer Joel Salatin and many in the Slow Food movement) denigrate government intervention in food systems and bewail the disappearance of the full-time (which is to say female) homemaker and cook. Food justice connects the dots between the ubiquity of contingent labor in all segments of the economy and the

increased reliance on fast and processed food; between neoliberal individualism and cultural contempt for obesity; between disinvestment in education and the rise of the frozen, processed, prepackaged school lunch; between ballooning rates of incarceration and the transition in much of rural America from agricultural to prison-based employment.

Food justice also acknowledges and learns from activists outside the United States, and strategies from the past. Nils McCune, Juan Reardon, and Peter Rosset's detailed analysis of La Via Campesina (LVC), in their words "an international alliance of social movements that challenges transnational agribusiness and indeed the entire neoliberal model through peaceful protests, policy proposals, and global articulation," provides an exemplum for transnational and local organizing by agricultural workers that we here in the US could do well to learn from. LVC also gives us a new model through which to think about agriculture and food systems: "food sovereignty," which "puts the aspirations and needs of those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations." This is a very different conceptualization of what is at stake in food politics from the US paradigm, which too often conflates the consumption of food with the "demands of markets." What would it mean to separate buying, cooking, and eating food from the market forces that manufacture demand and set prices, for example?

We lead off the issue with Nancy Romer's thorough and important overview of the radical potential of the food justice movement. Not explicitly about teaching, Romer's article is different from the typical *Radical Teacher* article, but it provides a crucial introduction to the issues discussed in the rest of the cluster. By turns inspiring, alarming, encouraging, and invigorating, it anatomizes the profound challenges we face in transforming national and global food systems even as it provides one example after another of grass roots activism fighting the degradation of land, livelihoods, and the food we eat. We imagine this article as a resource for educators who want to teach about food and food justice: Romer's article is a crucial contribution to the growing literature on food movements in the US and around the world.

Food justice education can also be local, as John Burdick shows us in his article. His focus on the cultural, economic, nutritional, and race politics of soul food is an exemplary treatment of the multiple interlocking structures that food studies can reveal. As Burdick argues, the simplistic condemnation of soul food as unhealthy, fat-laden, and overly-sugared ignores both the historical reasons for soul food as the diet of rural, disenfranchised, impoverished black people (as well as the comforts and plain deliciousness of soul food) and the work of a number of community-based organizations within African American communities that see food as a site for political work.

After all, food has long been the catalyst for political action. The French Revolution was midwived in part by the women protesting bread shortages and price hikes, and during the Civil War, women throughout the South demonstrated against the impoverishment of the region by

a combination of war and commodity farming in plantations, which led to massive food shortages, especially for the urban poor, both black and white. From Russia during WWI to Egypt in the 1970s, food deprivation has led to political uprisings. And, as Mary Potorti shows in her article, political activists often recognized the potential of food as an organizing tool, in this case the Black Panther free breakfast program.

The hunger and malnutrition that the Panthers faced have taken on a new form in the twenty-first century: the phenomenon the USDA calls "food insecurity," and defines as "lack of access, at times, to enough food for an active, healthy life for all household members; limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate foods." Food insecurity as a phenomenon matches the contingency of the labor market: like part-time work, it is not usually a permanent condition, but a situation that comes and goes, depending upon other demands on a family's budget. According to the USDA, more than 14% of the population is food insecure, with an additional 6% with "very low food security." Needless to say, food insecurity maps directly onto poverty levels, structural inequalities, embedded racism, and unemployment: the poorest states with the most food insecurity, such as Mississippi and Alabama (which have counties in which over 30% of households are food insecure) also have the lowest-performing schools, reduced access to reproductive health, most restrictive public assistance, and low-standard healthcare. On the whole, food insecurity is more common in urban areas, where there is less opportunity and space to be self-sufficient by growing food. In New York City, the numbers are astounding: almost a quarter of Bronx residents are food insecure, for example. In 2011 City Harvest estimated that federal, state, and local authorities would have had to contribute over \$150 million to food programs to eradicate food insecurity in the Bronx, even with meal costs estimated at under \$2.50.

Current solutions to the problem of food insecurity are stop-gap at best. While organizations like City Harvest and Feeding America channel food that would otherwise be wasted to people who need it, the charity-based model, as the Panthers understood, runs counter to a critique of the systems that create hunger in the first place. Food insecurity is a symptom of insecurities of other kinds: wage insecurity, housing insecurity, health insecurity, educational insecurity. Likewise, secure access to healthful, fresh, high quality food is itself an index of a variety of other types of security.

As the articles in this cluster illustrate, the focus on food justice puts people's self-determination at the center of the analysis. And that is truly radical.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Michael Pollan, "The Food Movement Rising." *New York Review of Books*. June 10, 2010. nybooks.com.



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# RADICAL TEACHER

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## The Radical Potential of the Food Justice Movement

By Nancy Romer



FARMERS' MARKET  
PHOTO BY NANCY ROMER

The two main threats to our people and planet are climate change and corporate control of our economy and polity.<sup>1</sup> These intertwined issues will take a mass movement of epic proportions to shift. Time is of the essence as climate, economic, and political disasters keep occurring, gaining in intensity, impoverishing people while enriching the transnational and national corporations. Agreements like the Trans-Pacific Partnership could further strip national governments of their rights to protect labor and the environment in favor of protecting corporate profits. The need to build dynamic and effective movements that embody our needs is an imperative for those who believe that only democratic struggles, led by the most oppressed and joined by allies, can create a new world. The Food Justice Movement (FJM) offers an entry into the complicated labyrinth of issues, analyses, and strategies of movements that exist and need to expand and form coalitions.

If you talk to people about these issues, particularly people who are not “in the movement,” they back away, overwhelmed by the enormity of the problems. How can we engage people to be moved into consciousness and action? How can we learn from each other and understand what is happening to our planet? How can we build the kind of organizations with staying power that we need to sustain us emotionally and socially as we build new understandings, new alliances, new movements, and a new world?

***Many North Americans and Europeans think of the “food movement” as “foodies” and gardeners: people who want to make sure they have their organic arugula.***

Smaller problems, more manageable in scope, that still reflect the larger problems at hand can be entry points for learning; for building skills, confidence, and relationships; for creating a culture of participation and community; for generating the courage to participate in analysis, strategy, and change. That is what the FJM has to offer: it addresses our most critical problems and offers concrete projects that can be transformative for people who begin to engage politically, often for the first time in their lives. This is a global movement that has been growing over the last 20 years with institutions, organizations, and alliances of which most people in the U.S. have been unaware.

We’ve seen, quite recently, what happens when a mass movement such as Occupy Wall Street or the Arab Spring in Tahrir Square can be derailed without long-term strategies and organizations. These movements have contributed crucial popular concepts, such as “the 99%,” class solidarity, mass uprising from dictatorships, and are likely to have far-reaching influence; right now they seem dormant. The more we build grassroots organizations of trust and shared experience, communities of learning and analysis, experiments in structure and action, develop

leadership of those most oppressed by the system, and, most importantly, create alliances and broad strategic approaches, the more our movements will sustain us in the future. The FJM has the potential to tackle cross-cutting issues of equality, environment, democracy, resilience, health, and power. It also has the potential to bring in crucial leadership of youth, people of color, women, the poor and working class -- the people most marginalized by the present food system -- and unite across class, race, gender, language, and nation.

Many North Americans and Europeans think of the “food movement” as “foodies” and gardeners: people who want to make sure they have their organic arugula and those who enjoy growing their own. The image the corporate media project is people, young and old, having a good time eating and enjoying their privilege or, in other words, recipes without politics.<sup>2</sup>

The Food Justice Movement is different: FJM wants everyone to have organic arugula and knows that the food system must radically change to achieve that goal. It sees race, class, and gender as central to food oppression and leadership. It sees the food crisis as a result of corporate control over our land, water, agriculture, food processing and distribution with heavy assistance from neoliberal governments and the corporate media. It sees the necessity of sustainable food systems (agriculture, distribution, processing) to mitigate climate change: that means an end to factory farms. It sees feeding the world’s people as dependent upon decentralization of the food system so people can build resilient, culturally-appropriate systems that meet their own needs. It sees renewable energy as critical, and food workers and small family farmers as central to the fight to create a healthy, resilient, and just food system. It sees solidarity across the globe, in particular within the Global South, where the struggle for democratic control of the food system or food sovereignty has been developing exponentially.

The FJM is one of the largest cross-cutting movements today and, therefore, has the potential to create alliances, to understand how the present corporate-controlled world functions, and to create strategies for building a multi-sector movement.<sup>3</sup> The FJM has many parts, potentially creating a multifaceted and powerful movement for change. The parts, demands, and strategies, however, do not always fit neatly together, and there is sometimes conflict. The challenge of making these parts work provides creative organizational work for those who see its potential. For activists and students, it provides insight, hope, and endless opportunities for direct participation. In the next sections I will briefly describe and analyze the major parts of the Food Justice Movement and present directions for its future.

## Sectors of the Food Justice Movement

**Farmers in the U.S.** Farmers are the central sector of the food movement, globally more than nationally. In the U.S., farmers working small- and medium-scale farms and connected to progressive farmer organizations are advancing the important idea of food sovereignty or

maintaining control over farmland, practices, seeds, and distribution of food to feed people. Many of these farmers use agro-ecological methods that are as or more productive than factory farming methods.<sup>4</sup> These farmer activists bemoan the reality that too many of their decisions around seeds, land use, and markets are taken out of their hands by agribusiness that works to control agricultural markets and determine farmers' practices.<sup>5</sup>

In the U.S., the National Family Farm Coalition (NFFC) represents family farmers struggling to earn a living, maintain the family farm tradition and practices, and provide food for the local food economies in which they are embedded. Too often farmers are caught between being a subcontractor juggling agribusiness's demands for use of their seeds, chemicals, and equipment and the finance industry that provides credit with which to buy these "required necessities."<sup>6</sup> They are outraged by the arm-twisting of the multinational agriculture, chemical, fossil fuel, and pharmaceutical corporations and their cronies in government. For the U.S. family farmer, these are the real enemies of food justice and the instigators of climate change, hunger, and poor health.<sup>7</sup>

Many of these U.S. farmer activists are keenly aware of their place in the class structure. NFFC and Family Farm Defender leader Joel Greeno led a "tractorcade" across the state of Wisconsin to Madison, the state capital, in 2012 to support public service union members who occupied the State Legislature to protest attacks on union members. Many independent family farmers see their future as connected to the success of an independent and organized, class-conscious movement standing up to corporate domination of our society.

### ***Farmers are the central sector of the food movement, globally more than nationally.***

NFFC advocates a return to agricultural supply management which attempts to keep farmers from going out of business, the result of decades of deregulation and "get big or get out" legislation. These policies insure the overproduction of genetically engineered corn, soy, wheat, and rice; these subsidized crops then are used in cheap,



COURTESY OF NANCY ROMER

and often hormone and antibiotic-laden, feed used in animal factory farms. The overproduction of corn is processed into high fructose corn syrup that infuses junk food and contributes to obesity and disease. U.S. small and medium-scale farmers ask for price floors, guaranteeing their capacity to continue to earn modest livings while providing food for their communities and protection against climate change through sustainable farming practices.

In addition, U.S. farmers who have suffered land theft and government discrimination have won lawsuits. The National Black Farmers Association won a \$1.25 billion settlement<sup>8</sup> and Native American Farmers and Ranchers won a \$680 million settlement plus \$80 million in loan forgiveness against the U.S. Department of Agriculture for race discrimination. Latino farmers' lawsuits have had similar results. The Federation of Southern Cooperatives and the Mississippi Association of Cooperatives are examples of activist grassroots Black farmer organizations that see themselves as food sovereignty organizations similar to organized peasants from the Global South such as La Via Campesina (LVC), the world's largest peasant/farmer/fisher organization. This cross-fertilization of ideas and strategies advancing food sovereignty and justice across the globe represents movement building at its best.

When people in cities insist that government-subsidized food, including school lunches, be purchased from local farmers, it expands the local food economy, builds decent jobs in the food system, improves the sustainable practices of the local food system (fewer food miles and earth-healthier practices), and produces healthier, fresher food for children. It also builds crucial alliances between family farmers and local consumers and advocates.

Of course, there are conflicts. Small family farmers have trouble staying in business and worry about paying their migrant farm workers better; migrant farm workers live such marginal lives that they need to fight for their pay and rights. Working out contracts between these groups will test the FJM, but these conflicts must be resolved to push back against corporate control of the food system that pushes everyone but the bosses to the bottom of the barrel.<sup>9</sup> Organizations such as the Agricultural Justice Project, the Domestic Fair Trade Coalition, and the Coalition of Immokolee Workers pursue responsible practices, taking both the small-scale farmer and farm worker into account.

**Farmers Across the Globe.** The broadest based and most effective movement of farmers is in the Global South, where peasant cultivators make up over 50% of the total population (about 2.5 billion people); the Global South has 85% of the total world's population. In contrast, in the U.S., small- and medium-scale farmers make up between 1 and 2 % of the total population. Several UN reports and studies of agro-ecological practices indicate that these small scale farmers can feed the projected 10 billion people expected in 2100 and can do it with good distribution networks and planet cooling practices.<sup>10</sup> Clearly the importance of Global South farmers, their organizations

and movements, are essential to our understanding of the FJM. We cannot develop separate strategies; we must work together to achieve results with which we can thrive.

Sitting in a small meeting room in a church basement in Manhattan, I recently had the privilege of hearing a passionate conversation among seven winners of the 2013 Food Sovereignty Prize<sup>11</sup> discuss the farmer movements in their respective nations: Haiti, Brazil, Mali, India, and the Basque Country in the Iberian Peninsula of Europe. The four women and three men talked about land grabs, and the collusion of the multinational seed, chemical, and agribusiness corporations and their national governments in controlling agriculture and making it difficult for farmers to feed their people. They discussed their respective organizations' strategies and tactics to take back agriculture and put it under local control and talked about their use of agro-ecological practices that work with land, soil, water, and people to produce culturally appropriate, resilient food for their local populations. Sheelu Francis, leader of the 100,000+ member Tamil Nadu Women's Collective in India, talked about the struggles of poor women farmers in Tamil Nadu planting native millet that will grow resiliently even with drought and resisting the



FARMWORKER  
FROM A  
DEMONSTRATION  
PROJECT IN  
JAMKHED  
PHOTO BY NANCY  
ROMER

pressure from corporate seed companies to grow genetically engineered rice instead. Rosadit and Rosnel Jean-Baptiste of the Group of 4 in Haiti told us how, after the 2009 earthquake, Haitian farmers burned Monsanto's "gift" of genetically modified seeds so that Haitians could continue to control their own agriculture and keep it out of the hands of the multinational corporations.

All these activists, including the U.S. National Family Farm Coalition, have created chapters of La Via Campesina. Perhaps the largest nonreligious organization on the planet, LVC has over 200 million members from 150 nations, mostly in the Global South. Founded in 1993, the hundreds of chapters work in a variety of ways toward Food Sovereignty or control of their local and national food systems. They are explicitly anti-corporate, work for land redistribution and against land grabs, are conscious stewards of the land and water, and tend to work collectively in small scale co-ops and land-seizure-based

communities, mostly in rural areas. Land-seizure-based communities are made up of farmers, often called squatters, who have seized land and are farming it. The land is either contested -- farmers believe that historically it is theirs -- or landlords have let the land be unproductive for years. They are peasant cultivators, who often face violence, as they stand up for their rights to work the land in service of their people. U.S. trade agreements (NAFTA, CAFTA, and the looming Trans-Pacific Partnership) have wreaked havoc with farmers across the globe. These agreements force national governments to elevate the power of corporations to extract profits from the farmers. The super rich are thus highly motivated to buy off governments through elections or overthrow governments so that their allies support these supranational agreements. Because capital is global, our movements to recharge the democratic power of the people must be global.<sup>12</sup>

**Food Workers.** Between two and three billion people in the world are food workers: agricultural, processing, distribution, retail, and restaurant. Workers along the food chain are paid low wages and have few rights. The Food Chain Workers Alliance is a U.S.-based organization that represents food workers in the food movement and interacts with the FJM. Food Chain Workers are organizing to bring the food justice and labor movements together to support each other and insure that class, race, and gender values are shared. As workers who are particularly oppressed, the food worker sector of the FJM looks to people of color, immigrants, and women for leadership.

Traditional U.S. labor unions, such as the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) and the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU), have been organizing food workers for decades, mostly in large factories and in wholesale and retail workplaces. The United Farmworkers has a rich history of organizing farm worker contracts with assistance from consumer boycotts.<sup>13</sup> Farm Laborers Organizing Committee and Comite en Apoyo de Trabajadores Agriculos have organized farmworkers locally.

Food workers serve as an important sector for the U.S. labor movement to organize. With a declining percentage of workers in unions, the greatest increase in labor organizing in the last ten years has been in smaller shops and contingent workforces, often in the service sector. Recent organizing of fast food workers into the Fast Food Forward campaign, calling for a \$15 per hour wage for fast food workers, has been a creative arena of organizing for labor developing new tactics and drawing in community support. The FJM supports the fast food workers and sees them as important in fighting poverty and low wages. The mostly young, often female, people of color, and immigrant workforce are the people needed to lead the FJM into a cross-cutting issue movement.<sup>14</sup> Fast food restaurants are also the site of organizing against unhealthy, processed food foisted primarily on young and poor people.



Community support for food workers has also played an important role in their success. The Coalition of Immokolee Workers (CIW), tomato pickers in Florida, has created highly successful campaigns on college campuses and in communities to leverage support for their demands from the fast food giants and supermarkets. By applying pressure through boycotts, the CIW has wrested concessions for Fair Food Agreements from Taco Bell, McDonalds, Burger King, and Trader Joe; Wendy's and Publix supermarkets are its most recent targets. These agreements include increased pay per pound of tomatoes and a range of human rights guarantees against wage theft, sexual harassment, and enslavement. The Mexican-inspired music, chants, street theater, and vibrant visuals make CIW actions invigorating. Food justice advocates, including college students, have played a major role in advancing their cause and have provided popular education on the oppression of farm workers and how to work for change.

***Between two and three billion people in the world are food workers: agricultural, processing, distribution, retail, and restaurant. Workers along the food chain are paid low wages and have few rights.***

Restaurant Opportunities Center (ROC), a national organization with branches in eight cities, has created another paradigm for organizing restaurant workers: popular education, direct actions, and a "High Road" campaign lifting up good restaurant employers and demonstrating against bad ones. ROC also provides professional training for restaurant workers, extensive research and public campaigns on its findings to highlight the problems of restaurant workers, many of whom are people of color and immigrants. Brandworkers International, another food worker organization, represents food processing and distribution workers, mostly immigrant workers in fancy food plants where the workers face dangerous working conditions. Their success has been due to effective on-the-job organizing, support from progressive lawyers filing suits on their behalf, and FJM support of their tactics. Their members have won millions of dollars from employers due to discrimination, exploitation, and wage theft. United Food and Commercial Workers, an international union that negotiates worker-employer contracts, uses community support to advance good contracts for their workers. UFCW workers at Murray's Chicken processing plant in upstate New York were struggling for a contract and dealing with the USDA-approved doubling of the speed of the processing line when the Brooklyn Food Coalition (BFC), a broad-based FJM group, publicized their struggle. They got hold of reports indicating major health and safety violations and coordinated with union organizers to apply pressure to company management. BFC was able to get the support of its sister organization, the 16,500 member Park Slope Food Coop and Murray's largest purchaser, and press for a good

contract that would yield healthier and safer conditions for the workers and chickens. Pressure helped to settle a stalled contract within two weeks.<sup>15</sup> Rural Migrant Ministries, a faith-based farmer-worker organizing project, has been valiantly fighting for a Farm Worker Bill of Rights in the New York State Legislature for several years. In 2013 they organized support from FJM groups across the state.

**Hunger and Poverty in the U.S.** Anti-hunger/antipoverty is perhaps the oldest and most institutionalized sector of the Food Justice Movement. With approximately 50 million Americans who are "food insecure" or unable to rely on adequate food on a regular basis, anti-hunger advocates created a web of organizations to address these issues. In the early 1960s, fueled by revelations made public by U.S. Attorney General Robert Kennedy and amplified by the civil rights movement, the presence of hunger, particularly in the South and in cities, became a national disgrace. Anti-hunger organizations formed to lobby for policy change. These activists brought us food stamps: monthly allotments for individuals and families experiencing hunger



JAMES BEARD FOUNDATION HOUSE KITCHEN STAFF PHOTO BY NANCY ROMER

or food insecurity. In a "grand bargain," the U.S. Farm Bill joined the omnibus legislation of farm subsidies with food stamps, now known as Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP), which serves over 48 million Americans, 87 percent of whom live in households with children, seniors, or people with disabilities. By the early 1980s, with Reaganomic policies cutting food assistance programs, a second tier of anti-hunger organizations expanded and provided anti-hunger services directly to the poor such as food pantries and soup kitchens, mostly funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and administered by a wide range of charities, in particular, faith-based organizations. In *Sweet Charity? Emergency Food and the End of Entitlement*, Janet Poppendieck explains how these organizations and nonprofits help serve the poor but often do nothing to challenge the reality of the poverty of their clients. Poverty and hunger are structural issues of inequality in our society. There is enough food to feed everyone in the world, let alone in the U.S., but wide income inequality makes millions of people, and about 1/3 of all children in the U.S., food insecure. This is rarely addressed as structural oppression of poor people by a lopsided system of distribution of wealth.

Some of these food pantry workers, clients, and volunteers, however, have been creative and pro-active in changing this paradigm. More and more pantries like Mother Hubbard's Cupboard in Bloomington, IN, provide a multiservice approach, offering food, job training, and placement as well as political education and organizing to create policy change. The Stop in Toronto sees its work as political and community building, not only feeding hungry people but also giving them tools to transform their lives and the policies that affect them. Many locally run food pantries are challenging the food that government surplus and food corporations offer: yellow cheese, processed carbs, old veggies, food which makes people sick. Brooklyn Rescue Mission, Bed-Stuy Campaign Against Hunger, and Food for Thought in Forestville, CA, are beginning to grow their own food for pantry guests, who may also participate in the gardening. They see the power of these pantry gardens to build community and relationships, and to empower people to understand why they are poor and how they can change the system, going beyond receiving or even growing their own food.

While advocating for a sharply graduated tax system based on people's income, New York State Hunger Action Network identifies the structural causes of hunger and poverty and works with allies to increase the minimum wage, provide jobs, improve the safety net, and support community control of food pantries. Starting out as a legislative and fund-raising organization to fight poverty, Why Hunger has an anti-hunger hotline and a grassroots network of anti-hunger organizations that are participating in a campaign for living wages.

**Health, Anti-Obesity and the School Food Movements.** Both anti-obesity efforts and school food activism are increasing. Close to half of the U.S. adult population and 1/3 of our school age population is overweight or obese; this is highest in low-income communities and among people of color who have little access to affordable, healthy, fresh food. The Live Right, Live Light Program serving obese and morbidly obese children from 2-19 years of age in Brooklyn, NY, works with one third grader who weighs over 250 pounds and cannot fit into her desk at school. Obesity is a preventable epidemic that is caused primarily by government food policies and corporate greed.

Though the term "food desert" has been used to describe the lack of healthy food in low-income communities, a more accurate term might be "food swamps" because food is easily available, but it is often filled with fat, sugar, and salt and sold at cheap prices by corner stores and fast food restaurants. The availability of this cheap, disease-causing food is due to the over-production of corn, soy, and rice, subsidized by tax dollars via the U.S. Farm Bill that is used to produce cheap, processed food that causes obesity and diet-related diseases including diabetes, and heart and joint diseases. The food is deliberately developed by food corporations to hook their customers and push this addiction through advertising to kids.<sup>16</sup> While obesity rates among privileged children are slowly decreasing, this is not true for low-income children. Health advocates ask people to make better choices and to become active exercisers: Michelle

Obama's "Let's Move" campaign signals that perspective. To change the cycle of obesity we must challenge the corporate food system. Michelle Simon's excellent blog and Nick Freudenberg's Tale of Two ObesCities push for government action that outlaws sales of certain products, for example, NYC Mayor Bloomberg's proposed ban on supersized soda or his ban on trans fats, and a required listing of calories of foods served in large chain and fast food restaurants. The San Francisco City Council passed a ban on prizes in "Happy Meals" so that children would be less manipulated to request them.

***School Food Focus, a national organization that has created change in school food for the largest school districts in the U.S., works parallel to these grassroots groups by promoting improved and, when possible, local food sourcing for schools to help change the market, for example, pushing for chicken that is free of antibiotics and hormones.***

In 2013, 134 million children ate school breakfast and 30.6 million ate school lunch at a cost of \$15,672,900,000. Most of the students received food free of charge because their families' incomes were at or below the poverty line. Since its inception in 1938, school food has become less nutritious as a result of decreasing school budgets. Due to public pressure, school lunches have improved slightly. Although the USDA spends billions of dollars annually on school food, much of it is in the form of surpluses from agribusiness. Little of it is fresh, unprocessed, or local food that improves health. Most of it replicates fast food products.<sup>17</sup>

Parents, teachers, administrators, community residents, and students have played a major role in changing school food. This part of the FJM has combined grassroots activism with professional advocates as well as improved food consciousness to make significant, but nowhere good enough, changes in school food. The class and race of these activists is diverse but their demands are consistent: salad bars, water jets, more fresh fruits and veggies, more whole wheat products, more locally sourced food, more "from scratch" cooking, and more choices that are culturally appropriate. Our experience in the Brooklyn Food Coalition has been that low-income parents are very concerned with what their children eat in school and see school food activism as an effective way to make their voices heard. It is also an important place from which to develop local leadership, especially among women and people of color, central to the future effectiveness of the FJM.

School Food Focus, a national organization that has created change in school food for the largest school districts in the U.S., works parallel to these grassroots groups by promoting improved and, when possible, local

food sourcing for schools to help change the market, for example, pushing for chicken that is free of antibiotics and hormones. The hope is that creating specifications for particular food items to be purchased by schools will change the market, and more farmers and processors will provide the food that schools want. But even when school systems set a goal of the percentage of foods to be locally grown, it may be hard to find the products they desire: the market has to catch up to the demand.

Sometimes hunger and health advocates disagree. While all parents, health, and anti-hunger advocates agree that we want healthier, fresh food for our children, anti-hunger advocates worry about reducing the total amount of food available if standards become too high. At present, much of our school food comes from tax-subsidized products that cause obesity and illness and use climate-warming methods. Cheap food, however, is not the answer to health or hunger issues; it empowers the transnational and national corporations that dominate the food system and will continue to dominate our lives unless we change it. We need to empower the local family farmer to produce more healthy food and reduce the control of agribusiness.

### **Community Gardens and Urban Agriculture.**

Community and backyard gardens are found everywhere in the world. Millions of urban dwellers are experiencing some independence from the food system or the joy of growing food in community gardens. Participation in community gardens is thriving in low-income communities and communities of color in urban areas, especially those with blighted housing. D-town Community Farm, a two-acre farm in Detroit, is part of this phenomenon. Detroit's Black Food Security Network, led by educator and urban farmer Malik Yakini, grew out of the large number of community gardens that were cultivated in the hundreds of vacant lots left after housing became inhabitable or was demolished. Detroit has become a city of urban farmers who are building communities who can feed themselves and their neighbors. In addition, they have developed farmers' markets, a community food coop, and policy around food issues. Proclaiming Black and Green as their mantra, they promote people of African descent as leaders in the movement and relate closely to the FJM in the U.S.

Growing Power, led by MacArthur Genius Award winner Will Allen, is another example of urban agriculture that has expanded to many acres of farmland in Milwaukee and recently in Chicago. Dedicated to engaging community to produce healthy, affordable food and to provide training to low-income communities, Growing Power has existed for 20 years. D-town Community Farm, Growing Power, Black Farmers, and the Black leadership of NYC Community Garden Coalition (NYC CGC) have organized Black Farmers

and Urban Growers that hold annual conferences on "Growing Food and Justice."

Farmers' Markets, Community Supported Agriculture, Food Coops, and Local Food Initiatives: Building a Healthy, Sustainable, Local Food Economy. Farmers' Markets, Community-Supported Agriculture (CSAs),<sup>18</sup> and Food Coops are ways to increase the local food economy on a small scale. They are lifeblood for the small and medium-sized family farmers who grow food specifically for the needs and preferences of local consumers. It is as close to food sovereignty as we can achieve in the present economic and political system. Direct relationships between farmers and consumers develop as each learns about and supports the concerns of the other. Small and medium-scale farmers do not have to share profits with wholesalers or processors and thus can maintain farm practices that will protect their land and the food they sell to others. Local processors serve a direct link for farmers and often sell at farmers' markets. For many farmers and processors, the farmers' market provides a social and political space to create community and relationships. Many organizations supporting farmers' markets have cooking demonstrations to teach people how to eat healthfully. CSA farmers appreciate their customers who pay upfront each season for produce, thus allowing farmers to avoid loans. Food co-



BROOKLYN COOP GARDEN PHOTO BY NANCY ROMER

ops, especially ones that require member labor, often build preferential relationships with local farmers and create an economic base that small and medium-scale farmers can count upon.<sup>19</sup> While these relationships are essential in creating the basis of a new food system, they are often devoid of political content because farmers that may belong to farmer organizations pushing

for change may not feel it appropriate to talk politics to their customers.

But that's exactly what we need to happen in our farmers' markets, CSAs, and food co-ops. We need to have discussions and educational opportunities for people to understand the food system and why their action, participation, and support are necessary for us to continue to have healthy food available in the future.

City and State initiatives that give preference to local food for government contracts can help to advance the local food economy and build relationships independent of major food corporations. The cities of Toronto and Los Angeles use federal, state, and local government money allocated for school and institutional food to procure food locally when possible. Governments can also require that food vendors who do business with the city or state have good records of labor and environmental practices. Creating contracts between local and state governments and local food producers can insure healthier food, increase tax revenues, and expand good jobs. The 860,000 school meals produced each school day by the NYC Department of Education's Office of School Food could transform the local

food economy if it used local food. The NYC Food Policy Center at Hunter College has a series of excellent proposals for the mayor of NYC to do this. The niche of local and organic food represents the largest growth sector in the U.S. food economy. It prefigures what might be possible if people were in control of the food system.

Building the market for healthy food will go only so far. Breaking the stranglehold of the corporate-dominated food system will take concerted political action, not just shifting purchasing patterns. The multi-billion dollar advertising and public relations budgets of the food industry will not go quietly.

**Food, Climate Change, and the Environment.** The agricultural sector that includes growing, distributing, processing, selling, serving, and managing food waste accounts for about 1/3 of all greenhouse gases emitted each year.<sup>20</sup> Monocrop farms that use synthetic fertilizer, pesticides, and heavy farm equipment, as well as methane-producing animal factory farms and gasoline used in extensive transportation distribution routes create greenhouse gases that are warming our planet. Agro-ecological methods that replenish carbon into the soil and local networks of food production and distribution minimize global warming.

Whether using organic certification schemes or ecologically sound growing methods, family farmers may be the best stewards of the land. They are often embattled with agricultural giants that control the markets and methods of farmers with which they have contracts. An example of this is chicken processing, in which Tyson and Purdue compel small-scale farmers to function as serfs whose work and lives are under their regulation.

On a 2008 trip to North Carolina for a Politics of Food Conference, I drove with a group of food justice activists by Smithfield Farms facilities. We were overwhelmed by the stench of CAFOs (Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations) and their enormous elevated pools of urine and feces, overflowing onto the land when it rained, but Smithfield did not allow us to see the CAFOs of turkeys and hogs up close. Laws that have made recording of these farming operations illegal have been passed in a number of states by means of heavy lobbying by corporate owners of CAFOs. The few whistleblowers who have recorded the treatment of animals and the despoiling of the environment have received death threats, and some have been hauled into court and served jail time.<sup>21</sup> These poisonous methods of producing food are being addressed and monitored by organizations such as Food and Water Watch and the Humane Society. Our overreliance on products made from animals, often inhumanely and poisonously raised, must be challenged as well. Strengthening the local food economy can also make citizens more aware of the environmental conditions in which their food is grown. Local food advocates are teaming up with anti-fracking and anti-oil and gas pipeline forces in the environmental movement. If the land is poisoned, we cannot grow healthy food for our people.

**Youth: Education and Activism.** Youth are vital participants in the FJM. School-based and after-school

programs and community-based youth programs often include popular food-related programs such as farming and gardening, cooking, healthy food access, and food and fitness projects. Real Food Challenge on hundreds of campuses, though mostly private institutions, insists on local and real food in college cafeterias and is an example of how youth are challenging the corporate food system. They aim to transform the economy through purchasing power. Many high school youth from diverse communities see the potential of creating a food system that meets their needs. Cooking and gardening in schools K-12, food studies across the curriculum, and Wellness Partnerships in schools have brought attention to food issues in curricular and extracurricular activities. What is often missing from these experiences in schools is a food justice orientation but that is often included in after-school and community-based projects. High school and college students have been active in supporting the Coalition of Immokolee Workers in their efforts to get fast food corporations to agree to higher pay for tomato pickers. They have been the backbone for boycotts and created solidarity with farm workers while learning about their struggles.<sup>22</sup> The independence and creativity of these youth give great hope to their future leadership in defining and building the FJM.



SCHOOL FOOD PHOTO BY NANCY ROMER

Organizations representing young and/or immigrant farmers such as Greenhorns, National Young Farmers Coalition (representing more than 40,000 new farmers), and the New Farmers Project provide support and technical assistance for people who have never farmed before or who have only farmed in their home nations. These organizations provide help in finding land to lease or buy and loans to get their farms moving forward. During the last five years the most popular internship among college students has been World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms (WWOOF). Few of these students will become farmers but the knowledge they gain will help them become aware of the issues inherent in our present food system. And some of them have become farmers. We need farmers with food sovereignty or food justice orientations. The hope is that direct experiences struggling within the present food system will move them to join with other farmers and activists to change the system.

**Democracy in the Global Food System: Organizations and Action.** The U.S. equivalent to global

farmers struggling against multinational corporations in peasant cooperatives, can seem anemic.

In Toronto, Oakland, San Francisco, Baltimore, and New York State, Food Policy Councils have been created to enable people to participate in food decisions made by local governments. Of course, how useful they are depends on who is at the table, who is excluded, how much power the Food Policy Council has, and how that power is derived. How do ordinary people get to be heard by the Food Policy Council? What matters is that people are thinking about the importance of influencing public policy around food. What is worrisome is that once a Food Policy Council is in place, it may ignore people lower down on the political food chain. The only way to avoid this is to build local democratically-controlled organizations of strength and awareness that won't put up with being ignored.<sup>23</sup>

Too many decisions are made from the top of the decision-making pyramid, with scant input, let alone control, from the people. In the U.S. that has translated into a kind of hopelessness and turning away from political action and attention.

**Building the Food Justice Movement.** The FJM has great potential. The parts of the movement are in place, but it needs a coherent political vision and analysis to achieve a food system that serves the needs of the people. It must challenge the hegemony of what Latin Americans call "savage capitalism" or corporate profits at any cost. We need alliances of farmers, labor, environmentalists, anti-racists, feminists, LGBT activists, parents, the poor and working class, fast food workers, immigrants, and students. Community gardens can encourage members to come to educational events, participate in creating food policies, and press for needed change. Schools can provide a systemic critique of the food system and prepare their students with knowledge and critical thinking. Food worker organizations can place class politics at the center of the FJM, and environmentalists can make the connection between dependence on the inter-linked fossil fuel and food industries and how their plans exclude people's welfare. The broader and more varied the political education of FJM participants, the more prepared activists will be to decide for themselves the ways the movement should move forward.

These analyses and strategies need to become a range of campaigns in which grassroots groups participate, putting community, cultural, and local demands into effect. Campaigns with specific demands or ideas for change give us a framework with which to educate and agitate. For example, a campaign for labeling genetically engineered foods both educates people about these crops and seeds and organizes against state and federal government targets for such food. Campaigns advancing a national Farm Workers Bill of Rights place excluded farm workers into labor law.<sup>24</sup> Changes in U.S. Department of Agriculture rules and expenditures around school food could be another campaign linking many parts of the FJM. Campaigns to eliminate fast food and junk food commercials from children's TV programming could be another national campaign, much like the anti-tobacco and alcohol campaigns of the past.

Local campaigns can provide specific targets around which alliances and relationships may be built. Living Wage and Sick Days campaigns have been successful in uniting and mobilizing the labor and the food movements in many U.S. cities. FJM in Los Angeles mobilized to improve school food by requiring more locally sourced products. NYC Food Forum, an alliance of FJM groups, created a primer of food policy for Bill DiBlasio, the new mayor of NYC. While the efforts are far from revolutionary, a more activated food movement could take these policy recommendations and move them forward. Without demands there cannot be mobilization, and mobilization for these demands requires popular education. Since most people learn best and become most committed within the context of action, these campaigns can help people to become more familiar with the ideas and goals advanced by the FJM.

Finally, a national organization to unite the FJM with a clear analysis, strategy, and process for change is needed,<sup>25</sup> one that would respect the various sectors, including the grassroots projects and needs and participation of activists. It would have to lift up and support the leadership of those most affected. It would have to be non-sectarian and open to a range of views, approaches, and tactics. It would have to understand that different communities want to participate in different ways, but all communities want to be represented and have their voices heard. It would have to understand the importance of advancing the FJM in the U.S. but also need to see its place among the movements internationally and not try to replicate our nation's unfortunate history of attempting to dominate others. US Food Sovereignty Alliance and the Food Chain Workers Alliance are allied national organizations that may unite the Food Justice Movement.

**The FJM and Educators in the Academy and Outside.** Rich opportunities await educators, students, and activists within FJM, whether in schools, in the academy, or in communities, as organizers and popular educators. Because the present maladies and the possible solutions of the food system cross cut so many major issues, it offers opportunities for action and learning. Basic research, organizing, and leadership skills; critical and strategic thinking; building coalitions and movements are all needed. Importantly, small wins and improvements are possible in schools, communities, workplaces, families, and our lives. Small wins create hope and belief in our power and are critical ingredients for an empowered movement. Efforts that respect the individual but form caring and effective groups create personal, social, and political change. Those collective identities can produce effective organizations and movements for change.

The hard reality is that our planet is changing and there is a growing number of hungry, sick, and unempowered people living on it. The world has never more emphatically needed a change in direction: we all know it and we need to make it happen.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Lester R. Brown, *World on the Edge: How to Prevent Environmental and Economic Collapse*, Earth Policy Institute, 2011; Bill McKibben, *EAARTH: Making a Life on a Tough New Planet*, Times Books, 2010; Frances Moore Lappe, *Eco-Mind: Changing the Way We Think to Create the World We Want*, Nation Books, 2011.
- <sup>2</sup> Mark Bittman, the "Flexitarian" columnist for the *New York Times*, defies this static concept. Bittman serves progressive food politics along with his recipes. See Mark Bittman, *Food Matters: A Guide to Conscious Eating*, Simon & Schuster, 2009.
- <sup>3</sup> Several other sources provide a much fuller account of the FJM: Eric Holt-Gimenez, ed., *Food Movements Unite! Strategies to Transform Our Food Systems*, Food First Books, 2011; Fred Magdoff and Brian Tokar, eds., *Agriculture and Food in Crisis: Conflict, Resistance, and Renewal*, Monthly Review Press, 2010.
- <sup>4</sup> Jules Pretty, "Can Ecological Agriculture Feed Nine Billion People?" in *Agriculture and Food in Crisis*. See Mark Bittman's succinct "How to Feed the World," *NY Times*, Oct 14, 2013; Rodale Institute's Farming Systems Trial; IAASTD report, Nourish a Billion.org.
- <sup>5</sup> <http://whyhunger.org/>, <http://www.grassrootsonline.org/>, <http://www.foodfirst.org/>, <http://smallplanet.org/>
- <sup>6</sup> Samir Amin, "Food Sovereignty: A Struggle for Convergence in Diversity," in *Food Movements Unite!*
- <sup>7</sup> Wenonah Hauter, *Foodopology: The Battle Over the Future of Food and Farming in America*, The New Press, 2012.
- <sup>8</sup> <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/tag/pigford-settlement>, <http://www.indianfarmclass.com>, <http://www.farmerclaims.gov/>
- <sup>9</sup> Raj Patel, *Stuffed and Starved: The Hidden Battle for the World Food System*, Portobello Books, 2007.
- <sup>10</sup> Raj Patel, "Can the World Feed 10 Billion People?" *Foreign Policy*, May 4, 2011.
- <sup>11</sup> The Food Sovereignty Prize is awarded to farmer activists across the globe fighting to control their own food system. It is in contrast to the World Food Prize, which goes to scientists and managers from such corporations as Monsanto and Syngenta, <http://foodsovereigntyprize.org/>
- <sup>12</sup> John Perkins, *Confessions of an Economic Hit Man*, NY: Penguin, 2004.
- <sup>13</sup> Frank Bardacke, *Trampling Out the Vintage: Cesar Chavez and the Two Souls of the United Farm Workers*, Verso Press, 2012.
- <sup>14</sup> Ryan Hill, "Opportunities Present for 'Labor Left' in Walmart and Fast Food Fights," *Solidarity*, October 9, 2013.
- <sup>15</sup> *Linewaiters' Gazette*, Park Slope Food Coop newspaper.
- <sup>16</sup> Michael Moss, *Salt, Sugar, Fat: How the Food Giants Hooked Us*, Random House, 2013.
- <sup>17</sup> Janet Poppendieck, *Free for All: Fixing School Food in America*, University of California Press, 2011, includes insightful material on how fast food inspired school meals came to be and how food workers have become increasingly de-skilled and often are reduced to heating up foods that were produced in factories.
- <sup>18</sup> Community Supported Agriculture is a subscription agreement between a group of consumers who agree to pay a set price up front for a given season to a farmer who agrees to provide whatever is grown on a regular basis to the consumer. It gives farmers cash before the growing season to buy seeds and not rely on bank loans for capital.
- <sup>19</sup> The Park Slope Food Coop (PSFC), with 16,500 members, requires each member to work 2 hours and 45 minutes every four weeks, thus cutting down on labor costs and building community. The PSFC is the largest member/worker coop in the U.S., with prices about 30-35% cheaper than those of a regular supermarket. Monthly democratic governing meetings and a biweekly newspaper make political conversation and action common practice.
- <sup>20</sup> Anna Moore Lappe, *Diet for a Hot Planet: The Climate Crisis at the End of Your Fork and What You Can Do About It*, Bloomsbury, 2010.
- <sup>21</sup> [http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2012-03-05/features/chicago-policy-cafo-protection-bill-gets-hearing-in-illinois-20120305\\_1\\_cafos-animal-welfare-animals](http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2012-03-05/features/chicago-policy-cafo-protection-bill-gets-hearing-in-illinois-20120305_1_cafos-animal-welfare-animals)
- <sup>22</sup> <http://sfalliance.org/> Student-Farmworker Alliance.
- <sup>23</sup> Many FJM organizations are run democratically, controlled by their members. Unfortunately, many are nonprofits, often controlled by tightly controlled appointed boards. NGOs (non-governmental organizations) may function as brakes to movement building and democratic participation. Often these organizations invite participation in activities but not in decision making.
- <sup>24</sup> Groups such as Rural and Migrant Ministries are working on such legislation. <http://ruralmigrantministry.org/jfw.html>
- <sup>25</sup> Unfortunately, in 2011, Community Food Systems Coalition, an organization that attempted to unite the U.S. food movement, collapsed due to organizational, fiscal, and personnel problems. The hope is that a successor organization will emerge with stronger support and organizational strategies.



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# RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

## Mobilizing to Re-value and Re-skill Foodservice Labor in U.S. School Lunchrooms: A Pathway to Community-level Food Sovereignty?

By Jennifer E. Gaddis



FIGURE 1: UNITE HERE LOCAL 1 PROTEST IN CHICAGO

COURTESY OF KYLE SCHAFFER

## I. Introduction

The dominant agri-food system, and the labor policies that support it, render food chain workers some of the most economically insecure (and ironically food insecure) populations in the country.<sup>1</sup> Advocates of food sovereignty believe that the individuals who produce, distribute, and consume food should have the right to define the policies and priorities of their food systems. Recent strikes at fast food restaurants and emerging activist research (see for example *Behind the Kitchen Door*<sup>2</sup>) suggest that a growing number of food service workers have begun to organize in support of food sovereignty. These worker-led movements are using collective political power to address social and economic injustice in the food system. Their efforts are part of a radical food politics that views re-skilling and re-valuing labor across the food chain as the foundation of a food system that builds human, ecological, and economic health.

The systemic exploitation of food chain workers (and the natural environment) is the product of social choices, embodied in institutions, ideologies, and political-economic structures. One such institution is the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), which was originally founded in 1946 with the dual purpose of supporting domestic agriculture and children's health. It is now an \$11 billion taxpayer-funded industry that embodies the tensions between reformist and mainstream views of food provisioning. A growing movement in support of "real food" (i.e. locally grown and scratch-cooked foods) seeks to disrupt the NSLP's historical reliance on large-scale farmers and food processors whose products travel through complex commodity chains.

The processed food industry is responding to the desire for real foods by marketing their "clean label" products (i.e. high quality processed foods made without artificial or other unwanted ingredients) and value-added locally grown foods (that largely travel through conventional supply chains) as a simple and cost-effective solution. This strategy, which I term "real food-lite," relies on the substitution of inputs rather than deeper reforms to the food system. School food authorities are predisposed to accepting industry-based solutions like clean label products since they fit within the existing heat-and-serve paradigm. In other words, the constraints of technological and institutional "lock-in" hinder transitions away from heat-and-serve meals and ultimately prevent more sustainable food systems from developing.

School foodservice workers are largely overlooked and undervalued by policy and academic circles, but eighteen months of ethnographic fieldwork and archival investigation have led me to a very different conclusion about the importance of cafeteria staff.<sup>3</sup> Frontline workers are critical to the success of the NSLP as it exists today—but even more importantly, they have tremendous potential to drive positive changes to the school food environment. This article focuses on one such example of workers using their personal and collective agency to advocate for both higher quality meals for U.S. schoolchildren and higher quality

jobs in the foodservice sector. Underlying my analysis is the understanding that school foodservice is a form of reproductive labor,<sup>4</sup> which means that it encompasses "various kinds of work—mental, manual, and emotional—aimed at providing the historically and socially, as well as biologically, defined care necessary to maintain existing life and to reproduce the next generation."<sup>5</sup>

School cafeteria workers have long been a subject of public satire, as in comedian Adam Sandler's song "Lunch Lady Land," where he sings, "Woke up in the morning, put on my new plastic glove. Served some re-heated Salisbury steak with a little slice of love. Got no clue what the chicken pot-pie is made of." His lyrics (albeit crudely) bring into question the lack of transparency in the agro-industrial food system and the lunch lady's culinary autonomy. Rather than expressing some truism about school cookery and those who perform this work, Sandler's caricature pokes fun at the negative outcomes (i.e. poor food quality and disempowered workers) of a particular mode of school feeding that provides children with meals that are "scientifically nutritious" yet rarely satisfying. The cultural portrait of the lunch lady presented by Sandler and other popular representations (e.g., the television show *The Simpsons*) doesn't conjure up an image of political activism. Cafeteria workers belonging to UNITE HERE—the largest organization representing foodservice workers in North America—are building a new public image. As of October 2013, school cafeteria workers in Chicago, New Haven (Connecticut), and Philadelphia have begun mobilizing to dismantle the structural constraints of the heat-and-serve paradigm.



FIGURE 2: UNITE HERE LOCAL 1 PROTEST IN CHICAGO. COURTESY OF KYLE SCHAFER.

## II. "No more frozen food!"

"We want to cook! Nosotros queremos cocinar!" rang the voices of over two hundred school lunchroom workers as they gathered outside of the Chicago Board of Education in early April 2012 to launch their campaign for "Real Food, Real Jobs." Their demonstration, coupled with the release of their report "Kitchens Without Cooks: A Future of Frozen Food for Chicago's Schoolchildren?" signified the emergence of a radical school food politics in Chicago Public Schools (CPS). At the time of the demonstration, the



CPS Board of Education planned to serve frozen pre-plated meals at all newly constructed and renovated K-8 schools.

These TV dinner-style meals—then served in about 25% of the cafeterias—were the subject of undercover activism by Sarah Wu, a CPS teacher who ate school lunch nearly every day during the 2010 school year and anonymously blogged about it on her website [Fed Up With Lunch: The School Lunch Project](#). These daily snapshots revealed a system of food provisioning that reinforces the social acceptability of wasted food and wasted packaging materials. The single-use plastic containers also introduce endocrine disrupting chemicals (e.g., phthalates and parabens) into children’s diets, which could lead to negative public health implications in the long-term. These frozen pre-plated meals are disproportionately used in urban areas and in elementary schools, which not only hints at the environmental racism inherent in the system, but also provides cause to worry since young children are especially vulnerable due to their body size and phase of development.



FIGURE 3: A TEX MEX MEAL SERVED IN CPS CAFETERIAS. COURTESY OF SARA WU.

These hot and cold meal packs are not a new phenomenon—they were widely introduced in the wake of the “right to lunch” movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s. A coalition of civil rights and anti-hunger activists had succeeded in lobbying the federal government to make free and reduced-price meals available to all eligible schoolchildren. Many municipal and state-level school food authorities struggled to comply with the new federal law, as older buildings often lacked kitchen facilities and the authorities had neither the time nor the money to build production kitchens in every school. To facilitate the rapid mass expansion of the NSLP, the federal government eased restrictions on private contractors and promoted centralized and mechanized food production technologies like the meal pack.

On the one hand, this policy shift succeeded in helping large numbers of underserved children in high-poverty urban areas gain access to subsidized school meals. On the

other hand, the mass industrialization of school foodservice deskilled a traditionally female profession of cooks and home economists and led to the proliferation of part-time positions that preclude foodservice workers from earning a livable wage. This policy shift also affected other areas of the school food chain—as control of ingredients became increasingly centralized in manufacturing facilities and distribution centers, local and regional producers were effectively squeezed out of NSLP procurement channels.



FIGURE 4: AN INDUSTRY CONSULTATION IMAGE COURTESY OF BRIDGEPORT PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Many contemporary school administrators refer to their foodservice departments as “support services,” which suggests that feeding children is secondary to the primary aim of educating children.<sup>6</sup> This viewpoint—coupled with inadequate federal and state meal reimbursements—leads financially strapped school food authorities to look for short-term cost savings. Foodservice directors often hold competing ideologies about whether cafeteria employees should be treated like the rest of the educational staff (in terms of raises, wages, benefits) or treated like private sector foodservice employees. Sylvia Elam from Kentucky describes the conundrum: “You just cannot have employees just because you want to be nice to them and give them benefits. Again, just like any other private industry that has standards, based on the number of meals, or meal equivalents you produce, there [are] an X number of hours that you can have.” This metric—meals per labor hour (MPLH)—is one of the primary tools used to measure the productivity of school cafeterias and to depersonalize staffing decisions.

School foodservice employees who qualify for public sector benefits are a particularly costly form of labor, which tends to make unionized school districts hyperaware of their MPLH. The two most commonly used strategies for increasing MPLH are redesigning production systems and increasing the use of convenience foods—the frozen meal pack is a classic example of both processes working in tandem. These commercially prepared foods reduce the need for full-time workers, which allows for even more cost

savings since part-time workers typically do not qualify for medical or retirement benefits. These tactics may give a temporary boost to a school district's bottom line, but eliminating workers' ability to earn a livable wage has negative long-term effects on community economic security and the school district's tax base.

The dearth of livable wage jobs in the foodservice industry is a particularly problematic phenomenon in urban areas with large percentages of single-parent households. In New Haven, for example, nearly three-quarters of cafeteria workers are primary providers, so any reduction in their wages affects the economic security of an entire family.<sup>7</sup> At the national scale, opportunities for workforce development and professional advancement declined alongside the rise of heat-and-serve meals. Marilyn Briggs—a foodservice director from Sacramento, California who began her career in the 1970s—explained the evolution she observed:

*We used to teach lots and lots of classes about basic skills of food preparation: how to bake bread, how to work with raw meat products—even butchering skills, and desserts, all kinds of from scratch products, and fruit and vegetable preparation. That has changed now; with central kitchens it's a whole different way of operating, a whole different set of skills. With reheating, even fewer skills are required. So, I definitely see a difference from when we were learning the skills for actually preparing the food in a school kitchen... Very rewarding, you actually have a product at the end of your hard work and can see that the children are enjoying the food that you prepared. You can feel creative, because you can add your own touches and help the district to create new recipes.*

Dropping the focus on MPLH and increasing municipal, state, and federal financing for the NSLP would allow interested school districts to move away from processed convenience foods toward on-site cooking with healthy ingredients. A return to fresh cooking in schools would provide more hours and new pathways for career advancement, especially for the many part-time employees that urban school food authorities employ. On the contrary, bringing real food to urban schools via pre-pack meals (e.g. [Revolution Foods](#)) is a form of what I term “real-food lite.” As an extension of the heat-and-serve model, it is a profitable niche market for the agri-food industry, rather a pathway for sustainable community development.

### III. “Let us cook!”

The workers in Chicago (Local 1), New Haven (Local 217), and Philadelphia (Local 634) are using the power of organized labor and building community coalitions to advocate for real food *and* real jobs in the Nation's schools. By “real food” they mean a return to fresh cooking. By “real jobs” they mean a livable wage that respects the reproductive labor they perform. At the start of the UNITE HERE campaigns, all three cities relied on a hybrid model

of food production: “warming kitchens” where pre-made meals are reheated and “production kitchens” where meals are cooked on-site. Cafeteria workers in the warming kitchens often report feeling disempowered and demoralized by their inability to improve the quality of the meals they serve. As one frontline server remarked before trailing off, “The students are always complaining about the food and they ask me if I cook it...” In contrast, workers at production kitchens often have the ability to make minor modifications to standardized recipes and to develop additional menu items that suit the taste preferences at their particular schools.



FIGURE 4: UNITE HERE LOCAL 1 CAFETERIA WORKERS DEMONSTRATING IN CHICAGO FOR THE RIGHT TO COOK IN SCHOOL CAFETERIAS. IMAGE COURTESY OF KYLE SCHAFER.

Cafeteria workers have taken up the slogan “Let us Cook!” partly because they hope to satisfy students' individual needs, preferences, and personalities—or to engage in what sociologist Marjorie DeVault would term the “larger work of feeding.”<sup>8</sup> Through years of frontline experience, foodservice workers learn the nuances of their school populations and can often predict which menu items are likely to be popular and which are likely to go uneaten. Despite this unique perspective, only about a quarter of the UNITE HERE workers reported having had the opportunity to provide input on the meals they serve.<sup>9</sup> Through their organizing efforts, the cafeteria workers hope to win the right to prepare freshly cooked meals in every school. They want to serve food that they can be proud of—in other words, meals they would feed their own children.

The vast majority of UNITE HERE cafeteria workers believe that their students would throw away less food if they were allowed to prepare school meals from scratch using fresh ingredients.<sup>10</sup> Under the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010—which came into effect during the 2012-2013 school year—a federally reimbursable school lunch must include either a fruit or a vegetable. Children are, however, not actually required to eat the fruit or vegetable. This well-meaning policy leads to large volumes of food waste if children do not like the fruits and vegetables on offer. However, when cafeteria workers have culinary autonomy they can work with students to develop healthful menu items that the children will consume. As one high school cook explained, “We've asked them, ‘What would you like to have? What kind of vegetables do you want?’ They really like the green beans and they like the peas. They love anything I can roast. They love roasted zucchini

sticks. They love roast squash...So we roast a lot of vegetables."<sup>11</sup>

Empowered cafeteria workers' can foster positive public health outcomes through the gradual shaping of children's learned food preferences. For example, one elementary school cook uses her culinary autonomy to create games that encourage young children to try unfamiliar foods:

*The other day they had oatmeal on the menu at breakfast, and [the children] didn't want to try it. And so I started playing a little game with them. I said, "Taste your oatmeal. Tell me what you taste" ... And we have recipes that we have to go by, but they [the management] told us occasionally we could put something to enhance the flavor, that won't add calories or affect it. So in my oatmeal I started putting a little vanilla flavor. And after about five tries the children guessed it, because it's just mild.*

According to literature on the development of taste preferences, repeatedly inviting a child to taste a small amount of a rejected or disliked food, without great emphasis on how much they eat, is one of the best strategies for promoting liking.<sup>12</sup> Moreover children's food preferences are affected by the contexts and consequences of eating various foods,<sup>13</sup> which means that positive interactions with cafeteria workers can lead to the acceptance of a wider array of nutritious foods. Therefore, the UNITE HERE cafeteria workers believe that an investment in the frontline staff is an investment in children's lifelong health and well-being.

#### IV. "Let us keep kids safe!"

Most jobs in school cafeterias are not particularly lucrative, so savvy foodservice directors hire employees who will be propelled to perform high quality work out of sheer dedication to the children they feed. Melba Hollingsworth, who spent her career directing child nutrition programs in Louisiana, stated in her 2012 oral history, "You have to look for those folks that have that nurturing skill built within them because those are what make these programs happen, because they will go beyond and they will make it happen, no matter how many regulations, no matter how many other things that will happen." Similarly, Kathy Talley, who spent twenty years doing nutrition education and training at the West Virginia Department of Education, explained that it is the "solid core of caring and concern for the children" that carries the NSLP through difficult situations. However, in the time I spent observing and interviewing foodservice workers, I found that this "solid core of caring" often makes workers reluctant to leave tasks undone for fear that the children will be negatively affected. When foodservice staff works off the clock or skips scheduled breaks, management perceives staffing levels as adequate, even when they may not be. In short, the "solid core of caring" makes it difficult for workers in individual schools to take action against exploitive working conditions.

UNITE HERE survey results indicate that the majority of school foodservice workers view themselves first and foremost as caretakers.<sup>14</sup> Perhaps this is because so many of them have social or even familial relationships with the children they feed. For instance, over half of the New Haven cafeteria workers have children or grandchildren in the public schools.<sup>15</sup> Their efforts as caretakers ensure that neither the nutritional needs of food insecure families nor the emotional needs of children are overlooked. Like many of her fellow cafeteria workers, one woman from Arkansas recalled, "We had a little boy that I can remember; he was homeless... And we would always make sure, and I know this is illegal, but we always made sure we put extra food on that child's tray because we knew he didn't have anywhere to live."<sup>16</sup> Similarly, a retired school foodservice director from Louisiana explained how the caretaking efforts of her cafeteria staff provided a safety net for food secure families:

*People just don't realize that it's not just a school lunch program; it's actually taking care of some needs of children that may not have food at home... Oftentimes we'd [the cafeteria staff] go home on a holiday and we'd wonder, "I know little Johnny comes to school a little shabby every day, is he going to eat, how is he going to manage?" ...We often would send things home with them on holidays. We would become a surrogate mother or an aunt, or auntie as they would say here, and so those things are really significant."<sup>17</sup>*

It is important to note that not every cafeteria worker fully engages in this type of reproductive labor, but those who do typically take great pride in their efforts because they feel that they are providing a necessary community service.

Cafeteria workers also provide emotional support that is critical to children's safety at school. Many of the foodservice directors and frontline staff that I interviewed explained that because the cafeteria staff is seen as non-threatening, children are more likely to confide their troubles to a foodservice worker than to a counselor, teacher, or principal. The value of this emotional labor—performed by what many school boards consider to be "support staff"—was recently a subject of intense debate in Philadelphia. In early June 2013, the School District of Philadelphia (SDP) announced the layoff of over 1,200 noon-time aids. These employees, also known as "student safety staff," are members of UNITE HERE Local 634. They labor alongside cafeteria workers to keep children safe during mealtimes and between classes.

At the time of the mass layoff, inadequate staffing levels were already affecting the safety of Philadelphia schoolchildren. UNITE HERE survey results indicated that forty percent of the SDP cafeteria staff and noon-time aids had recently witnessed a violent incident that could have been diffused or even prevented if more student safety staff had been present.<sup>18</sup> Such a drastic reduction in the number of dedicated school safety staff would likely make the already understaffed schools even more dangerous in

subsequent years. To protect their communities and their livelihoods, UNITE HERE workers joined with parents, clergy, SDP students, and (eventually) over fifteen elected officials to protest the labor cuts. They staged a series of demonstrations and a hunger strike during the summer of 2013 that drew national attention to the role that cafeteria workers play in keeping children physically and emotionally safe. Their activism proved successful when nearly all of the laid-off school safety staff was recalled to work before the start of the 2013-2014 school year.



FIGURE 5: PHILADELPHIA WORKERS MARCH IN SUPPORT OF SCHOOL SAFETY STAFF. IMAGE COURTESY OF UNITE HERE LOCAL 634.

## V. Mobilizing for Food Sovereignty

At the time of my writing in October 2013, workers in Chicago, New Haven, and Philadelphia are continuing to mobilize themselves and their communities in support of “Real Food, Real Jobs.” They have achieved varying levels of success thus far. The Philadelphia campaign focused on the immediate concern of school safety, whereas the Chicago and New Haven campaigns emphasized a return to fresh cooking in their cafeterias.

The Chicago workers enjoyed an early victory at the negotiations table. On May 2, 2012—less than a month after the CPS lunchroom workers’ first public demonstration—the Chicago Board of Education (BOE) committed to scrap their planned expansion of warming kitchens and to eventually phase out the use of frozen pre-plated meals. However, the cost-cutting undercurrent that plagues the NSLP (and public schools more generally) is preventing the Chicago workers from realizing the city’s planned transition to a fresh food paradigm. A transition away from pre-plated meals requires additional labor at on-site kitchens—yet amid district-wide job cuts during the summer of 2013, CPS planned lunchroom layoffs that would affect 10-15% of the foodservice staff. These labor reductions would preclude Chicago’s transition to freshly prepared school meals. Instead the BOE may choose to satisfy critics like Sarah Wu by taking the route of “real food-lite” to improve the quality of school meals. The CPS cafeteria workers, in contrast, believe that the route of “Real Food, Real Jobs” is best for both the health of schoolchildren and the strength of their Chicago communities. They are asking the public (this means you!)

to sign their online petition to let CPS know that you can’t cook food from scratch without lunch ladies!

After several months of organizing and building their vision for New Haven Public Schools, members of Local 217 launched their campaign on May 8, 2013. They marched into the mayor’s office chanting “Fresh food, Real jobs!” and hand-delivered a copy of their report “Healthy Kids First: Why cafeteria workers want to cook fresh meals in New Haven Public Schools.” Since then they have built political support for their campaign through grassroots organizing and appearances both on the radio and at the local university (which is well-known for the success of its own Real Food, Real Jobs transition). New Haven’s contract negotiations committee—comprised of cafeteria workers who elected to take on this leadership role—is moving beyond the mandatory bargaining subjects of wages and benefits. They are using their contract negotiations with the City of New Haven as an opportunity to win a legally binding commitment to re-invest in quality food and quality jobs. They hope to create a task force made up of workers, management, and City officials that will have the authority to collectively design and oversee a return to fresh cooking.

## VI. Conclusion

Ultimately a radical food politics is a community-based politics that creates opposition to the dominant corporate foodscape. The collective power of frontline foodservice workers could act as a leverage point for the creation of a sustainable food system, built on the ideals of social justice, livable-wage jobs, and long-term ecological health. The UNITE HERE model presents one potential pathway toward realizing such a broad-scale transformation. School lunchrooms are nodes of potential activism scattered across rural and urban neighborhoods in all fifty states. Much is at stake—over thirty million American children participate in the National School Lunch Program each day, gaining not only physical but also emotional sustenance as they pass through the serving line. Policies and practices that revalue the role of reproductive labor and the staff that performs it will improve children’s diets and build food systems resilience and adaptability across community, regional, and national scales. Let’s mobilize.

Addendum:

There have been two major victories in the UNITE HERE K-12 campaigns since this article was written. Check out how 97 Chicago lunchroom workers won their jobs back and New Haven workers won a contract that will provide a “pathway to cooking” ([www.realfoodrealjobs.org](http://www.realfoodrealjobs.org)).

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> *The Hands that Feed Us*, report released June 6, 2012 by the Food Chain Workers Alliance.
- <sup>2</sup> Jayaraman, S. (2013). *Behind the Kitchen Door*, ILR Press.

3. <sup>3</sup> My research on school feeding began in New Haven, Connecticut, where I worked in the kitchens and cafeterias, attended union meetings and staff trainings, rode along on food deliveries, and accompanied the school district's foodservice director as he dealt with food brokers, tested new products, and met with policymakers. This ethnographic research was later supplemented by archival sources and oral histories, participatory observation at state and national industry conferences, and visits to cafeterias in over thirty school districts in diverse parts of the country. I later engaged with UNITE HERE to conduct participatory research during the launch of their campaign in New Haven Public Schools.

4. <sup>4</sup> This concept originally comes from the work of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, but feminist scholars began using the concept of reproductive labor in the 1970s to name and analyze women's unpaid domestic work. Later it was extended to analyses of wage labor.

5. <sup>5</sup> Laslett, Barbara, and Johanna Brenner. "Gender and Social Reproduction: Historical Perspectives." *Annual Review of Sociology* 15 (1989): 381-404.

6. <sup>6</sup> On the contrary, many child nutrition professionals argue that education doesn't stop at lunch—food habits and conversational etiquette are socially mediated—and the lunchroom is a prime venue for learning.

7. <sup>7</sup> *Healthy Kids First: Why cafeteria workers want to cook fresh meals in New Haven Public Schools*, UNITE HERE report released May 8, 2013.

8. <sup>8</sup> DeVault, M. (1994). *Feeding the Family: The Social Organization of Caring as Gendered Work*, University of Chicago Press.

9. <sup>9</sup> Data from the Local 1 and Local 217 surveys.

10. <sup>10</sup> Data from Local 1, 217, and 634 surveys.

11. <sup>11</sup> Darlene French, Interviewed by Jeffrey Boyce, Oral History Project, Child Nutrition Archives, The National Food Service Management Institute, December 13, 2012.

12. <sup>12</sup> Birch, L. L. (1999). "Development of Food Preferences." *Annual Review of Nutrition* 19: 41-62.

13. <sup>13</sup> Ibid.

14. <sup>14</sup> *Healthy Kids First: Why cafeteria workers want to cook fresh meals in New Haven Public Schools*, UNITE HERE report released May 8, 2013.

15. <sup>15</sup> Ibid.

16. <sup>16</sup> Hester Dye, Interviewed by Jeffrey Boyce, Oral History Project, Child Nutrition Archives, The National Food Service Management Institute, July 23, 2008.

17. <sup>17</sup> Wendy Mangiaracina, Interviewed by Melba Hollingsworth, Oral History Project, Child Nutrition Archives, The National Food Service Management Institute, January 29, 2009.

18. <sup>18</sup> UNITE HERE analyzed all reported incidents of violence that occurred in SDP from September 2012 through May 2013, which included: 1330 assaults, 973 cases of disorderly conduct with injury, 472 weapons infractions, 704 threats; and 13 rapes and attempted-rapes.



REHEATING MEAL PACKS. IMAGE COURTESY OF BRIDGEPORT PUBLIC SCHOOLS



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# RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

## “Good For You and Good To You”: The Importance of Emphasizing Race When Radicalizing Students Around the Food Movement

By John M. Burdick



STAFF OF SYLVIA'S, A LEGENDARY SOUL-FOOD RESTAURANT  
IN HARLEM, NEW YORK  
PHOTO COURTESY OF THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

"Slavery is over cousin,  
But then at lunch it wasn't.  
If food is the last plantation  
Then I'm Harriet Tubman"

--Stic Man of Dead Prez, "Scar Strangled Banner"

The diverse environmental and food justice initiatives that comprise the contemporary "Food Movement" undeniably have the potential of offering radical and anti-capitalist alternatives to the corporate agribusiness domination of the global food system. Since the early 1960s, farmers, chefs, grocers, educators, environmentalists, labor organizers, consumers, and a plethora of food justice activists have, by seeing all facets of food as political, worked with much success to fundamentally reshape food production, circulation, and consumption throughout the United States.

Despite the many important challenges being made to the corporate food system, the full radical potential of the varied components that comprise this Movement are often undermined by its (and, more broadly, "foodie" culture's) attachment to a problematic racial politics. Many of the alternative food initiatives emerging in the 1960s materialized as primarily white, self-styled countercultural utopian projects and back to the land movements, formed in part to escape both the strife and privileges of city life.<sup>1</sup> While these numerous alternative food projects emerged under the pretext of moral, ethical, and environmental justifications, many simultaneously exuded a discourse driven by racially exclusionary and color-blind rhetoric that undercut its ability to fully address the ways by which the corporate domination of the food system disproportionately impacts low income communities and communities of color. Of course there is no denying that this movement had radical aims, many of which were and are being currently realized. However, by frequently utilizing discourses of pastoralism, localism, purity, a premium placed on agricultural labor, and an idealized national image of a lush agricultural past, many of the advocates of the Food Movement have conjured a romanticized and whitewashed vision of American agriculture. This romanticized vision works to erase both the past and present of an American agricultural and food access system predicated on racial exploitation.<sup>2</sup> By failing to fully address our collective agricultural legacy founded on structures of institutional racism that forced African Americans and Mexicans into agricultural labor and removed Indigenous peoples (Mexicans and African Americans as well) from their land, the various practitioners of the alternative Food Movement unconsciously coded spaces of alternative food practice as white, resulting in the vast majority of those involved in alternative food being both white and (for both economic and cultural reasons) socially middle to upper class.<sup>3</sup>

To be more direct, the Alternative Food Movement, and subsequently the education in it, is dominated by progressive whites in positions of social and economic privilege. Especially at the University level, be it in programs or courses in sustainable agriculture, nutrition, food policy, food systems, or the many that fall under the broad umbrella of *Food Studies*, the pedagogy of alternative food is largely a white, middle-class endeavor. As a result, many of the courses and programs espousing alternative food practices fail to take a critical position toward these problematic racial politics as they impact their teaching of the Alternative Food Movement. This is not to say that there are not an ever increasing number of important challenges to the corporate food system being made by working-class communities of color, many of which I will address further in the article. Rather, in pointing out the problematic racial logics, I aim to critique the ways by which white, urban, and middle/upper-classed subject positions are continually articulated through these romanticized and pseudo-nativist/settler colonial attachments to local and organic foodways and their continual reproduction through alternative food pedagogy.<sup>4</sup>

***The Alternative Food Movement,  
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These problematic racial logics have not gone unnoticed. An increasing number of food educators are critiquing the ways by which race and class influence our food system, especially among those courses that place the labor conditions of food industry workers at the center of their curriculums. Nonetheless, as Julie Guthman highlights, even when attempting to address issues of race in their curriculums, food scholars frequently utilize two problematic pedagogical strategies. The first, which Guthman labels the discourse of "if they only knew," is the prevalent notion in alternative food education that if food advocates and educators could simply inform more people, including communities of color, about the benefits of alternative food practice, these groups would undoubtedly change their consumption patterns and partake in the movement's unarguably beneficial undertakings. Under such logic, white non-profits (which often tend to dominate resources and funding) are placed in positions of authority over food justice and food security initiatives, as seemingly well-intentioned white activists and educators enter into communities of color under the assumption that their ways of thinking, and their approach to alternative agriculture, are not only best for themselves, but also for the community which they are entering.<sup>5</sup> This rhetoric not only reinforces a legacy of white privilege but also blatantly denies the lived realities of systemic structures like poverty, food deserts, urban decay, and inadequate public transportation that disproportionately affect communities of color and restrict many communities' access to quality food. Perhaps even more troubling, in simply thrusting the aims of the Alternative Food Movement into racialized

communities without challenging the Movement's whitewashed rhetoric, it denies that certain food choices, cuisines, and consumption patterns have deep histories that are of central importance to the maintenance of many communities' cultural identities.

The second problematic pedagogical strategy, which Guthman labels "inviting others to the table," is a multicultural approach predicated on inviting an increased multiplicity of voices to the conversation on food practices and policies.<sup>6</sup> In a pedagogical sense, this strategy has resulted in an increased diversity of the initiatives that food educators are exposing their students to. And in fact many food educators do now teach their students about alternative food projects emerging from, by, and for communities of color. While this is a handy gesture, as critics of multicultural education have made clear for over a decade, simply adding a multiplicity of voices to our curriculums does not in and of itself shift the pedagogy towards more productive, and ultimately more racially just, ends. In this "inviting others to the table" approach, students are not given a foundational and in-depth engagement with the facets of the Alternative Food Movement emerging from and ultimately benefiting communities of color. Rather, the food radicalism emerging from these communities is often tacked on as superficial supplements to an existing curriculum that foregrounds white normativity and whitewashed food practices.

It is my contention that as radical educators and food activists, we must push beyond these two limiting paradigms that drive most alternative food education. As educators, we must reject shallow attempts at expanding the reach of our educational initiatives, often resulting in white food scholars and activists entering into communities of color like food missionaries, attempting to "teach" communities of color how to farm or to preach the benefits of organic agriculture. As food educators we must refuse a blind espousal of "healthier" diets that are predicated on whitewashed conceptions of both health and cuisine. As food educators we must refrain from ineffectively and superficially attempting to include a handful of perspectives from communities of color in our teaching materials on food radicalism.

Rather, we must fundamentally rewrite and reshape the very foundations of our food pedagogy to foreground the ways by which the food system is and always has been driven by the exploitation of bodies of color, the forced removal of Indigenous peoples from their homelands, and the ways by which food access continues to be predicated on systems of power that perpetuate racial genocide. This must be accomplished not by superficially adding projects from within inner city communities of color to our curriculums, but rather by fundamentally grounding our food curriculums in the racialized history of the American food system. We must redraft our curriculums, refusing to

project whitewashed critiques of the corporate dominated food system outward, and rather create a space where the voices, perspectives, histories, and approaches of food justice advocates of color are foundational and at the core of our courses. Not only will this force us to push our students (and ourselves) beyond the troubling racial logics that hinder much of alternative food practice, but we will also be able to impel our students towards a fuller and more radical food consciousness. One that is not located just in food related issues, but also grounded in a foundational critique of the complex hierarchal systems of power and oppression that drive American society.

Taking this stance that the full radical potential of the Food Movement can only be achieved through a critical engagement with contemporary racial politics, this article offers a select handful of pedagogical strategies that move beyond the "if they only knew" and "inviting others to the table" paradigms. Specifically, the remainder of this article draws upon my experiences from a unit taught on "soul food" in an undergraduate course on the cultural politics of the US Food System. I will reflect on my experiences in which I attempted to use an interdisciplinary and historical examination of soul food to grapple with complex phenomena such as slavery, globalization, colonialism, immigration, transnational identities, and neoliberalism while remaining committed to the ultimate goal of radicalizing students around issues related to food politics and racial justice.

In the spring of 2013, I was given the opportunity to design and teach a course on the politics of American food culture at the University at Buffalo (SUNY). Such a course had never been taught at this University and it took much

convincing of university administrators and undergraduate students alike that the production, circulation, and consumption of food was a subject worthy of rigorous academic attention. After meeting the University's fairly strict minimum enrollment requirements, I set out to teach the course with two main goals.<sup>7</sup> The first was to explore the connections between what we eat and who we are -- "we are what we eat" -- through a critical examination of how personal identities and social groups are formed via food production, preparation, and consumption. As such, together we would study the meaning and significance of food to different ethnic groups and diasporic communities by exploring the way that people transmit, preserve, and change culture through food. Through a combination of discussion, readings, film, field trips to local grocers and restaurants, and of course cooking and eating, I hoped to push my students to understand food as central to phenomena such as globalization, colonialism, immigration, transnational identities, and nation-state formation. The second goal of the course was to radicalize my students around issues of food justice by fostering an understanding of the relationship between food and power. Here, I hoped to delve into the role of food in the formation of political



SERVICE SCHOOL LUNCHES PHOTO BY STEVE RISKIND



movements, subaltern identities, anti-colonialism, contemporary food justice projects, and radical agrarian movements.

I knew I wanted to divide the course into three major components, one historical, one contemporary, and one predicated on community involvement, and structure them in a manner where they were very much in consonance with one another. However, I struggled to find the appropriate curricular framework to structure the course. After much brainstorming, conversations with colleagues, reviews of available literature, and a contemplative analysis of the Association for the Study of Food and Society Syllabi Set, I decided that the debates surrounding "soul food," its history, its significance to black culture, and its impacts on African American health would function as an especially useful platform for the course.<sup>8</sup> I was a bit reluctant to embrace such a curricular framework, as I was concerned about what I as a white male of a middle-class background, who has never lived in the American South, could teach a group of primarily white students on a suburban campus. However, I was confident that any curriculum engaging with soul food must include conversations on African and African American foodways, diasporic identity, slavery and slave food, and detailed explorations of the inequalities within the contemporary food system. I was optimistic that this soul food lens would give students the historical contextualization to critically examine African American diet and health, food deserts, fast food's role within urban communities, food and gentrification, the food stamp program, and other factors that influence access to healthy food within communities of color, as not only products of twenty-first century racism but as a result of centuries old institutions and ideologies that drive the American racial hierarchy.<sup>9</sup>

After committing to a soul food lens for the course, I decided that the curriculum for the course would be divided into three central units. The first was a historical examination of the role of food in colonialism, which made up the introductory weeks of the semester. The second unit, which compromised the bulk of the course, would be a historical and contemporary examination of the debates surrounding soul food. And the final unit was an examination of contemporary radical food justice projects, which is where we specifically engaged with food initiatives emerging from communities of color. This third unit included the final project for the semester, where students, in groups of five to six, spent the last weeks of the semester researching, and volunteering for or engaging with any number of local or national radical food initiatives. The students then informally shared their work with the class in the final meetings of the semester.

After a brief introduction, the course began with a three-week unit on the history of food and colonialism. During this time, as a group we briefly examined the role of African and Transatlantic foodways in the growth of the American colonies, the relationship between food and slavery, and, with the help of the University of Buffalo's vibrant Native Studies program, the role of food in the colonization of indigenous populations. Initially in the first few weeks of the course, I could sense a bit of reluctance

and restlessness in my students. Many entered the class expecting to be taught about factory farms, slaughterhouses, feedlots, and the Organic Movement from day one. Rather, the class began with Sidney Mintz's seminal text *Sweetness and Power* and a critical examination of the role of sugar in the creation of the American racial hierarchy and the expansion of plantation style slavery. Students, seemingly expecting to be reading Michael Pollan and watching *Food, Inc.*, initially seemed disengaged with this approach. As one of my students expressed in a feedback form I circulated early in the semester, "I'm not totally sure what slavery and sugar plantations have to do with what I am eating. When I first took this course, I was expecting to learn about how to eat healthier and more environmentally aware food. I didn't know it was going to be a history class." At this point of the semester, it didn't seem clear to the students how the historical foodways that we were collectively exploring were relevant to their lives on a suburban campus dominated by dormitory cafeterias and fast-food restaurants. I was hopeful that these realizations would come as the semester progressed, but after only a few brief weeks, based on such student feedback I was considering some major revisions in the direction of the course material.

***A race-centered approach allowed my students to understand that the social and corporate structures that continually limit access to quality healthy food in urban communities did so not as an isolated practice, but rather that this lack of access is a continuation of racist institutional structures that attempt to control and ultimately destroy black bodies.***

In part because I did not want to lose sight of my initial goals for the course and in part because a reworking of the syllabus would have been a major undertaking, I continued with the planned curriculum. It was at this point, the fourth week of the semester, that our discussions shifted into the bulk of the course material, a six-week historical examination of the role of food, especially soul food, in the racialization of black bodies. Through various class activities like readings, discussions, film screenings, and of course cooking and eating, we dove into conversations on soul food, its origins and its history, and collectively debated what soul food staples like black eyed peas, pork ribs, and of course fried chicken can teach us about the complex ways that racial hierarchies operate in the United States. Using excerpts from texts like Frederick Douglas Opie's *Hog and Hominy*, Jessica B. Harris's *High on the Hog*, and Doris Witt's *Black Hunger*, we collectively examined the importance of soul food to African and African American cultural identity and in the perpetration of violence against black bodies.<sup>10</sup> By engaging with Psyche Williams-Forsson's text *Building Houses Out of Chicken Legs*, we explored representations of chicken in cultural

forms like minstrelsy, vaudeville, and popular film and addressed how a single food could be central in constructing black bodies as criminal, hyper sexualized, and savage or animal.<sup>11</sup> Importantly, as a class we also examined the ways by which African Americans appropriated chicken, either in slave diets or as a source of economic mobility, to assert their agency in the face of even the most violent forms of racial oppression.

Both collectively and independently students were pushed to examine the ways that slaves utilized food often thought of as waste by slave owners for their nutritional and cultural survival during slavery, the emergence of soul food through a hybridized combination of Native American, Caribbean and African American culinary staples, the role of soul food in the Great Migration, the importance of soul food to radical black political projects, black relationships to land, and the relationship between soul food and health in African American communities. In having all of these important conversations, not only did soul food offer a useful platform for examining slavery, diasporic identity, and transnational cultural exchange, but it allowed students to ask fundamental questions revolving around how those in power have used the food system to dominate African Americans and perpetuate a racial oppression and conversely how African Americans have used soul food to reject that racial oppression and form radical political movements during slavery, Reconstruction, the Jim Crow Era, and the Civil Rights Movement.

***My experiences teaching this course helped me realize that as food educators we can teach our students not only that all people deserve the right to healthy, affordable, quality food, but also what claiming such a right can truly mean.***

To conclude this unit on soul food, we viewed and discussed Byron Hurt's 2013 film *Soul Food Junkies*.<sup>12</sup> This excellent film, which features scholars Jessica B. Harris, Marc Lamont Hill, Fredrick Douglas Opie, and Shantrelle P. Lewis; food justice advocates such as Dick Gregory and Bryant Terry; and a wide array of chefs and home cooks, offers a nuanced examination of soul food in both historical and contemporary contexts through the health struggles of the filmmaker's father Jackie. The film, an incredibly useful pedagogical tool, delicately and successfully negotiates the tension between soul food as a staple of black cultural identity and as a harmful factor in African American health. As one tailgating chef explained to the filmmaker, soul food might not always be "good for you," but it at times can be "good to you."

The film further paralleled our course curriculum by delicately portraying black radical politics projects through the dynamic role of black cuisine in examinations of the Civil Rights Movement, black cuisine's denomination as "Soul Food" by the Black Power Movement, and its rejection as "slave food" by the Nation of Islam. The film

concludes by asking important questions about the role of food in the health of the African American community. However, Hurt's film does not blame soul food for the high rates of heart disease, diabetes, and obesity and the lower life expectancy that disproportionately affect African Americans. Rather, as the film makes clear, the bigger cause of the decline of African American health is the industrialization of our food system. It concludes by making clear that the 23.5 million Americans that live in "food deserts" are actually subject to race- and class-based American food apartheid.

Our discussion of the film concluded with an in-depth discussion of the following quote by Dr. Marc Lamont Hill, which the theme of the course was in many respects structured around.

*There is no better example of racism in the twenty-first century than the relationship of black and brown people and the access to healthy foods. People think about racism as an individual act of prejudice or discrimination from one person to another. That's not what it's about. It's about systems, structures and institutions... You want to wipe out an entire generation of people, when you want to engage in a kind of twenty-first century genocide, all you have to do is continue to do what we are doing, which is deprive people of access to healthy food.<sup>13</sup>*

Through such examinations, the film answered much of my students' reluctance towards the course material that they had been experiencing earlier in the semester and helped us together understand not just how black cuisine impacts African-Americans, but how food, and the black experiences of it, affect everyone.

Using this film as a springboard, it was at the mid-point of the semester that I began to introduce the class to some of the theories, methodologies, practices, and approaches of the Alternative Food Movement. After reading and discussing the portions of the canonical texts on the ills of industrial agriculture from the likes of Marion Nestle, Eric Schlosser, and Michael Pollan, we began to examine and critically question the merits of some of the Food Movement's most celebrated alternatives such as organic farming, the politics of eating locally, the Slow Food Movement, CSAs/farmers' markets, and vegetarian and vegan diets.

While these conversations were promising and at times fruitful, these texts have their limitations as they seemingly blend together into a mushy tale of a "broken" food system and what individual consumers or "eaters" must do to fix it. Rather, as was the intention all along, I wanted to offer a different perspective from the Food Movement's and did so when we reached the true pedagogical climax of this course -- an examination by students of the means by which communities of color have used alternative food practices such as urban gardens, CSAs, co-ops, culinary programs, and health food initiatives to resist the damages caused by the industrial food system.

It was at this point that the final project of the semester was put into action. Collectively, we began to dive directly into the community driven final project that was to be the culmination of the semester of work. Students were asked to research and become involved with a community driven food justice initiative such as the Massachusetts Avenue Project (Buffalo, NY), Growing Green Educational Program (Buffalo, NY), Detroit Black Community Food Security Network, Black Panthers' Free Breakfast Program, the Hip-Hop Group Dead Prez's Food Fight Project, The Sistah Vegan Project, and Michelle Obama's Let's Move Campaign. While these initiatives and others obviously had varying degrees of success, student groups were asked to research, examine, contextualize, and ultimately become involved with a radical food campaign of their choosing. While the student group was not required to become intimately involved with the radical food endeavor they were exploring, in the very short time we had left in the semester they were required to research and find an accessible way to partake in the food justice campaign that their particular organization was currently undertaking. The students then reported back to the class on what they had learned about each campaign, how the project was challenging the corporatization of our food system, and how the issues the campaign was addressing intersected with the issues of food-related racial genocide that we had been discussing all semester.

Over the final two weeks of the semester, each group took a class meeting and described what they had found in their community research and involvement. Students presented on food justice issues far and wide, ranging from farmers' markets right here on the Buffalo Campus, to fast food workers' rights campaigns, to Detroit's urban gardens. I was blown away by what the students generated and the transformations I saw in them. When the students finally had the chance to get their hands dirty, so to speak, and see the ways that people on the ground were actively and very radically fighting against industrial agriculture and its impacts on the health of their communities, they did not see these radical food justice projects through the lens of the problematic whitewashed politics that drive much of alternative food practice. They were no longer hesitant or apprehensive about the connections between the role of food during the early phases of settler colonialism and their daily food choices as students at a large American university. Rather, by exploring soul food and by building an understanding of the role of food in the history of racial oppression in the United States, when these highly motivated and often inspiring students came to examine and, more importantly, become involved with these community driven food projects, they did so with a much fuller awareness of the Movement's radical potential.

A race-centered approach allowed my students to understand that the social and corporate structures that continually limit access to quality healthy food in urban communities did so not as an isolated practice, but rather that this lack of access is a continuation of racist institutional structures that attempt to control and ultimately destroy black bodies. It was clear from my students' presentations that they came to the realization that the apartheid in the American food system was a

continued attempt at controlling and ultimately destroying black bodies. They saw food injustice as having a deep historical legacy of regulating black bodies – from the capture of black bodies on the Western coasts of Africa, to the forced labor of black bodies in American slavery, to urban segregation, to the continual control and domination of black bodies through structures that limit access to quality, healthy food. When learning about, and most importantly finally becoming involved with the ways by which communities of color have resisted the ills of industrial agriculture, my students came to see food justice not as emerging in a vacuum or problematically color-blind, but rather as radically anti-racist and posing a profound challenge to societal wide structures of inequality that are deeply rooted in a history of racial oppression.

My experiences teaching this course helped me realize that as food educators we can teach our students not only that all people deserve the right to healthy, affordable, quality food, but also what claiming such a right can truly mean. By demanding the right to quality healthy food, communities of color have worked to reject the classist, racist, capitalist domination of their bodies. The student projects actualized the content of the course, demonstrating to them the full radical potential of the Food Movement, not as a whitewashed Movement only benefiting the racially and economically privileged, but rather as a radical reclamation of autonomy and self-determination of cultural identity and ultimately of the well-being of one's very body, especially in communities of color. In the end, employing a race-centered approach helped my students see food justice initiatives for what they were, a radical reclaiming of the right to control one's body, stripping that power from the hands of the corporate elite and placing it in the hands of the people. The reclaiming of food can be a reclaiming of life – a rejection of control over not just black but all bodies and a radical rejection of not only the corporate controlled agribusiness, but also the American racialized economy as a whole.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Belasco, Warren. *Appetite for Change: How Counter Culture Took on the Food System*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006.
- <sup>2</sup> Guthman, Julie. "If They Only Knew': Colorblindness and Universalism in California Alternative Food Institutions." *The Professional Geographer*. 60: 387-397, 2008.
- <sup>3</sup> Slocum, Rachel. "Whiteness, Space and Alternative Food Practice." *Geoforum*, October 6, 2006.
- <sup>4</sup> Tomkins, Kayla Wazana. *Racial Indigestion: Eating Bodies in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century*. New York: NYU Press, 2012. And Guthman, 2008.
- <sup>5</sup> This critique is also astutely made by Malik Yakini, Executive Director of the Black Community Food Security Network as part of the "Race, Food and Justice: Analyzing the Urban Food Movement through a Social Justice Lens" Lecture Series at Case Western Reserve University in 2013.
- <sup>6</sup> Guthman, Julie. "If They Only Knew': Colorblindness and Universalism in California Alternative Food Institutions." *The Professional Geographer*. 60: 387-397, 2008.
- <sup>7</sup> Because of funding cuts to the College of Arts and Sciences at the University at Buffalo, there is a strict policy that if proposed courses do not meet a minimum enrollment of 24 students, they can be canceled during the first week of the semester. This results in many faculty and graduate instructors having to "advertise" their courses throughout the university. This enrollment minimum is difficult to reach for many courses, especially in programs and departments doing more radical or interdisciplinary work. This policy is of course very problematic for many fairly obvious reasons.
- <sup>8</sup> The ASFS syllabi set can be found at [food-culture.org](http://food-culture.org)
- <sup>9</sup> It should be noted that, because this course was an upper level undergraduate class, many of the students had a previous introduction to the study of race. In fact, many of the students in this particular course had taken Introduction to American Studies with me during the previous semester. As a result they were introduced to the foundational concepts of critical race theory and critical ethnic studies, and had at the very least begun examining on a very cursory level the ways that race and ethnicity intersected with gender, class, sexuality, ability, and privilege. I would strongly recommend that any course on the intersections between food and race begin with at least a perfunctory examination of the key concepts in the study of race and introduce students to some of the issues affecting racial oppression and privilege. Much of this can be done as the semester progresses, but laying some of the groundwork and defining key terms at the beginning of the semester would surely prove to be extremely useful.
- <sup>10</sup> Harris, Jessica B. *High on the Hog: A Culinary Journey From Africa to America*. New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2011; Opie, Frederick Douglass. *Hog and Hominy: Soul Food From Africa to America*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2008; Witt, Doris. *Black Hunger: Soul Food and America*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004.
- <sup>11</sup> Williams-Forsen, Psyche. *Building Houses Out of Chicken Legs: Black Women, Food and Power*. The University of North Carolina Press, 2006.
- <sup>12</sup> Hurt, Byron. Dir. *Soul Food Junkies*. Independent Lens. 2013.
- <sup>13</sup> Hurt, Byron. Dir. *Soul Food Junkies*. Independent Lens. 2013.

## Suggested Source Materials

### Texts:

- Alkon, Alison Hope. *Black, White, and Green: Farmers Markets, Race, and the Green Economy*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012.
- Alkon, Alison Hope. *Cultivating Food Justice: Race, Class and Sustainability*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011.
- Bower, Anne. *African American Foodways: Explorations in Food and Culture*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008.
- Carney, Judith. *Black Rice: The Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002.
- Carney, Judith. *In the Shadow of Slavery: Africa's Botanical Legacy*. Berkley: University of California Press, 2010.
- Eisnach, Dwight and Herbert C. Covey. *What the Slaves Ate: Recollections of African American Foods and Foodways from the Slave Narratives*. Westport: Greenwood Reference Publishing, 2009.
- Fitchen, Janet. "Hunger, Malnutrition, and Poverty in the Contemporary United States." in Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik (eds). *Food and Culture: A Reader*. New York: Routledge, 2012.
- Gottlieb, Robert. *Food Justice*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010.
- Harper, A. Breeze. *Sistah Vegan: Food, Identity, Health, and Society: Black Female Vegans Speak*. Herndon: Lantern Books, 2010.
- Harris, Jessica B. *High on the Hog: A Culinary Journey from Africa to America*. New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2011.
- Johnston, Josée and Shyon Baumann. *Foodies: Democracy and Distinction in the Gourmet Foodscape*. New York: Routledge, 2010.
- McMillan, Tracey. *The American Way of Eating: Undercover at Walmart, Applebee's, Farm Fields and the Dinner Table*. New York: Scribner, 2012.
- Miewald, Christian E. "The Nutritional Impact of European Contact on the Omaha: A Continuing Legacy." Carole Counihan (ed.). *Food in the USA*. New York: Routledge, 2002.
- Mintz, Sidney. *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*. New York, Penguin Books, 1986.
- Opie, Frederick Douglass. *Hog and Hominy: Soul Food From Africa to America*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2008.
- Terry, Bryant. *Vegan Soul Kitchen: Fresh Healthy and Creative African American Cuisine*. Boston: De Capo Press, 2009.
- Tompkins, Kyla Wazana. *Racial Indigestion: Eating Bodies in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century*. New York: NYU Press, 2012.
- Warnes, Andrew. *Savage Barbecue: Race, Culture, and the Invention of America's First Food*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008.
- Witt, Doris. *Black Hunger: Soul Food and America*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004.
- Williams-Forson, Psyche. *Building Houses Out of Chicken Legs: Black Women, Food and Power*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006.
- Williams-Forson, Psyche. "More Than Just the 'Big Piece of Chicken': The Power of Race, Class and Food in American Consciousness." In Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik (eds). *Food and Culture: A Reader*. New York: Routledge, 2012.
- Wise, Michael. "Colonial Beef and the Blackfeet Reservation Slaughterhouse 1879-1895." *Radical History Review: Radical Foodways*. Durham: Duke University Press. 2011.

Waziyatawin. "Decolonizing Our Diets." *For Indigenous Eyes Only: A Decolonization Handbook*. Santa Fe: School of American Social Research Press, 2005.

\*Note: Some texts are suitable for all undergraduate courses, others for more advanced undergraduate and graduate courses.

### Films:

#### Full Length:

- The African Americans: Many Rivers to Cross* – Henry Louis Gates
- After I Pick the Fruit* – Nancy Ghertner, Dir.
- Soul Food Junkies* – Byron Hurt, Dir.
- The Garden* – Scott Hamilton Kennedy, Dir.
- The Meaning of Food* – Marcus Samuelson Host. - <http://www.pbs.org/opb/meaningoffood/>
- UrbanRoots* - <http://urbanrootsamerica.com/urbanrootsamerica.com/Home.html>

#### Clips, Lectures, Music Videos:

- "Food Fight: Earth Amplified" featuring Stic Man Of Dead Prez - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mu8QthIZ6hY>
- "Race, Food and Justice: Analyzing the Urban Food Movement through a Social Justice Lens" - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yFZa4yRW45I>
- "Ted Talk: Ron Finley: A guerilla gardener in South Central LA" - [http://www.ted.com/talks/ron\\_finley\\_a\\_guerilla\\_gardener\\_in\\_south\\_central\\_la.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/ron_finley_a_guerilla_gardener_in_south_central_la.html)

### Suggested Food Justice Organizations:

- Will Allen's Growing Power Inc. - <http://www.growingpower.org/>
- Be Black and Green - Detroit, MI. - <http://www.beblackandgreen.com/>
- Black Farmers & Urban Gardeners Conference - New York, NY. - <http://www.blackfarmersconf.org/>
- The Black Land Project - <http://www.blacklandproject.org/>
- Black Panthers' Free Breakfast Program - <http://www.blackpanther.org/>
- The Campaign for Food Justice Now - <http://www.cfjn.org/>
- CATA - The Farm Workers Support Committee - <http://www.cata-farmworkers.org/>
- Coalition of Immokalee Workers - <http://ciw-online.org/>
- The Color of Food - <http://browngirlfarming.com/>
- Communities Creating Healthy Environments - <http://ccheonline.org/>
- Dead Prez's Food Fight Campaign - <http://www.okayplayer.com/news/underground-rap-earth-amplified-stic-man-food-fight-video.html>
- Detroit Black Community Food Security Network - <http://detroitblackfoodsecurity.org/>
- Detroit Food Justice Task Force. Detroit, MI. <http://www.detroitfoodjustice.org/>
- Growing Food and Justice For All Initiative. <http://www.growingfoodandjustice.org/>

Growing Green and Massachusetts Avenue Project - Buffalo, NY. <http://mass-ave.org/>

Federation of Southern Cooperatives Land Assistance Fund. <http://www.federationsoutherncoop.com/>

First Nations Development Institute. <http://www.firstnations.org/>

FJAR - West Philadelphia, PA. <http://mariposafoodjustice.wordpress.com/about/>

National Black Farmers Association - <http://www.bfaa-us.org/>

New Roots - Louisville, KY. <http://www.newrootsproduce.org/>

NY Faith and Justice - New York, NY. <http://nyfaithjustice.org/>

Michelle Obama's Let's Move Campaign. <http://www.letsmove.gov/>

Planting Justice - Oakland, CA. <http://www.plantingjustice.org/>

Rooted in Community - <http://www.rootedincommunity.org/>

Rural Coalition/Coalición Rural. <http://www.ruralco.org/>

The Sistah Vegan Project. <http://sistahvegan.com/>

Other Worlds. <http://www.otherworldsarepossible.org/>

White Earth Land Recovery Project - (Ojibwe) White Earth Indian Reservation <http://www.whiteearth.com/>



FARMERS AND VILLAGE LEADERS IN INDIA PHOTO BY NANCY ROMER



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# RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

## Agroecological *Formación* in Rural Social Movements

By Nils McCune, Juan Reardon, and Peter Rosset



GUATAMALAN FARMERS' WALK

## Introduction

The struggle for popular control over food systems is present in all parts of the world today. As free trade agreements have come to include food as a major export-import commodity, strong social movements have emerged to challenge neoliberal policy and defend ecological family farming (Rosset and Martínez-Torres 2012; Rosset 2013). These movements denounce the corporate agribusiness model, in which access to food, land, knowledge and nature is increasingly negotiated through exploitative capitalist relations, alienating and excluding the world's vast majority from control over their necessary means of survival. In the case of La Via Campesina (LVC), an international alliance of social movements that challenges transnational agribusiness and indeed the entire neoliberal model through peaceful protests, policy proposals, and global articulation, some 200 million families and their organizations are now working together to achieve food sovereignty (Desmarais 2007; Martínez-Torres and Rosset 2010; La Via Campesina 2013).

The industrial agriculture model is only about 60 years old, but has already contaminated water sources, replaced tens of thousands of seed varieties with a dozen cash crops, diminished soil fertility around the world, accelerated the exodus of rural communities toward unsustainable megacities, and contributed to global inequality. Additionally, the corporate food system currently contributes between 44 and 57% of global greenhouse emissions (Grain, 2011). La Via Campesina rejects the industrial agriculture model, at the same time as it rejects the predominance of the profit motive over any other principle in the capitalist structuring of global food systems. In collaboration with civil society and consumer groups, rural social movements propose distinct methods for a different kind of food system.

***The industrial agriculture model is only about 60 years old, but has already contaminated water sources, replaced tens of thousands of seed varieties with a dozen cash crops, diminished soil fertility around the world, accelerated the exodus of rural communities toward unsustainable megacities, and contributed to global inequality.***

Ecological agriculture, or agroecology, is an element of this broad effort to recuperate food systems from the corporate agribusiness model. Agroecology is sometimes contrasted with the input-substitution model, found in much organic agriculture in the United States, in which synthetic inputs are simply replaced by purchased off-farm organic inputs without changing the structure of monoculture and agribusiness. Applying ecological principles to agriculture, on the other hand, emphasizes internal inputs, nutrient cycling, energy efficiency, and local knowledge in the construction of greater autonomy.

Peasant organizations have increasingly embraced the idea of agroecology, in order to make themselves less dependent on costly, petroleum-based farm inputs and markets controlled by transnational capital. Agroecology also defends peasant wisdom and traditional agricultural systems, most of which have been sustainable over hundreds or thousands of years.

Member organizations of La Via Campesina have built (or are currently building) some 40 schools of agroecology—ranging from informal farmer training centers to more formal universities—all created and directed by the rural organizations themselves. Among their objectives, the schools have come to combine the tradition of popular education with the farmer-to-farmer methodology—the horizontal, “movement” form of agroecological education and promotion. Finally, the schools have the added challenge of generating intergenerational dialogue—passing along the historical memory of elders to peasant youth activists.

## Popular Education, Agroecology, and the *Diálogo de Saberes*

Popular education became intensely well-known in Latin America with the work of Brazilian pedagogue Paulo Freire in the late 1960s. The challenge of creating horizontal, problem-posing educational processes—and the commitment to systemic social change led by the historically oppressed—proved to be highly important in Latin American revolutionary movements of the 20th century. Popular education is conceived from trust in all peoples' ability to think critically and act strategically if given the tools to analyze their own lives. Its commitment to forging dialogue—rather than preaching or depositing knowledge “packages”—is based on the idea that learners cannot be considered mere objects, but must be active subjects of the process of learning as discovery.

In contemporary rural social movements, the concept known in Spanish as the *diálogo de saberes* (roughly the equivalent of “dialogue between ways of knowing”) expands on popular education by suggesting that there are many equally valid “ways of knowing” the world (Martínez-Torres and Rosset, forthcoming). Given the enormous diversity of organizations and actors in LVC, the *diálogo de saberes* (DS) has characterized LVC processes of education, training, formation, and exchange in agroecology. DS takes place at the level of training centers and schools of the LVC organizations, as well as the larger scale of agricultural landscapes and peasant territories. Local peasant knowledge, indigenous and feminist ways of knowing, among others, are validated and considered on an equal basis with logical, Cartesian, historically Eurocentric knowledge. Agroecology is a field of practice and theory which challenges many of the dominant prepositions of modernism (like universally applicable practices in agriculture based on rational application of chemistry laws, the enshrinement of the urban proletariat as history's sole anti-capitalist protagonist, and the “bigger is better” approach to change) and thus provides a basis for the *diálogo de saberes* within LVC (Toledo, 1992; Rojas, 2009;



Sevilla-Guzman and Woodgate, 2013). To describe its agroecology trainings, schools, workshops, and exchanges, LVC uses the concept of *formación*, which may be roughly translated as training, although it refers to the construction of a better human being (the new man or new woman of the new society) through critical reflections and actions.

The organizations that make up LVC have increasingly developed agroecological *formación* processes aimed at accelerating historical transitions to food sovereignty. In agroecology schools, the *diálogo de saberes* takes place between scientific, peasant, rural proletarian, and indigenous ways of knowing. Over time, LVC has developed a better understanding of how schools and processes of agroecological *formación* can benefit rural social movements and create new understandings at national and societal levels. The three case studies that follow show the evolution of LVC's concept of how to structure agroecological *formación*—first as an institute (in Venezuela), then as a territorial process (in Cuba), and finally as a combination of both under the umbrella of popular education (in Nicaragua). In each case, common themes arise: the need for a *diálogo de saberes*, the pace of change (in farming, in organizations, and within people), the search for methods to create and sustain autonomous processes, and the complex interplay of factors that motivate people to learn about, practice, and transform agriculture.

## Paulo Freire Latin American Institute of Agroecology (IALA) in Venezuela

After years struggling to secure publicly-financed institutions that meet the educational needs of rural families and their social movements, in late 2005 La Vía Campesina signed a groundbreaking agreement with Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez Frías (Torrez 2006). Elaborated in the context of the Bolivarian Alternative for the Peoples of the Americas (ALBA) – a regional alliance dedicated to social, political, and economic integration – this historic agreement between an international social movement and a national government laid the foundation for the LVC's Paulo Freire Latin American University Institute of Agroecology (IALA-PF). Named after Brazil's renowned popular educator, the LVC's first continental agroecological university includes the physical structures (classrooms, dorms, eating areas, etc.), farmlands, and state support (salaries, scholarships, and academic recognition) required to host food sovereignty student-activists for a five year period.

IALA-PF is the first international peasant university, a place where the daughters and sons of peasants and indigenous people are trained to be future leaders and cadre of their organizations, with political organizing and agroecological skills. Chosen by their social movements to both study in, and build, IALA-PF, its first set of students came from a diverse array of LVC affiliate organizations including the Landless Workers' Movement (MST/Brazil), the Rural Workers' Association (ATC/Nicaragua), the Ezequiel Zamora National Campesino Front (FNCEZ/Venezuela), and the Organization of Struggle for

the Land (OLT, Paraguay), to name just a few. These young land activists, over 100 when the institute was first established, were accompanied by a much smaller group of LVC cadre (5-7 adults) tasked with guiding both the political and pedagogical development of the institute. Coursework during the first year at IALA-PF includes basic university-level content such as mathematics, chemistry, biology, and ecology, as well as courses in social science on the complexity of small-scale family farming, biocultural diversity, and social ecology. In year two, students study statistics, physics, and botany while taking additional classes on ecoregions, campesino cosmologies, and agriculture in the social history of the Americas. With agroecology, sustainable agroecosystems, and food sovereignty as the permanent point of reference, this integration of the physical and social sciences continues throughout the time they study, live, and work in IALA-PF. According to Fausto Torrez, of Nicaragua's ATC and active member of the Latin American Coordination of Organizations in the Countryside (CLOC), IALA-PF was established to "instill a pedagogical and political thought committed to the social dynamics of popular struggle."



COLLECTIVE DECISION-MAKING AT IALA PAULO FREIRE IN BARINAS, VENEZUELA

To achieve the overall objective of forming cadre capable of facilitating complex rural transformations through collective thought and action, students at IALA-PF distribute their time more or less evenly between the classroom, experimental agroecological production, and community organizing for food system transformation. To ensure the university is a reflection of their own education praxis, the entire student body works through collectives of 10-12 students per group known in Portuguese and Spanish as *núcleos de base* (NBs). Borrowed from the MST's experience with land occupations involving hundreds of landless families collectively managing production, consumption, health, education, and culture, the NBs of IALA-PF meet to discuss everything from classroom content to agroecological production, and the distribution of members into different working groups based on specific needs and or initiatives. Working groups have been created, for example, to manage seed saving and sharing, to critically assess the university's academic personnel, and to create procedural guidelines to be followed by the entire IALA-PF community. Designed so that students develop

practical experience in collective decision-making, the results of discussions within NBs are taken to university-wide assemblies for ratification, thus strengthening the collective's overall commitment to the IALA-PF process. This methodology is strongly influenced by the teachings of Anton Makarenko and the MST's praxis in popular education (Tarlau 2013). Its main drawback, in the context of IALA-PF (where formal evaluations and grades pressure students to prioritize the classroom), is that it tends to limit the amount of time dedicated to community organizing, thus reducing the university's impact on local food system transitions.

As La Vía Campesina's first formal opportunity to experiment with university-level agroecological *formación*, and with local partners largely unfamiliar with LVC's prior pedagogical experiences, certain challenges arose that provided lessons for the movement. Decisions about such fundamental questions as what to study, produce, and distribute—when, how, and with whom—became objects of reflection and ideological debate in this experimental university made up of over 100 social movement activists from over a dozen different national and organizational contexts. A spontaneous *diálogo de saberes* was formed as students, professors, pedagogical leadership, and administrators brought diverse historical experiences and perspectives to the radically democratized educational space. Collective decision-making processes involved politically less-experienced peasant youth taking advantage of a rare educational opportunity for a five-year degree through their LVC affiliate organization, along with seasoned cadre of rural social movements like the Landless Workers' Movement (MST) of Brazil, and even career administrators from Venezuela's Ministry of Higher Education, in the construction of an alternative educational project. Such processes showed an enormous breadth of ways of knowing present in one institutional setting, and the result was mixed—excellent as a political-cultural exchange, highly difficult as an educational experience. The graduates of IALA-PF are widely considered within LVC to have passed a great test of character, and have been integrating into the national leadership of their organizations and movements since the graduation of the first class in 2012 [<http://ialapaulofreire.blogspot.com/>].

## The *Campesino-to-Campesino* Agroecological Movement in Cuba

A persistent debate in the literature on agroecological farming, and on the impact of agricultural research in general, has been the question of scaling-out (broad adoption over wide areas and by many farmers) and scaling-up (institutionalizing supportive policies for alternatives) successful experiences (von der Weid 2000; Holt-Giménez 2001; Pachicho and Fujisaka 2004; Altieri and Nicholls 2008b; Rosset et al 2011). This is paralleled in the literature concerning the effectiveness and appropriateness of conventional agricultural research and extension systems for reaching peasant families in general (Freire 1973), and more specifically for promoting agroecology rather than the Green Revolution (see, for

example, Chambers 1990, 1993; Holt-Giménez 2006; Rosset et al. 2011).

### **Agroecological innovation in its "movement form"**

While conventional top-down agricultural research and extension has shown a negligible ability to develop and achieve broad adoption of the practices of agroecological diversified farming, social movements, and socially dynamizing methodologies appear to have significant advantages (Rosset et al. 2011). Social movements incorporate large numbers of people—in this case large numbers of peasant families—in self-organized processes that can dramatically increase the rate of innovation and the spread and adoption of innovations.

The fact that agroecology is based on applying principles in ways that depend on local realities means that the local knowledge and ingenuity of farmers must necessarily take a front seat, as farmers cannot blindly follow pesticide and fertilizer recommendations prescribed on a recipe basis by extension agents or salesmen. Methods in which the extensionist or agronomist is the key actor and farmers are passive are, in the best of cases, limited to the number of peasant families that can be effectively attended to by each technician, because there is little or no self-catalyzed dynamic among farmers themselves to carry innovations well beyond the last technician. Thus these cases are finally limited by the budget, that is, by how many technicians can be hired. Many project-based rural development NGOs face a similar problem. When the project funding cycle comes to an end, virtually everything reverts to the pre-project state, with little lasting effect (Rosset et al. 2011).

***The fact that agroecology is based on applying principles in ways that depend on local realities means that the local knowledge and ingenuity of farmers must necessarily take a front seat.***

The most successful methodology for promoting farmer innovation and horizontal sharing and learning is the *Campesino-a-Campesino* (farmer-to-farmer, or peasant-to-peasant) methodology (CAC). While farmers innovating and sharing goes back to time immemorial, the more contemporary and more formalized version was developed locally in Guatemala and spread through Mesoamerica beginning in the 1970s (Holt-Giménez 2006). CAC is a *Freirian* horizontal communication methodology (*sensu* Freire 1970), or social process methodology, that is based on farmer-promoters who have innovated new solutions to problems that are common among many farmers or have recovered/rediscovered older traditional solutions, and who use popular education methodology to share them with their peers, using their own farms as their classrooms. A fundamental tenet of CAC is that farmers are more likely to believe and emulate a fellow farmer who is successfully using a given alternative on their own farm than they are to take the word of an agronomist of possibly urban extraction. This is even more the case when they

can visit the farm of their peer and see the alternative functioning with their own eyes. In Cuba, for example, farmers say "seeing is believing" (Rosset et al. 2011).



PEASANT-AS-PROFESSOR IN THE *CAMPESINO-A-CAMPESINO* METHODOLOGY IN CUBA.

Whereas conventional extension can be demobilizing for farmers, CAC is mobilizing, as they become the protagonists in the process of generating and sharing technologies. CAC is a participatory method based on local peasant needs, culture, and environmental conditions that unleashes knowledge, enthusiasm, and protagonism as a way of discovering, recognizing, taking advantage of, and socializing the rich pool of family and community agricultural knowledge which is linked to their specific historical conditions and identities. In conventional extension, the objective of technical experts all too often has been to replace peasant knowledge with purchased chemical inputs, seeds, and machinery, in a top-down process where education is more like *domestication* (Freire 1973; Rosset et al. 2011). Eric Holt-Giménez (2006) has extensively documented the Mesoamerican CAC social movement experiences with CAC as a methodology for promoting agroecological farming practices, which he calls "peasant pedagogy."

Cuba is where the CAC social methodology achieved its greatest impact, when the National Association of Small Farmers (ANAP), a member of LVC, adopted it along with a conscious and explicit goal of building a grassroots movement for agroecology inside the national organization (extensively detailed in Machín Sosa at al. 2010; and Rosset et al. 2011). In less than ten years the process of transforming systems of production into agroecological integrated and diversified farming systems had spread to more than one third of all peasant families in Cuba, a remarkable rate of growth. During the same time period when peasants became agroecological, the total contribution of peasant production to national production jumped dramatically, with other advantages in reduced use of farm chemical and purchased off-farm inputs (more autonomy), and greater resiliency to climate shocks (Machín Sosa at al. 2013; Rosset et al. 2011; Altieri and Toledo 2011).

## IALA Mesoamérica in Nicaragua

In Nicaragua, La Via Campesina is making a synthesis of both models—agroecological *formación* as institution-

building and as a territorial process. The Rural Workers Association (ATC), a member organization of La Via Campesina, has been involved in the construction of other LVC agroecology schools, and sent several of its youth cadre to study at Venezuela's IALA Paulo Freire. Among the returning graduates, there was a feeling that although they received a formidable political and technical education, in Central America they wanted to build an agroecology institute with more organic ties to networks of farmers. IALA Mesoamérica, underway on a mountainous campus of the ATC in Matagalpa, inserts a school of political and agroecological *formación* into an ongoing *Campesino-a-Campesino* process.

A key pedagogical principle of IALA Mesoamérica is the idea that participation in a social movement is an educational process. By design, this IALA inserts rural youth into CAC horizontal communication processes, so that they can learn how best to facilitate such processes and articulate them as a social movement. The experience itself of being a popular educator is the fundamental learning tool for the young Central American participants in IALA Mesoamérica, who also study technical aspects of agroecology, cooperative organization, media strategies, and political theory. While farming families develop productive strategies and communicative skills, young movement people from LVC develop the ability to understand and guide complex social-cultural learning processes.



OBSERVATIONAL LEARNING: A FATHER AND SON ON THEIR COOPERATIVE FARM IN EL CRUCERO, NICARAGUA

### **Generational strategy**

Countless agricultural extension programs have shown that adult farmers rarely incorporate the technical advice given to them by young—often urban—agronomists or engineers. Agroecological principles may be less alienating to peasants than conventional agronomical formulas—although not always at first—but that alone does not make hardened adults any more likely to listen to university students who have mostly studied agriculture in textbooks, classrooms, and experimental lots, often using language and terminology rejected by peasants. This is even more true when the young people, as in the case of IALA Mesoamérica, may come from different cultural contexts (Southern Mexico to Panama), and may use distinct colloquial terms for farming concepts. How then to combine an international university in agroecology with on-the-ground, territorial campesino-to-campesino processes?

To get past this dilemma, IALA Mesoamérica teaches youth activists how to *facilitate* communication *among* peasant farmers, rather than *extend* packages of content to farmers. In this way, young people in the agroecology movement are popular educators. Tasks like identifying local leaders and understanding community dynamics, assessing farms and finding local innovations, discussing agroecology in cooperative assemblies and inviting peasants to get more involved, essentially relate to the communicative skills that youth can learn through training as popular educators. Youth facilitators eventually teach farmers about the ecological principles of what they are already doing and help them use their farms as demonstrative parcels, so that they can better explain their advances to other farmers. Effective farm visits, workshops, and exchanges are essential to facilitate the spread of agroecology; these require personal knowledge of the motivations of the participating farmers, something that only can be achieved by an organization when its cadre participates in grassroots, community processes. This is why agroecological facilitators—popular educators in the countryside—are so necessary for creating autonomous movements toward agroecology. The vision of IALA Mesoamérica is for this role to be filled by youth in the Central American countries that, like Nicaragua, have a huge and growing youth population. From the position of local facilitator of a CAC process, these young people may go on to take significant responsibilities within their organizations; first, they will have been “formed” as popular educators and organizers in agroecology.



GUATAMALAN FARMERS PHOTO BY NANCY ROMER

## Peasant Pedagogy and *Diálogo de Saberes* in La Via Campesina

The past five years have seen virtually every organization in LVC around the world attempt to strengthen, initiate, or begin to plan its own program for promoting, to varying extents, the transition to agroecological farming among their member families. Over the past five years LVC has given a key role to its "International Working Group on Sustainable Peasant Agriculture." Among other tasks, this Working Group (with a female and a male representative from each of the nine regions into which LVC divides the globe), under the leadership of the National Small Farmers Association of Cuba (ANAP) and the National Union of Peasant Associations of Mozambique (UNAC), is charged with strengthening and thickening internal social networks (Fox 1996) for the exchange of experiences and support for the agroecology work of the member organizations. This includes identifying the most advanced positive experiences of agroecology, and studying, analyzing, and documenting them (*sistematización* in Spanish) so that

lessons from them can be shared with organizations in other countries.

In Latin America, LVC has learned more and more about the kind of agroecological *formación* that it wants, to strengthen its organizations, their ties to one another, and the cohesiveness of the food sovereignty alternative. The foundation and development of IALA Paulo Freire in Venezuela is significant in the history of Latin America's rural social movements: it is the continent's first truly peasant university, bringing together committed youth from rural social movements in North, Central, and South America to study agroecology as a dialogue between political, technical, traditional indigenous, and revolutionary worldviews. Collective decision-making remains at the heart of the experience, yet the energy spent focused on the school's educational praxis has limited the ability of students to become effective local actors, with priority instead being given to internal organization and academic achievement.

In the case of ANAP in Cuba, an alternative structure—territorial processes of innovation and communication using popular education techniques—led to the phenomenal success of agroecological farming. However, the Campesino-to-Campesino Agroecological Movement of the ANAP is purely informal learning; it doesn't respond to any need—urgent in other countries—to create formal educational opportunities for rural youth. So it is that in Nicaragua, IALA Mesoamérica, dialectally taking from both examples, sets out to create a university for peasant youth at the same time as it connects them with territorial processes of horizontal agroecological education. If it is able to consolidate over the next few years, IALA Mesoamérica could provide invaluable lessons for peasant movements and popular educators.

In reality, the process of dialogue used to improve agroecological *formación* in LVC is quite broad, stemming from the diverse historical experiences of member organizations. In November 2013, Cuba's National Association of Small Farmers (ANAP) held a special course at the organization's school, the Niceto Pérez National Training Center in Guira de Melena, for 40 international delegates—all members of teams working on agroecology schools in LVC organizations. This methodological course allowed delegates to share stories, strategies, experiences, and ideas about how to create agroecological processes in their countries. Delegates from Nicaragua, Guatemala, Panama, Colombia, Brazil, Chile, Argentina, Haiti, the United States, Canada, Mexico, Mozambique, Mali, and Zimbabwe were on hand to share experiences and learn from the methodology of the CAC Agroecological Movement in Cuba. Essentially popular education in agroecology, ANAP's methodology represents an international high water

mark in terms of helping tens of thousands of farmers become agroecological educators.

At the same time, the vastly diverse historical experiences present at the course showed the importance of the *diálogo de saberes* for spreading agroecology around the globe. With the enormous variety of rural actors, including peasants, indigenous groups, veterans, traditional healers, churches, and migrant workers, among many others, diverse strategies become essential. No one pedagogical approach can hope to respond to the diversity of worldviews and cultural senses from which people may approach agroecology. The *diálogo de saberes* provides an educational perspective for understanding and recognizing distinct ways of knowing the world. It shares a root with popular education, but has different categories.

Popular actors, including peasants, proletarians, and indigenous and other peoples marginalized by the neoliberal model—including many educators and researchers—are increasingly coming together to build food system alternatives. Agroecology is an important “socially activating tool for the transformation of rural realities through collective action, and a key building block in the construction of food sovereignty” (Martínez-Torres and Rosset, forthcoming). Its use, as a tool and as a building block, in turn corresponds to the ability of popular actors to create spaces for dialogue, reflection, and learning.

Note: Readers interested in doing so can support La Vía Campesina International [[www.viacampesina.org](http://www.viacampesina.org)] and the effort to build IALA Mesoamérica by contacting [[saludcampesina@yahoo.com.mx](mailto:saludcampesina@yahoo.com.mx)].

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# RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

## Whose Food Revolution? Perspectives from a Food Service Training Academy

By Doris Friedensohn



FINGERS OF BUDDHA PHOTO BY STEVE RISKIND

**T**he poorest among us, those who might benefit most from the Food Revolution - - in relation to their health and well being - - are the furthest removed from its reach. Ironically or not so ironically, this includes food service workers who labor each day, often in the shadow of the Revolution, feeling "the sting" of exclusion.

I know some of these food service workers. For almost a decade now, I've been writing and telling their stories. I've met my subjects not quite on their own ground - - at home or at work - - but on common ground, so to speak, at the Community FoodBank of New Jersey in Hillside, on the edge of Newark. The protagonists of my stories have all been students at the FoodBank's free 14-week Food Service Training Academy (FSTA). The majority of them now work or are looking for work "in the industry."

How did I get to the FoodBank -- and why -- you may be wondering? In 2003, I was deep into a memoir about my life as an eater -- about the dizzying choices available to a culinary-conscious, health-aware, and globe-trotting American. Couscous or curry, sushi or souvlaki, paella or pozole? Lettuce grown where? Hogs slaughtered how? Who sells "the best cheese in the world"? Even as I extolled my options, I knew about neighborhoods in Harlem and Newark without supermarkets, where vegetables at the local bodega were anything but fresh, and where "choice" was between McDonald's, Burger King, and Taco Bell. Shouldn't this "other world" cast a shadow (at the very least) over my wry celebration of adventurous eating and America's culinary diversity?

***Many food service workers earn what's called a livelihood by helping others eat better.***

A friend suggested that I visit the FoodBank, where I was introduced to the Executive Chef of the Training Academy. His description of his program as "an intervention in the desperate lives of some very poor people" caught my attention. I wanted to watch the training process and get to know the trainees. Before I knew it, I was hooked. After my memoir was published in 2006, with a chapter on the FSTA, I became a regular visitor. Two to four days a week for the next five years, I hung out in the kitchen, the classroom, and the FoodBank's cafeteria - - observing cooks-in-training and asking many questions. But mostly I listened. In 2010 I invited photographer Steve Riskind to join me. The results of our collaboration are the book, *Cooking for Change: Tales from a Food Service Training Academy* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Full Court Press, 2011) and a traveling exhibit, "Cooking for Change; Job Training at an Urban FoodBank."

The people we came to know, men and women, ages 20 to 70, are predominantly African American and mostly from the greater Newark area. They are, most of them, glad to have witnesses to their struggles with poverty, life in the streets, and time in prison and rehab. Often, they weep when acknowledging self-doubts; they drop their heads and sometimes their voices when describing efforts to stay clean. But almost always there's the hope, asserted

defiantly or dreamily, for the proverbial second (or third) chance at employment in the mainstream economy.

Many food service workers earn what's called a livelihood by helping others eat better. The "others" are usually richer, more knowledgeable about diet, more intimate with their physicians, and healthier, too. YES, food service workers employed in upscale restaurants, retirement communities, corporate dining facilities, country clubs, elite universities, and fancy private schools have a special experience. Often enough, they prepare organic Tuscan Kale salads with lovingly raised, small breasted chickens, fair trade quinoa, and freshly made mango salsa. They might even eat these same choice items a couple of hours earlier or later at a staff table (if there is such a thing). But their children won't be so lucky, and their partners won't be either. In fact, no one in their neighborhood will be so lucky - - unless they happen to have a similar, low-paying service job.

In short, there are select battalions of underpaid cooks who are out there - - on the front lines of an Apartheid-style revolution: a Revolution which caters to those in the dining room while cordoning off those in the kitchen. To put the case somewhat differently: when it comes to the Food Revolution, we're not seeing much trickle down. This is a sad state of affairs. Tragic, a word which shouldn't be overused, is the adjective I prefer. Those on the fringe of all the high-minded talk about eating better - - just eat less, eat more vegetables, and cook them yourself - - are eating bitterness. Much as they'd like to be inspired by Frances Moore Lappé, Michael Pollan, Alice Waters, Eric Schlosser, Mark Bittman, and Carlo Petrini, they don't quite see the pay-off in their own lives.

They've got a point. How do we speak honestly to people about a Revolution-in-the-Making without lying too much about their chances of enjoying its benefits? I've tried, without great success. After much talk with the chefs about the role of Big Questions in the training of students, I've put my skills on the line: giving short talks to groups of 30-45 students (followed by steamy, silly, or lackluster discussions) on culture and culinary habits, ethnic eating in New Jersey, Industrial Agriculture, and, yes, the Food Revolution.

***In short, there are select battalions of underpaid cooks who are out there - - on the front lines of an Apartheid-style revolution: a Revolution which caters to those in the dining room while cordoning off those in the kitchen.***

The individual students I've come to know are optimistic in spite of their experiences. They would be angry, many of them, to hear me suggest that they are eating bitterness. They would be angry because that reality (or possibility) threatens the narrative they are desperately attached to: a narrative of second chances and hope which it's also the business of job training programs to promote.

There's a second, self-defining narrative which figures, sometimes quite powerfully, in their thinking and feeling. It's about food as a realm of creativity, nurture, and community. In a field where the pay is poor and labor conditions range from adequate to terrible, most of these trainees have an emotional investment in cooking. Preparing good food is life-sustaining - - like sex, sunlight, and sports. People who cook, they like to imagine, are uniquely empowered, not just to fill bellies but also to give pleasure to others.

Pleasure is no small matter. For the FSTA students I know, there's pleasure attached to familiar foods; to foods that are chemically pleasing with their sweet, salt, and fat flavors; to foods that are good to look at, surprising to the taste buds, and energizing. There's pleasure attached to foods that are soothing - - like a lover's touch or a mother's breast. The Theater of Food is another source of pleasure. Many food service workers, mesmerized by Food Channel Competitions and tales of Celebrity Chefs, harbor their own dreams of Cooking-as-Glory. Related to these sensual and soul-satisfying pleasures is the notion of "plenty." Abundance is a beautiful thing. Restraint, by comparison, seems ungenerous, even small-minded.

In a world of increasing and increasingly visible inequality, it's easy to understand why, for many food service trainees, missing out on the Food Revolution may be a matter of indifference. They'll gladly take home those well-marbled steaks and imported triple crème cheeses that the country-club set is forgoing - - that is, unless their cholesterol levels are off the charts. Many food service trainees need to think twice about their health - - or the health issues of others in their households. In fact, these concerns make what little they know about the Food Revolution both too painful to acknowledge and infuriating.

Repression and rage are a bad combination in our political culture: they are paralyzing - - or numbing like booze or a drug. "Don't hit me with stuff I can't have!" That's what I see on the faces of students when Michael Pollan appears on screen in *Food, Inc.* talking glowingly about organic heirloom tomatoes and delicate baby lettuces, picked 24 hours earlier and available at farmers' markets. "Wait a minute! In Newark! We ain't got no decent supermarket - - and this guy wants us takin' two buses to buy stuff we can't afford." Then there's always a

student who is quick to announce, "After school, I'll grab me a bus to McDonald's and give these achin' feet a rest. Besides, my kids, they love Big Macs and feel good when we go out. And, yeh, I'll feel good, too, after chopping onions in the kitchen all morning and being on clean-up after lunch."

Students at the Food Service Training Academy know that good ingredients are out there, at Whole Foods and elsewhere - - and out of their reach. The same is true for clothes, jewelry, cars, kitchenware, you name it. They know - - even if they don't know exactly what all those good things might be; even if they don't care to know - - or don't dare to imagine them. Desire is normal. But too much desire is dangerous to their precarious balance.

In a related vein, FSTA students don't know they're in the trap of Industrial Agriculture. They don't know until

someone like me insists they look at the film "Food, Inc," and take in the dark side of its message. They need to see cows locked in feeding lots knee deep in shit; they need to see chickens so profitably fattened and big breasted that their legs can barely support them. They need to see underpaid immigrant workers butchering hogs during 12 hour shifts - - on machines that are known to slice off part of a finger or two. They need to hear farmers explain that they're terrified to use their own, chemical-free seeds because Monsanto, with its seed monopoly, will collude with the banks to squeeze them out of business.

Watching *Food, Inc.* makes food service trainees twitchy with anger. It leaves them feeling depressed. The System is too complex - - and mystifying - - for them to comprehend; it's too

dangerous to mess with. They don't mind if some idealists think they can change things - - and say they're willing to go to jail for their beliefs. But not them. They've been in jail - or their fathers, brothers and friends have, and jail ain't no fun. Besides, they're doing this training program to stay straight. So why am I fucking with them about things they can't change?

In fact, Change - - with a capital C - - and job training are often at loggerheads. Job training, at the FSTA and elsewhere, is geared to producing compliant workers: people who will show up every day on time; people who will say "yes, chef," who will work efficiently, with a smile, and with minimum waste. The boss doesn't want to hear smartass comments that he's cutting corners with the chili,



FROSTING PHOTO BY STEVE RISKIND



putting smelly peppers in the sauce, or using ingredients way past their expiration date. Job training teaches people - - many who have never been in the mainstream workforce - - what the system requires of them and how to get along. In addition, a tight job market (how's that for a euphemism?) discourages risk-taking. Unemployment in their neighborhoods has taught food service trainees and workers just how expendable they are.

FSTA chefs, who sympathize with the aspirations of their students - - and worry about their health - - have their own bottom-line concerns. Here's an illustration. Five mornings a week, beginning before 7 am (class starts at 8:30), crews of students make breakfast, to order, for themselves and the staff. The operative notion is "A Hearty Breakfast": eggs, bacon, pork or turkey sausages, fried potatoes and onions, muffins, bagels, croissants, and sticky buns plus juice and coffee. When I asked the Executive Chef why he wasn't promoting a Healthy Breakfast of yogurt, granola, and fruit, his immediate response was "yogurt's too expensive."

The Food Revolution, to be successful, requires that we rethink and renounce our bad food habits. As we all know, resisting great Belgian chocolates is hard. Saying "no" to seconds of perfectly grilled, lemon-drenched salmon with a touch of sautéed broccoli rabe may be harder. I'll confess that drinking no more than two glasses of wine before dinner is the hardest of these disciplines. For food service students, who count every dollar - - and sometimes every quarter - - the terms and stakes are often different. A heaping, "hearty" (but heart-unfriendly) American breakfast, maybe 1500 calories worth, which costs \$12 in the neighborhood diner, is a free perk of the training program. Who wants to say no to that?

"We like **our** food," food service trainees tell me all the time: deep fried chicken, well-cooked greens, well-done meat, well-buttered bread, gooey mac and cheese, and whipped cream on multi-layered cakes. Like most of us, they want what they know and have always enjoyed. It's personal. It's cultural. It's identity politics. What they **don't** want is what upper-middle-class white people, who go to the gym all the time, think is good for them.

When I started working on a book about the FSTA, back in 2006, I already had a title, "Cooking for Change." No, I wasn't thinking about the Food Revolution. I was focused, somewhat naively, on Opportunity. What I saw was a chance for people to be trained for jobs that were and still are plentiful - - jobs that are not likely to be outsourced or replaced by machines, at least not in the immediate future. These jobs, paying more than the minimum wage, sometimes even come with benefits.

In these last five years, since the banks, in collusion with the government, threw our world into disarray, I'm seeing the terrible vulnerability of the poor more clearly. The Fabled American Dream, which job training evokes, looks to me like a glass half empty. Or worse. However, most FSTA students and graduates are determined to see the glass as half full, and they act accordingly. They do what they must to get through the training program, to find work and hold on to a job. They do this even when they know that their wages probably won't cover their expenses.

Perhaps they're more optimistic about the democratic potential of the Food Revolution than I am. If they could afford to live in Brooklyn, with a friendly food co-op down the block, they surely would be. Still, as masters of the art of Making Do, these gritty individuals may surprise me and surprise themselves. They may actually start planting community gardens - - as some of their children and grandchildren are doing - - in downtown Newark and elsewhere around the area. If local churches agitate for more farmers' markets, they may sign petitions and ring their neighbors' doorbells to drum up support. When they learn that farmers' markets accept food stamps, they'll be even more likely to pay attention. In fact, some of them have kids in the Greater Newark Conservancy's summer program, "Farm to Table and Then Some," where they will learn about food justice, food cultures, and even food waste.



KNIFE SKILLS PHOTO BY STEVE RISKIND

Recently, when I spoke to FSTA students about the City of Newark's "Rent a (Garden) Plot Program," for a dollar a year, three women took down the name and contact number of the program administrator. "We should try that," one of them said. "It's not really so hard." Indeed, some routes to the Food Revolution are easier than others. For example, if their ministers organize Walks for Health or establish "No Fry Zones" in their church kitchens (as has happened in rural Mississippi), these students and their friends may spread the word.

Here's a footnote on "spreading the word." There are Food Revolution evangelists, with roots among the African American poor, who are doing a bang up job. Will Allen, the founder of Growing Power Inc., a farm and community food center in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, is a MacArthur Award winner and a pioneer in urban agriculture. Allen's projects promote access to fresh, safe, affordable, and nutritious foods for the poor, including those in the inner city. If only he'd come to Newark; if only he'd run a few workshops at the FoodBank.

Food service students, I've been arguing, are torn between old habits of denial and a new uneasiness. Yes, they recognize the health costs of eating as they do, as poor people do, and they believe that their children

deserve better. That's why they've come through the FSTA. That's why, day after difficult day, they curse the system and tease one another while looking for hugs, exchanging

hi-fives, and trying desperately to stay hopeful. That's why there's still a chance that Michael Pollan's practices can become theirs.



MOPPING PHOTO BY STEVE RISKIND



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# RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

## Feeding Revolution: The Black Panther Party and the Politics of Food

By Mary Potorti



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*First you have free breakfasts,  
then you have free medical care,  
then you have free bus rides,  
and soon you have FREEDOM!*

-Fred Hampton, Deputy Chairman,  
Black Panther Party, Illinois

Having studied as an undergraduate under Warren Belasco, a pioneer in the field of food studies, I have for years been conscious of the politics behind food production and consumption. In my own research and teaching, however, I returned to food studies not with an interest in *food*, per se, but as a means of investigating structures and systems of power and inequality. Historical moments that transformed my own insular undergraduate worldview—namely, the black freedom struggle, the Vietnam War, and the emergence of second wave feminism and gay liberation—sometimes barely registered with my students, many of whom saw little connection between their own fields of study in

communications or the health sciences and current issues involving race relations, capitalism, gender inequality, gay rights, or international affairs. After two years meandering through stacks of literature about the black freedom struggle in search of a new topic or innovative approach suitable for a dissertation, I attended a fascinating presentation by Alondra Nelson in 2011 about the Black Panther Party's efforts to combat medical discrimination. I began to consider the potential of reaching media- and science-minded students by de-emphasizing key historical figures and events and instead focusing on the human body itself as a site of social and political struggle.<sup>1</sup> Food, I came to realize, is often a weapon in these battles.

The dynamics and tensions of agency and coercion, autonomy and oppression, at play in the global food system—manifested in myriad recent controversies surrounding the Farm Bill, food stamps, GMOs, obesity, healthcare, hunger, school lunch programs, food waste, food deserts, food safety, farmers' markets, fast food wages, globalization, and slave labor around the world—directly reflect and implicate historical patterns of marginalization and oppression. Current realities have historical roots, and historical campaigns and programs have modern-day reverberations. In an age where student activism largely occurs in cyberspace, if anywhere, many undergraduates see little point in attempting to challenge or even question systems of power when 1) the target is so diffuse, and 2) prospects for immediate, tangible gains are dim, to say the least. Relatively recent stories, for example, about fast food workers striking for a \$15 minimum wage or Walmart's revealing move to place bins for customers to donate food items to help feed the company's own employees, make clear that food insecurity persists. But many voice surprise, even disgust, with the notion that McDonald's employees "deserve" a living wage or believe that a carefully-constructed hunger safety net will catch those who fall through the cracks. Rarely have my students articulated an impassioned belief that change can be effected from the grassroots. In U.S. history and food studies courses, I often turn to the Black Panther Party and its food service programs to raise questions about how "poor people's movements" develop, how tactics and strategies develop, and, in the words of Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, "why they succeed" and "how they fail."<sup>2</sup>

***Speaking of the newly renamed "Food for Peace" program in 1961, President John F. Kennedy highlighted a reality that many African Americans and civil rights activists already acknowledged. "Food is strength," Kennedy proclaimed, "and food is peace, and food is freedom, and food is a helping to people around the world whose good will and friendship we want."***

Resisting the object-centered lens of much food studies work, Kyla Wazana Tompkins's *Racial Indigestion* (2012) calls for closer examination of "texts and [historical] moments during which acts of eating cultivate political subjects by fusing the social with the biological, by imaginatively shaping the matter we experience as body and self."<sup>3</sup> Following her lead, I frame my undergraduate food course, "The Politics of Food," around questions of identity and agency, access and accountability, health and sustainability, rather than commodities, flavor principles, etiquette, or culinary innovations. Though certainly the material delights of food are laden with cultural significances that reflect and reinforce social dynamics and political relationships, eating as an act itself, the meaning of which primarily stems from the identity of the eating subject rather than the eaten object, speaks to the reality that some have far greater access to "good" food than others. The Black Panther food programs represent an opportunity to approach food less as a forum of cultural and community expression than as a tool for political mobilization. As a historical case study, the Panther food programs offer several useful angles for classroom interrogation of hunger and emergency food relief specifically, as well as struggles for liberation and movements for social change more broadly. Their message remains relevant today, or as *The Black Panther* newspaper proclaimed in March 1969, "Hunger is one of the means of oppression and it must be halted."<sup>4</sup>

## Historical Context

Speaking of the newly renamed "Food for Peace" program in 1961, President John F. Kennedy highlighted a reality that many African Americans and civil rights activists already acknowledged. "Food is strength," Kennedy proclaimed, "and food is peace, and food is freedom, and food is a helping to people around the world whose good will and friendship we want."<sup>5</sup> In light of the rediscovery of poverty in the United States, initiated by Edward R. Murrow's documentary treatment of the plight of migrant farm workers in 1960's *Harvest of Shame*, Kennedy's pronouncement would prove both profoundly insightful and painfully short-sighted. Amidst the prosperity and abundance of postwar America, the persistence and pervasiveness of poverty—and its most pressing symptom, hunger—grew both more pronounced and less palatable. Despite the lofty rhetoric of Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty, tellingly launched on the porch of *white* Kentucky sharecroppers in 1964, tangible gains for America's poor were piecemeal, politically-contentious, racially-charged, and ultimately fleeting. The intertwining of racial oppression and class inequality, which has characterized American history since slavery, expanded the implications of poverty beyond issues of material welfare, fostering a crippling physical and psychological condition that diminished prospects of justice and freedom for the poor. Religious charities like those run by the Catholic Church and mutual aid societies formed by immigrant communities have deep roots in American history. While they provided needed services, they worked toward no long-term solutions. During the Great Depression, hunger amidst

surplus became a national scandal, as the government paid farmers to overproduce while millions continued to starve.<sup>6</sup> During this time the communist Alabama Sharecroppers' Union worked to mobilize a racially-conscious class-based movement to secure rights for tenant farmers, recognizing the connection between the race of most Alabama sharecroppers and the biases of a system that kept hardworking families in an intergenerational cycle of debt. Decades later in neighboring Mississippi, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) quickly realized that civil rights work in the poorest counties of the Delta would be pointless if people were too paralyzed by hunger and food insecurity to move. In fact, the long black freedom struggle has repeatedly underscored the cultural and political significance of food, explicitly calling attention to interlocking structures of racism and social inequality embedded in the politics and culture of food. Conceptualizing food as a site of conscious and concerted social activism calls attention to the problematic interstices of the "racialized political economy of food production and distribution" and the "cultural politics of food consumption" in the United States.<sup>7</sup> Offering a new vantage point from which to scrutinize and formulate questions about racial equality and social justice, food studies encourages a more inclusive, expansive understanding of the black freedom struggle. The lens of food justice and what Tompkins has termed "critical eating studies" in particular requires a broadening of the term "activist" to include all those seeking to resist systems of oppression in efforts to improve their daily lives. It also mandates a revision of more conventional definitions of "freedom," most of which have focused on integration and voting rights, by illuminating the essential role of food in both the symbolic politics and practical agenda of movement activists.

***This tactical progression from guns to butter was not reformist or counterrevolutionary, as critics like Panther leader Eldridge Cleaver charged, but instead represented a flexible and logical response to official efforts to thwart the Party's growth and influence.***

The Black Panther Party, a community-based organization headquartered in Oakland, California dedicated to radical politics, armed self-defense, and racial self-determination, advanced one of the most devastating, forceful, and potentially revolutionary critiques of the American food system to emerge during this decade of sweeping social change. In 1969, Huey P. Newton, Panther co-founder and Minister of Defense, mandated that all Party chapters nationwide institute a Free Breakfast for Children Program. Only recently released from jail after his acquittal in a long and highly-publicized trial for murdering a police officer, Newton and his Party had become infamous for their militant efforts to "police the police" via community patrols by young black men in leather jackets and berets openly bearing loaded guns. This new directive established the first of the Party's much-celebrated

"Survival Programs," which provided free goods and services to the urban poor. The most popular and, oddly, the most controversial of these programs were centered on food.

Despite their infamously militant tactics, the Panthers, and Newton in particular, contended that combating police brutality and racial violence was but one dimension of their broader vision of black liberation—a vision rooted in demands for "freedom" and the "power to determine the destiny of our Black Community."<sup>8</sup> "Interested primarily in educating and revolutionizing the community," Newton later explained, "we needed to get their attention and give them something to identify with."<sup>9</sup> The tenth point of the Party platform encapsulated the tangible gains it sought for America's "black colonial subjects," declaring, "We want land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice, and peace." Struggles for land and housing required long-term legal and economic strategizing, while major reforms of the urban education system would require skillful reorganization and enormous financial investment, all with no immediate payout. Though certainly apparent in the physical deterioration of the nation's cities, the human toll of "the urban crisis" was most palpable in the daily suffering of the hungry poor. Therefore, while African Americans worked toward long-range goals of "freedom," "justice," and "peace," the Party began organizing around the basics of bread.

This tactical progression from guns to butter was not reformist or counterrevolutionary, as critics like Panther leader Eldridge Cleaver charged, but instead represented a flexible and logical response to official efforts to thwart the Party's growth and influence.<sup>10</sup> In this vein, the survival programs were broadly "designed to underline the injustices of American capitalism and stimulate the Black masses into revolting against the American government" and, in doing so, to "lay the groundwork for the insurrection" necessary to bring about a new racial order.<sup>11</sup> The interracial, cross-cultural, and politically innovative alliances the Party forged were both possible and momentarily effective because the Panthers, and particularly Party co-founder and political philosopher Huey Newton, interpreted the world at the end of the 1960s in a way that made sense to a variety of suffering peoples who were, if not ripe for radicalization, sympathetic to the demands and tactics of militants in America's streets.

Panther food programs, which began with a single breakfast program in Oakland, exploded to over 36 sites nationwide by 1971. Their food work also included free food programs and spectacular "Survival Conferences" in the Spring of 1972, in which free groceries were a featured attraction. These programs relied entirely on donations from community members, local churches, and most importantly from neighborhood businesses and grocery chains. While the labor needed to make and serve the food each morning was voluntary, provisioning foodstuffs and other supplies was often a matter of manipulation, even coercion. Party members, parents, and sometimes the children themselves solicited donations from local grocery stores and businesses. While some willingly contributed, others, including chains such as Safeway and Mayfair and

independent operations like black-owned Bill Boyette's liquors, refused to do so. In these cases, the Party counted not on the goodwill of local businesses so much as their fear of economic retribution. The politics of the breakfast program thus underscored the division between the haves and have-nots. Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin, Jr. note, "The Panthers drew a line dividing the world in two."<sup>12</sup> Indeed, it became easier for people to understand the persistence of hunger, for example, when a store such as Safeway could be castigated for withholding food from needy children. Though widespread hunger has diffuse points of origin, Panther food programs and food politics devised concrete locations and sites for the poor and working classes to challenge capitalists who profited from the community without giving back. The Party newspaper regularly listed stores that refused to participate or contribute to their cause. In April 1969, the *Panther* chided "the avaricious businessmen that pinch selfishly a little to the program. We say that this is not enough, especially from those that thrive off of the Black Community like leeches." The Party not only charged "avaricious businessmen" with perpetuating hunger by overcharging for food commodities but also demanded that those businesses be part of the solution or face swift economic reprisals. As a result, the Party fostered an ideology of hunger predicated on the belief that capitalism was responsible for the people's suffering, but that ironically also relied on the imperatives of capitalism to get businesses in line with their program. In this way, the breakfast programs had the potential to awaken the revolutionary consciousness of the people to see the interrelatedness of capitalism, social stratification, and their own material deprivation and political marginalization. Despite some objections to these practices, the breakfast programs were a runaway success.

The practical benefits of free breakfasts were great. As *The Black Panther* regularly emphasized, a morning meal worked to silence the hunger pains of black youth that so often incapacitated them during school hours. One Party member asked her comrades, "How can a person be expected to pay attention and learn about history, math, science and other subjects that are abstract to his reality when his mind is concentrating on a very real and concrete problem? Where is the next meal coming from?"<sup>13</sup> The connection between undernourished bodies and underdeveloped minds was plain: Children must be fed each morning if they were to feed their minds at school during the day, to establish fundamental skills in math and reading necessary not only for socio-economic mobility but for political mobilization as well.

Certainly Panther food programs operated as vital emergency measures to get food to the hungry and nutrients to the malnourished. But that was only the beginning. David Hilliard acknowledged that food "serves a double purpose, providing sustenance but also functioning as an organizing tool."<sup>14</sup> As Newton later wrote, the survival programs "were designed to help the people survive until their consciousness is raised, which is only the first step in the revolution to produce a new America...In themselves they do not change social conditions, but they

are life-saving vehicles until conditions change."<sup>15</sup> The practical necessity of the food programs, and the clear and vital interest they aroused in the Party among residents of Oakland and other major cities, sparked a series of food-centered political campaigns aiming not only to improve the daily lives of the hungry, but to address structural inequalities that served to keep African Americans and other economically and politically oppressed groups divided and weak.

***Panther food programs, which began with a single breakfast program in Oakland, exploded to over 36 sites nationwide by 1971.***

Four months into the first program, *Newsweek* quoted a California police officer who asked, "How can anyone be against feeding kids?" The skepticism, resistance, and outright opposition the programs encountered, however, made clear that many, especially those in positions of authority, were opposed to feeding some kids, and adamantly so. The extent of police harassment of the Party's breakfast programs nationwide and the intricate work of the FBI's Counterintelligence Program (COINTELPRO) to "expose, disrupt, misdirect, discredit, or otherwise neutralize the activities" of the Panthers (among other black organizations) demonstrated that officials at the local and federal level perceived the food programs to be a multivalent threat. Panther Elaine Brown, who spearheaded the establishment of a Panther free breakfast program in Los Angeles, surmised that "[t]he success of the Panther free breakfast programs for the poor...as much as Panther guns triggered [FBI director] J. Edgar Hoover's targeting of the party for the most massive and violent FBI assault ever committed."<sup>16</sup> According to Bureau records, one FBI head instructed agents in San Francisco, "...The BPP is not engaged in the 'Breakfast for Children' program for humanitarian reasons [but for others], including their efforts to create an image of civility, assume community control of Negroes, and to fill adolescent children with their insidious poison."<sup>17</sup> Subsequent COINTELPRO efforts to impede operations included harassment of church leaders who hosted daily meals, questioning and occasional arrest of youth and Party members who attended or volunteered, often frivolous citations from the public health department, and sometimes physical destruction of the food itself. In its more devious moments, the FBI circulated rumors in San Francisco that the breakfasts were unsafe because "various personnel in national headquarters...are infected with venereal disease" and in Raleigh-Durham that the nephew of the chief breakfast organizer was a pedophile who physically abused the children in attendance.<sup>18</sup> According to Panther Chief of Staff David Hilliard, who oversaw the expansion of Panther service work, "Police raided the Breakfast for Children Program, ransacked food storage facilities, destroyed kitchen equipment, and attempted to disrupt relations between the Black Panthers and local business owners and community advocates, whose contributions made the programs possible."<sup>19</sup> But why? The

extent to which government operatives worked to undermine these food programs suggests that they, too, understood what was at stake in permitting communities to see the direct connection between strong bodies and strong minds, between healthy children and healthy communities, between food and freedom.

Indeed, many heralded the transformative potential of the survival programs, asserting that for true freedom to be possible, the material essentials of life must be free of cost. The Marxist politics of Newton and his followers, of course, lay at the root of this worldview, which declared that freedom and capitalism by definition could not coexist. "Capitalism is what put black people in slavery," the *Black Panther* declared in March 1969. "Capitalism is why black people can't get decent housing and capitalism is why there are so many hungry children in the black communities of America today."<sup>20</sup> But the survival programs went further, showing not merely what was wrong with capitalism but also how socialism could work. Seale made the connection obvious: "Once the people see a socialistic program is valuable to them they won't throw it away. By practicing socialism they learn it better."<sup>21</sup>

**Many heralded the transformative potential of the survival programs, asserting that for true freedom to be possible, the material essentials of life must be free of cost.**

Viewing the late Sixties as a moment truly ripe for revolution, Newton and Seale sought to raise the awareness of the oppressed of all races to see the systemic forces that worked to perpetuate their daily struggles against hunger, malnourishment, ill health, poor housing, illiteracy, and a host of other social barriers. If, as Newton insisted, the Party's survival programs were merely a prelude to an armed overthrow of the capitalist system, the food programs played a vital part by addressing the need for bread—a need that has been at the root of people's liberation struggles throughout history.

## In the Classroom

The healthy state of Black Power studies and Black Panther scholarship in recent years has produced several important and accessible histories of the Party's formation, ideology, political evolution, and social programs, several of which are easy to excerpt and accessible to undergraduates. Historian Donna Jean Murch frames her study, *Living for the City* (2010), around the experiences of southern blacks who migrated to California in search of better employment and the mobility promised by a strong public education system. Chapters titled "Survival Pending Revolution" and "A Chicken in Every Bag" speak directly to Panther Survival Programs, arguing that they were unique and influential *not* because the Panthers were the only group providing such services to the poor (they weren't), but because Panther programs "politiciz[ed] welfare rights

by showing a coordinated national effort that highlighted the Party's successes and the government's failures."<sup>22</sup> More recently, Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin, Jr. argue in *Race Against Empire*, a political history of the Panthers, that this progression from armed community defense to service programs was not reformist or counterrevolutionary, as some contemporaries charged, but instead a flexible and logical response to official efforts to thwart the Party's growth and influence. In the authors' estimation, the unifying thread and the centerpiece of Panther political philosophy was a "nondogmatic, Marx-inflected anti-imperialis[t]" worldview—an incisive, timely critique of class and power in the United States.<sup>23</sup> Bloom and Martin posit that Panther politics was undergirded by a belief that black Americans and other disenfranchised groups were, in effect, internal colonies of the United States. Examining the psychological effects of this "ghettoization" on individual and communal development, *Black Against Empire* deftly situates the daily (lowercase "p") politics of survival in poor urban black communities within the context of the international (capital "P") political struggles of subjugated nations and peoples against forces of global imperialism. By this account, Panther politics acknowledged the international dimensions of systems defining the rights of people not only in their relation to state power but in the political dynamics governing nations' relationships to each other as well. As this work proves, the Panthers were not insular and impulsive but instead largely collaborative and deliberate—qualities that inspired followers and created coalitions. Both works can serve well to provide historical context and a political lens through which to interpret Panther food politics.

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I often frame conversation about the Black Panther Survival Programs with a fifteen-minute clip from *The Black Power Mixtape, 1967-1975* (dir. Goran Olsson, 2011).<sup>24</sup> This documentary provides a concise, compelling introduction to the black freedom struggle, theories of Black Power and political radicalism, and leaders and programs of the Black Panthers, highlighting the interplay between poverty, physical vulnerability, and political disfranchisement. The film is pieced together from recently discovered archival footage shot by a Swedish film crew during the late 1960s and early 1970s, voice-over commentary from historical personalities including Kathleen Cleaver and Angela Davis, and reflections and childhood memories from hip hop artists like Talib Kweli and Erykah Badu. Rather than show the entire film (which is certainly worth the class time), I begin about twenty-five

minutes into the film with a sequence capturing a single black mother in New York City as she struggles to get her ten children roused and ready for school. The narrator points out that there is not enough food for all of the children to eat breakfast (which on this day is only dry cereal), while the camera frames the inadequacies of the living space. The sequence then frames a Panther liberation school, where children sing about the coming revolution; a female Panther leader affirming to foreign reporters the Panthers' willingness to die or go to jail for the cause; and scenes from an early morning breakfast program. Grappling with these images urges students to see that hunger and malnourishment are symptoms of a sick social system, beset by the harmful contradictions of capitalism.

Other primary sources about the Panther food programs abound, including Party literature, news stories, interviews, oral histories, and autobiographies. Moreover, *The Black Panther* newspaper is itself a veritable archive of Panther rhetoric and imagery, including articles by central party leadership, reports from local chapters, ads requesting aid and donations, letters from friendly and hostile readers, photos of Panther events, and the masterful artwork of Minister of Culture Emory Douglas. Douglas's images are particularly fruitful in the classroom. Depicting the black urban poor in humanizing, sympathetic, even heroic terms, Douglas's cover art directly connects daily struggles for food, clothing, work, shelter, and peace of mind to the Party's broader revolutionary Marxist vision, often while demonizing specific politicians and figures in the local community. For example, during a BPP-orchestrated boycott of Boyette's Liquor Store, Douglas portrayed Bill Boyette as an "honorary Klansman" for his refusal to "treat the people to a piece of bread" by pledging a regular donation to the breakfast program.

***Students often sympathize with the Panther's strategy of mobilizing the poor through social service work. However, they frequently object to the tactics used to achieve these ends.***

Sources offering reactionary perspectives are tellingly plentiful as well. Internal documents from the FBI's Counterintelligence Program (COINTELPRO) provide a particularly stark contrast. Numerous internal memos to and from FBI director J. Edgar Hoover reveal that federal officials perceived the food and other survival programs as a devious, highly effective tactic to divert media scrutiny and win over those living in the nation's urban ghettos. Even more shocking to students, the documents often detail specific instructions or reports about how to infiltrate the Party and sabotage its operations, tactics that historians largely agree succeeded in fracturing party leadership and fueling internecine feuds and intra-racial street violence. Many students express disbelief that the United States government would go to such extremes to impede what many see as an objective social good—feeding the hungry. The language of these documents

makes plain that those in positions of authority recognized the appeal of free food programs and realized that in order to maintain the status quo, such programs must be quashed. One way this was accomplished was by establishing comparable government-run programs, namely free breakfast programs inside public schools. This realization itself is instructive, urging students to question the motives of government officials and to entertain the possibility that problems like hunger and widespread poverty are not inevitable, but the result of systematic biases that agents of power often have a vested interest in protecting.

Sociologist Janet Poppendieck's work on hunger and emergency food services provides crucial historical grounding and theoretical framing for this discussion, while placing these short-lived programs in conversation with food politics at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>25</sup> The Panthers' close practical alliance with community churches, which often housed the free breakfasts, fosters easy comparisons between the Survival Programs and the charity work often conducted by religious organizations. But in contrast to many church-run soup kitchens or food pantries that provide an outlet for congregants to act charitably toward their less fortunate brethren, the Panthers were not driven by charitable aspirations, which Poppendieck points out often actually serve to depoliticize hunger. Poppendieck writes that charitable "[f]ood programs not only make the well fed feel better, they reassure us that no one will starve, even if the nation ends welfare and cuts gaping holes in the food stamp safety net."<sup>26</sup> Even worse than the moral complacency fostered by "sweet charity," Poppendieck argues that emergency food assistance programs and infrastructure render our society vulnerable to token solutions that simply link together complementary symptoms without disturbing the underlying structural problems.<sup>27</sup> In striking contrast, the Panthers' food programs and anti-hunger politics worked to address the persistence of food insecurity by dramatizing its political roots and implications. Though the Panthers targeted the graphic problem of hunger, it was only the beginning of their multi-faceted program for community survival. Paired with a host of other programs to address needs for food, clothing, shelter, shoes, and meaningful education, Panther food programs reflected Poppendieck's assertion "that the food portion of this complex web of human needs can [not] be met independently of the rest."<sup>28</sup> The Panthers recognized that hunger could not be addressed in a vacuum and that racial inequality could not be addressed without tackling socioeconomic equality.

The historical moment offers several pedagogical opportunities to engage with issues of poverty, racial inequality, and social movements more broadly. First, why did the Panthers become involved with these Survival Programs? Where and how did they see a need and what payout did they seek from dedicating enormous resources to this work? Some students, mirroring the language of contemporary Panther critics and early Panther scholarship, express skepticism that the food programs were actually driven by humanitarianism, raising another important question. Was emergency food aid a tactical



move, or did Party members really view this as the ground floor of the revolution they sought?

Indeed, students often sympathize with the Panther's strategy of mobilizing the poor through social service work. However, they frequently object to the tactics used to achieve these ends. Film clips from breakfast programs portray children repeating after a male Panther, "All power to the people...Free all political prisoners. Right on!" These scenes intrigue and sometimes disturb students, who quickly formulate revealing inquiries. Were the Panthers really any different from the federal officials and local programs they criticized? Are all social programs inherently disempowering? Is service work without agenda really possible? And if, as I generally contend at the beginning of the lesson, food is freedom and food is control, did the Panthers not also manipulate the hungry, using their growling stomachs to pull them into their program? Does it matter, I ask? Can't the end justify the means, especially when the means entail that fewer children went to school on an empty stomach? Is this really coercion, as some propose? Or is this simply how "poor people's movements"—and many other social movements, for that matter—operate?

**Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward's classic work, *Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail (1977)*, helps address some of these questions.<sup>29</sup> Reflecting on specific class-based movements during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the authors theorize the interplay between state power, historical circumstances, leadership personalities, organizational structures, and the demands and outcomes of social movements on behalf of the poor.**

Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward's classic work, *Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail (1977)*, helps address some of these questions.<sup>30</sup> Reflecting on specific class-based movements during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the authors theorize the interplay between state power, historical circumstances, leadership personalities, organizational structures, and the demands and outcomes of social movements on behalf of the poor. Piven and Cloward affirm the need to approach historical moments with objectivity and respect for the reasoning of movement leaders. They contend that "so long as lower-class groups abided by the norms governing the electoral-representative system, they would have little influence.... [P]rotest tactics which defied political norms were not simply the recourse of troublemakers and fools. For the poor, they were the only recourse."<sup>31</sup> From this vantage, the criticism and backlash elicited by the Panther food programs seems inevitable. For as Piven and Cloward ask, "how could it have been otherwise? Important interests were at stake, and had those interests not been a profound

source of contention, there would have been no need for [class] insurgency."<sup>32</sup> Indeed, one of the greatest strengths of *Poor People's Movements* is the thoughtful, rational, yet firm manner in which it calls upon many students to question the class biases and assumptions they bring into the classroom—assumptions that influence and inhibit their ability to take a social movement on the terms of the people who made it. "[T]he relevant question to ask," insist Piven and Cloward, "is whether, on balance, the movement made gains or lost ground; whether it advanced the interests of working people or set back those interests."<sup>33</sup> When framed by these questions, and discussed in the context of the southern civil rights movement's tactics of nonviolence, the tone of the conversation often shifts. The work of social change is messy and difficult. Sometimes the fact that a struggle is waged, that resistance coalesces, must itself be the only triumph of a struggle, for "[w]hat was won must be judged by what was possible." The community efforts of the Panthers would have been noteworthy had they stopped at emergency food relief, and their service work would have been subversive if their chief aim had been simply to provide needed goods and services to the urban poor. But in effect, doing for the hungry poor of the nation's urban ghettos what the federal government claimed to be doing, and moreover encouraging the members of the community to do for themselves, constituted political work, meaningful organizing, and class mobilization for grander, if ultimately unachieved, ends. The revolution the Panthers sought was not to be, but the means by which they prepared for that revolution made clear the relevance of politics to the everyday lives of the hungry poor. This itself must be seen as a victory, for in doing so they framed hunger as an issue of power and inequitable resource distribution rather than a fleeting personal condition that beset the lazy or the unfortunate. Launched in the early years of the Nixon administration in the shadow of Johnson's grand, unrealized Great Society, Panther hunger programs called attention to the bipartisan failure to establish or maintain a defensible, humane hunger safety net. Neither Democrats nor Republicans were solely responsible but neither had the wherewithal to actually, finally tackle the problem. This lesson opens the door to potentially revealing and undoubtedly difficult discussions about how to tackle the persistence of food insecurity in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## Notes

- 1 Alondra Nelson previewed her research at the 2011 American Studies Association Conference in Baltimore, MD. Alondra Nelson, *Body and Soul: The Black Panther Party and the Fight Against Medical Discrimination* (University of Minnesota Press, 2011).
- 2 Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977).
- 3 Kyla Wazana Tompkins, *Racial Indigestion: Eating Bodies in the 19th Century* (New York University, 2012), 2.
- 4 "To Feed Our Children," *The Black Panther* (26 March 1969).
- 5 Qtd. in "Overview: Food for Peace," U.S. Food Aid and Security Website < <http://foodaid.org/food-aid-programs/food-for-peace/>> (accessed 13 Feb 2012).
- 6 Janet Poppendieck, *Breadlines Knee Deep in Wheat: Food Assistance in the Great Depression* (Rutgers University Press, 1985).
- 7 Alison Hope Alkon and Julian Agyeman (eds.), *Cultivating Food Justice: Race, Class, and Sustainability* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2011), 13.
- 8 Black Panther Party, "What We Want, What We Believe" (1966), available at <http://www.blackpanther.org/TenPoint.htm> (accessed 18 Oct 2013).
- 9 David Hilliard and Donald Weise (eds.), *The Huey P. Newton Reader* (New York and London: Seven Stories Press, 2002), 58.
- 10 The most successful of these official efforts was the 1967 passage of the Mulford Act, which prohibited the carrying of loaded firearms in public, which had been the principle Panther tactic during the early months of the Party. See Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin, Jr., *Black Against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party* (University of California Press, 2013), 57-61.
- 11 Ryan Kirkby, "'The Revolution Will Not Be Televised': Community Activism and the Black Panther Party, 1966-1971," *Canadian Review of American Studies* Vol. 41.1 (2011), 25, 26, 30.
- 12 Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin, Jr., *Black Against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party* (University of California Press, 2013), 393.
- 13 "Reform or Revolution?" *The Black Panther* (3 Mar 1969).
- 14 Qtd. in Alondra Nelson, *Body and Soul: The Black Panther Party and the Fight Against Medical Discrimination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 58.
- 15 Huey P. Newton, qtd. in Mumia Abu-Jamal, *We Want Freedom: A Life in the Black Panther Party* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: South End Press, 2004), 70.
- 16 Elaine Brown, *A Taste of Power: A Black Woman's Story* (New York: Anchor Books, 1994), 10.
- 17 Qtd. in Kenneth O'Reilly, "Racial Matters": *The FBI's Secret File on Black America, 1960-1972* (New York: The Free Press, 1989), 302.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 302-303.
- 19 David Hilliard, "Introduction," in David Hilliard and Donald Weise (eds.), *The Huey P. Newton Reader* (New York and London: Seven Stories Press, 2002), 15.
- 20 "Capitalism Attacks Breakfast for Children," *The Black Panther* (20 Mar 1969), 15.
- 21 Interview with Bobby Seale [Section title and pg unknown], *The Black Panther* (3 March 1969), 43.
- 22 Donna Jean Murch, *Living for the City: Migration, Education, and the Rise of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 175. Panther leader Kathleen Cleaver remarked in 2010, "[With t]he kind of problems that the black community suffer—unequal levels of imprisonment, unequal levels of access to resources, poor health ...the Black Panther Party tried to model for the community some of the possible solutions that were not capitalistic-oriented, like free clinics...or 'send your children to us and we will feed them for free.' And the idea of free breakfasts is one of the legacies that's been adopted with schools now having free breakfasts. But they didn't before. The Black Panther Party was not the only organization that did it, but it was the only organization based in ghetto communities that did it." *Black Power Mixtape, 1967-1975*, dir. Goran Olsson (PBS, 2011); emphasis added.
- 23 Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin, Jr., *Black Against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party* (University of California Press, 2013), 312.
- 24 *Black Power Mixtape, 1967-1975*, dir. Goran Olsson (PBS, 2011).
- 25 See Janet Poppendieck, *Sweet Charity?: Emergency Food and the End of Entitlement* (New York: Penguin Books, 1998). For a shorter, more condensed version of Poppendieck's argument, see Janet Poppendieck, "Want Amid Plenty: From Hunger to Inequality," in Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik (eds.), *Food and Culture: A Reader*, 3rd ed. (New York and London: Routledge, 2013), 563-571.
- 26 Janet Poppendieck, "Want Amid Plenty: From Hunger to Inequality," in Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik (eds.), *Food and Culture: A Reader*, 3rd ed. (New York and London: Routledge, 2013), 568.
- 27 *Ibid.*, 567.
- 28 *Ibid.*, 569.
- 29 Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail* (Vintage Books: New York, 1977, rpt 1979).
- 30 Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail* (Vintage Books: New York, 1977, rpt 1979).
- 31 *Ibid.*, 3.
- 32 *Ibid.*, xiii.
- 33 *Ibid.*, xiii.



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# RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

## A Short Course on Development in “Post-conflict” Congo

By Justin Podur



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**I**t was during my brief teaching in Bukavu, in the east of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), that I came to understand the power of neoliberalism in shaping the narrative of DRC’s past, present, and future. While my students argued that the DRC’s problems stemmed from local corruption, not ongoing colonialism, I was trying to present a more diverse story of development, one that cracks the neoliberal narrative and lets democracy and the public sector play a role.

It was the summer of 2011 and I was teaching the very first class of a new Master’s Program in Environmental Management. Most of my students were managers in government or non-governmental organizations, or teachers upgrading their skills for jobs they already held. Mostly in their 30s and 40s, they are also survivors of one of the worst conflicts of the century, and they all have stories of which I got only small glimpses.

For them, having a foreign professor was a chance to see how their education compares with the rest of the world’s in both content and standards. But my own task was different. My two short courses, “Globalization and Development” and “Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and Forest Management,” were to help these current and future environmental managers expand their understanding of the policy options available to them—options shaped by their history.

The DRC only became independent in 1960. Its independence was immediately followed by an invasion by its former colonial master, Belgium, followed by an intervention by the United States. Decades of kleptocratic dictatorship under Mobutu followed, ending only through yet another foreign invasion, this time by Rwanda in 1996, and Rwanda continues to call the shots in the eastern Congo, where I was. Given this history, the Congo never had a chance to recover from the damage inflicted upon it

by colonialism; instead, it has been continuously tortured by it.

***The DRC only became independent in 1960. Its independence was immediately followed by an invasion by its former colonial master, Belgium, followed by an intervention by the United States.***

The Congo's education system is no exception. By favoring vocational education over higher education, the Belgians sought to prevent the emergence of a Congolese elite that could challenge their rule. A Belgian colonial official wrote: "If we have no black doctors, veterinarians, engineers, it is because we can send white doctors, veterinarians, and engineers."<sup>1</sup> In about fifty years of colonial rule the Belgians produced virtually no Congolese university graduates. By 1954, there were 30 Africans enrolled in Congolese universities; by 1959, the Belgians increased enrolment to a total of 421 Africans studying at Congolese universities.<sup>2</sup> (The population at the time was about 14 million). An American observer in 1946 wrote: "Only if it is intended that the Congolese people remain permanently under European tutelage, can a disjointed system of education, which denies them effective training beyond the rudimentary and limited vocational levels, be justified."<sup>3</sup>

Had the Congo had time to recover, these legacies would be irrelevant. But as it stands, both the colonial legacy and current strife hinder everyday educational work.

## The day-to-day difficulties

The day-to-day difficulties of my Congolese students are very different from those on North American campuses. My class nominally starts at 1pm, but we never get going before 1:30. The campus is in Panzi, a remote part of town, and to get to it you have to take a dirt road that is narrow and completely jammed with people, cars, motorcycles, buses, and trucks, at all hours. One day someone suggests that my class change to 10am, and a vigorous debate starts. They call a vote and it's split. I break the tie, telling the class that I have decided to do it at 1pm, hoping that I'm guessing right, and they all seem satisfied – until the next day, when the debate ensues again. They all work, and their other classes are just as packed and intense as mine, because professors are coming from other countries like Burundi and Kenya and can only teach at UEA (l'Université Evangélique en Afrique) while they are on leave, like me.

For their assignments, which they call "Travaux Pratiques," some give me hand-written versions, others email them or hand me printed copies, and still others seek extensions on the grounds that there was no electricity the night before. The city is powered by an unreliable

hydroelectric generator on the Ruzizi River, and I live through the nightly blackouts too, so I empathize.

One day a student arrives so late that he's missed the entire class and the rest of the students are piling into vehicles to head home. He explains he was held up at work. He is a high school teacher who needs a sound system to teach because his class has 500 students, his school 3000. I am sure I am misunderstanding the numbers, that my French comprehension is failing me. A few days later I bring it up again with a group of students. I tell them I don't think it's possible that the teacher has 500 kids in his class. They say it is. One, an architect who was once in medical school, said he was once in a class with 3500 in an auditorium.

*"How do they mark assignments?"*

*"Assistants," they tell me.*

*"How many assistants?"*

*"Three!"*

*"So one assistant marks 1000 papers? How long do they have?"*

*"3 months?"*

Even if those were simple assignments, it would be twenty a day for fifty days. Another teacher admitted to me that it was virtually impossible to do the work.

The teacher in my class gets paid \$175 per month, but the average is apparently closer to \$70 a month, and only 20% of teachers are even getting paid. Public school students pay about \$5 a month, but teachers sometimes ask parents for more. Tuition in the master's program is \$1500 for the year, which includes a laptop – a smart idea by Katcho Karume, volcanologist and coordinator of the Master's program, who tells me they are paying only a fraction of the total cost per student, with the rest covered by foreign donations.

These anecdotal numbers I hear from my students contrast starkly with official statistics. A 2005 World Bank country study listed average primary school class sizes around 40, and salaries around \$15 per month (World Bank 2005, p. 87). These figures excluded the eastern Congo, however, where the war shattered the already broken system. The descriptions I heard were those of a system that is in recovery mode.

## Educational problems from Congo's history

And yet, despite these significant day-to-day differences, in some ways these students remind me of my students at home – they are on Facebook in the computer lab, they look at their laptops during lectures, and they duck out of class with their cell phones.

Given Congo's history, such similarities were even more surprising. King Leopold of Belgium took the Congo in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century's "Scramble for Africa" in one of history's most horrific episodes of colonialism. Though the Congo became a Belgian colony (1906–1960), this more official status did not help its prospects. The Belgians left Congo in a disastrous state, including structural problems in its education sector. A study done by Barbara Yates shortly after independence found the system completely bottlenecked by personnel shortages and urgently needing to train more teachers, especially above primary schools. This study found that less than two percent of eligible young people were enrolled in secondary schools and barely one percent in higher education, and the problem is even worse once the dropout rates are included. (Yates 1963, p.153).

"Over eighty years of colonial history, Belgium managed to produce 2000 Congolese high school graduates and twenty Congolese college graduates," Yates writes (p.153). In fact, the Belgians engaged in educational colonialism. Prioritizing vocational education and semi-skilled workers to assist the colonial administration, theirs was a deliberate policy of keeping the educational development of the Congolese low. In a later study Yates goes on to argue that Belgium's educational policy was based on the principles of Christian patriarchy, white hegemony, and a very specific fear that education would create an uncontrollable Congolese elite. (Yates 1980, pp.27-50)

If anything, economic and political interference in Congolese affairs continued in subsequent years. The US helped overthrow Congolese leader Patrice Lumumba and supported the thirty-five-year dictatorship of Mobutu. Under Mobutu, education as well as development more generally stagnated, while the profits of the Congo's mineral wealth flowed to South Africa, the US, and Europe. A report published by the Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa notes, among others, that the public education budget dropped from 7% of the GDP to 1%, that there was a 96% fall in spending per student, and that the estimated literacy rate was lower than 70%. (AfriMap 2009). These problems persist to this day. Schools are top heavy with staff and short of teachers and many children simply don't go to school.

Still, while colonialism and Mobutu's dictatorship are responsible for much of the current disorder, the international war that overthrew him wreaked even more devastation on the country. Bukavu, where I worked, was hit very hard by successive invasions throughout the war, notably by Rwandan refugees and by the Rwandan Patriotic Army that pursued them. Over the next 10 years, the Rwandans, their Ugandan allies, Congolese self-defense groups, and various Congolese governments fought a war conducted mostly against civilians like my students, leaving the rich mineral resources in the hands of various armed factions, and leaving people starving amid fertile agricultural land too dangerous to work. Today there is a kind of peace, though the mines remain in the hands of armed groups; civilians are still brutalized; and the devastated infrastructure is yet to be rebuilt.

Maybe that's why both Katcho Karume, the program director of my university and agronomist Gustave Mushagulusa, the rector, always seem to be in a hurry: they need to accelerate the education of a couple of generations of Congolese. One of Gustave's favourite sayings, when he's trying to move a meeting along, is "il faut gagner le temps" - - "we need to make up some time."

### ***My students were not very familiar with the narratives of anti-colonial nationalist struggle.***

Private universities were authorized in 1989, and my university is one of hundreds of such institutions created in the years that followed. Surprisingly, the enrollment ratio in higher education is higher here than in other countries in the region. According to a World Bank study, DRC's higher education system "continues to display vitality: though the resources for effective functioning are lacking, journals and publications are produced, seminars organized, and internet sites maintained" (World Bank 2005, p. 101). Yet for all this vitality, the province of South Kivu, where the UEA is located, is among the worst served (World Bank 2005, p. 105). As universities across the DRC try to "make up some time," inequality between regions is still waiting to be addressed.

### **The power of Western stories of Congo**

Kevin C. Dunn, in his 2003 book *Imagining the Congo*, discusses how Western perceptions of the Congo as intrinsically chaotic, as the "heart of darkness," shaped Western policy towards the country at key moments in its history. As I interacted with my students, I realized that Western perceptions were so powerful and hegemonic that they also shaped the world views of my Congolese students, who, in my view, had suffered very directly from Western interventions over their lifetimes.

My students were familiar with Patrice Lumumba, though more as a martyr than as a political thinker; some of them knew about Frantz Fanon, but mostly just his statement that if Africa were a gun, the Congo would be the trigger; some of them knew a little bit of Marx. But after a quick poll I realized that the radical analysis I had assumed would be the starting point for a course on Globalization and Development at a university in Bukavu was not to be the starting point at all.

This made my task slightly more complex than I had planned. I walked in thinking, here in the country of Patrice Lumumba, the continent of Frantz Fanon, the radical narrative of rapacious global capitalism would be so obvious that it wouldn't even be clear what I would have to teach at all. I assumed that I would be able to add some nuances to students' thinking on these issues, some ways of thinking about globalization and economic development in other contexts that might be of value. But what I encountered was something quite different.

My students were not very familiar with the narratives of anti-colonial nationalist struggle. To meet them where

they were at, I had to start from the discourses they were familiar with, which are those in fashion in Africa today: debates about international aid that took neoliberal economic policies for granted, without any alternatives considered. As a first step, I would have to try to introduce them to the idea that there were several ways of understanding the global economy, and that of these, the neoliberal way of understanding it was not necessarily the best.

So I start where they are at. In my development class, I start them off reading Dambisa Moyo's *Dead Aid: Why Aid is Not Working and How There Is a Better Way for Africa*, a book whose message is that Africans should rely on themselves and not on donors, appeals to them. Moyo argues that aid destroys small business, breaks government accountability to taxpayers, causes inflation, and feeds corruption, which is a major preoccupation of my students.

The enormity of this situation is noted in a 2009 OSISA-AfriMap report about corruption in the Congo's education system. It concludes

*that corruption was endemic, including the exchange of good grades for sexual favours or for cash; the use of funds for purposes other than those they were allocated to; the straightforward theft of funds from the institutions concerned; the allocation of UNESCO scholarship funds to personal associates; misuse of institutional property or vehicles for personal purposes; discriminatory hiring practices; and the use of students to carry out work for teaching staff on a personal basis.*

The report argues for a stronger institutional and political framework to address corruption in the education sector. But is corruption really just an outcome, as Moyo would argue, of failing to privilege the private sector enough? Or was it an outcome of scarcity itself?

After Moyo's book, I follow up with Ha-Joon Chang's book, *Bad Samaritans: The Myth of Free Trade and the Secret History of Capitalism*. As an economic historian, Chang shows that today's wealthy countries became wealthy by defying every single tenet of neoliberalism – the public sector always played a leading role, and there was heavy regulation, redistribution, and planning.

After Chang, who is ultimately a Keynesian, I introduce Marx, whose name is familiar to my students but whose ideas are not. I talk about Marx's critique of capitalism and class hierarchy, and the idea that those who work should control the wealth they produce. They understand the moral appeal of these ideas, but they want practical examples and I tell them about Cuba's famed healthcare system. They know that Che Guevara was a Marxist, but they also know that Che's time in the Congo didn't amount to very much. We go back to Keynesianism.

In contrast to Moyo and the World Bank, Chang argues that corruption is a consequence of a lack of development, not a cause. A lack of development means that a

government has a low tax base, which means that it can't pay good salaries to public employees who are in a position to get money in other ways. I am building up to this point in class, trying to lead the students to the answer I want, when one of them surprises me:

*"So, what do you do, if you are a public servant, and your salary is too low to live on?" I ask, fully expecting someone to say: "try to get bribes." Instead: "You get a job with an NGO!"*

My students' surprise answer reveals one of Moyo's arguments against foreign aid: that the international salaries paid by aid agencies make the wages of local businesses (and government) uncompetitive. I acknowledge this, but ask students to consider that direct foreign investment, which Moyo advocates, could have the exact same effect on a poor economy. Some are convinced. Others do what my Canadian students do: try to find a middle ground, as if neoliberal, Keynesian, and Marxist theories can all be right.

Another question my students want to debate is the relationship between leadership and structure. We talk about where the DRC fits into the global economy: its dependence on aid and exports of natural resources, illegal networks by which predatory neighbours capture its revenue, and how development in the DRC might involve some mix of investment in the agricultural and industrial economy, while paying attention to conservation of the DRC's extraordinary ecological heritage. However, when I introduce them to political economy ideas about how different state structures can lead to different economic outcomes, they ask: "What does the structure matter if our leaders are corrupt?"

I tell them they are the leaders now.

Katcho has the same message, phrased more harshly. "No one will do anything for you," he tells them, "and you don't want to work, you don't want to read, you don't want to do it for yourself." Go easy on them, I argue with him. I tell him they work as hard as my students in Canada.

With Congolese professor Pascal Sanginga (a development practitioner based in Kenya), Katcho and I form a panel to listen to all the Master's thesis proposals for this class: these students are about to start their research and are seeking feedback on their ideas. Katcho's feedback is accurate, but it is so blunt that it would make my Canadian students cry. After my slightly gentler comments to one student, Katcho says: "You were very diplomatic, Justin, but I don't see anything in this proposal that is actual research."

But most of the proposals are interesting, and wide-ranging, on issues such as renewable energy, integrated pest management, women's participation, hospital waste, and river pollution. We mostly give the usual kinds of criticisms of methodology, research question, and feasibility.

## The global economy of the Kivus

One student proposes a completely infeasible program: to study the effect of money from illegal mining on construction, and then the effect of construction on deforestation. I suggest that the relationship between construction and deforestation will be difficult enough, more than enough for a Master's thesis, and that the economy doesn't work in such a way that you can separate out mining money. Katcho agrees. "Is a professor's salary paid for by mining? Is a teacher's? Is a doctor's?"

The economy of the Kivus is dominated by a mix of United Nations, foreign donors, and the somewhat dysfunctional mining sector. While much of the mining is still controlled by armed groups linked either to the Congolese army or the Rwandan army, a major corporate employer in South Kivu is Canada's gold mining company, Banro. I visited them to hear about their environmental programs. Their representatives argue, perhaps unsurprisingly, that the solution to the conflict is legitimate business – too many unemployed people and too many weapons lead to violence. The day after my visit, I ask my students:

*"What's Banro's reputation?"*

*"Good," one student says.*

*"Bad," another says. "They have a concession in Itombwe, which is a reserve, a primary forest."*

*"Is it currently mined?" I ask.*

*"Yes, but not by them. It's currently controlled by armed groups, but it'll be necessary to chase them out."*

*A female student laughs when he says that. "Oh, just chase them out, will you?"*

*"Yes, we have to chase them out. They are there illegally."*

A debate ensues between the realist and the conservationist, who explains to me that the government granted a wide range of concessions to corporations like Banro, concessions that are currently being mined by artisans under the supervision of armed groups. The realist shares Banro's view and wants the mines to be in corporate hands, while the conservationist wants to extend the protected forest.

And Congolese conservationists are very serious indeed. At the end of my first week, I visit the gorillas in the Kahuzi Biega National Park. Eight visitors, accompanied by four rangers, visit with a gorilla family (in this case Chimanku and family) for an hour. The rangers look tough, clearly know and love the gorillas, and have obviously seen a lot. The main office has a shrine of skulls of gorillas killed during the war – most of them, it seems, were killed between 1996 and 1998.

On my last day, my students ask me what I think of them. When I tell them I was impressed with their focus and attention spans, they seem satisfied. They ask what was negative about teaching there. Mostly technology and infrastructure, I say. I had no complaints about the students. As I'm saying this, a student's cell phone rings, and we laugh. "No complaints," I repeat.

## Observations from teaching in the Kivus

I had a few observations that I didn't share with my students. I think my students, and my colleagues, are highly politically aware and forced, by the context, to be cautious about how much they express. In the summer of 2011, campaigning for the November 2011 presidential election had already begun. Between the lines, I heard a bitter understanding that the current president, Joseph Kabila, was going to do whatever was necessary to ensure that he would stay the president. Kabila had won the 2006 elections with massive electoral support from the east, including Bukavu and likely including my students, as someone who was from the east and would be able to bring peace to the region. And while it is possible to talk about "post-conflict Congo," the east has been disappointed by Kabila's performance. The 2011 elections turned out according to the bitter predictions I had heard in the summer. Amid low turnout and accusations of intimidation and fraud, Joseph Kabila returned to the presidency.

My students also took it for granted that anyone who would teach in the Congo would know a great deal about it. No one was the least bit impressed when I used examples from Congolese history or economics or the recent war to illustrate points. They just expected their professors, even foreign ones, to know these details, and they think of the Congo as an important country, even if it's not currently on its feet. On the other hand, they were very curious and interested about the rest of the world, including my own background. My parents are from Kerala, a state in India that is often used as an example of excellent health and education outcomes without concomitant economic growth, a development model that, like Cuba, is based on popular mobilization and, of course, education. When I explained one of the critiques of the Kerala model, that excellent education without sufficient growth in employment means that millions of Kerala's children end up working outside of the state, my students laughed. "Like you!" they said.

The other impression that has stayed with me was the power of Western frames. Those who tell stories of "local corruption" had a lot more time to work on my students than I did with the story of external colonialism and predation. The same facts, the same experiences, can be fit into a colonial narrative of eternal chaos and ethnic conflict or into an anti-imperialist narrative of interference and plunder. Kevin Dunn was right: the West's *Imagining the Congo* has great power, even in the Congo. I had expected to start with a radical economic analysis of underdevelopment in the Congo and go into depth in history and strategy. Instead, I had to start as I often do in North America: by arguing for a diversity of views besides just the neoliberal one and building up the arguments



brick-by-brick from there. My task was to take these future and current managers to a place where they could consider other policy options besides the neoliberal package of privatization, low taxes, deregulation, and favouring the private sector. In my class it meant introducing Ha-Joon Chang's ideas about how the developed countries actually developed, but doing so gently. For these students, I learned, the power of Western frames was matched by the power of political context: I had to be at least as cautious as they were about how we discussed politics and economics.

I served as external examiner on a few of the program's Master's theses in 2012. By the end of that year, "post-conflict" Congo had flared up again. Another Rwandan-supported rebellion, named M23, had taken over the capital of North Kivu, Goma, and was promising to march on Bukavu. In November of 2012, I heard that my students were scared, that foreigners were leaving. By December, the rebels had left Goma and were negotiating with the Congolese government in Uganda, their ultimate goal probably the partition of the Congo and some legal status for Rwanda's de facto control of the Kivus. More people displaced, more lives ruined, more foreign interference, and more development time lost.

Which, to Katcho and Gustave, just means more time they need to hurry to make up. The invitation to foreign scholars to go teach is still open, and they are going to try to keep teaching, whatever is going on.

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## Notes

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- <sup>2</sup> Lemarchand, p. 136.
- <sup>3</sup> J.S. Harris, "Education in the Belgian Congo," *Journal of Negro Education*, XV (Summer, 1946), p. 426. Cited in Lemarchand, p. 143.



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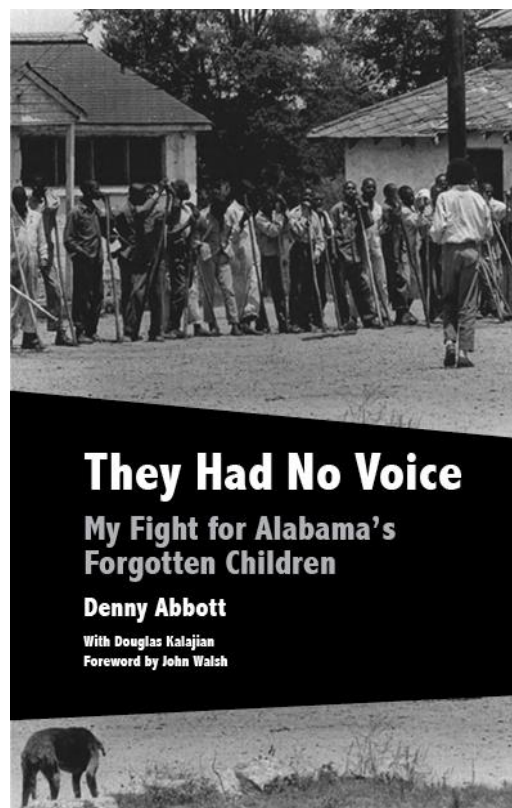
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# RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Review Essay: *They Had No Voice* by Denny Abbott  
and *Working for Peace and Justice* by Lawrence S.  
Wittner

By Jyl Lynn Felman



***Working For Peace and Justice: Memoirs of an Activist Intellectual* by Lawrence S. Wittner (University of Tennessee Press, 2012)**

***They Had No Voice: My Fight for Alabama's Forgotten Children* by Denny Abbott (New South Books, 2013).**

What does it take to be a life-long activist? How does it happen that a person takes on a political cause? Or does the cause take on the person? When does the political become personal enough to take action, risk harm to your family, lose all job security, and open yourself to public attack for years?

I kept asking myself these questions while reading the memoirs *Working for Peace and Justice* by Lawrence S. Wittner and *They Had No Voice* by Denny Abbott. Although their lives differ in terms of class, privilege, and higher education, both men committed themselves to political activism. While they both came to radical politics in their twenties, their paths to activism, beginning in the 1960's, were motivated by vastly different experiences and expectations.

Lawrence Wittner grew up in a middle-class, intellectual, and cultured family in Brooklyn and developed a social conscience when he was young. After finishing his Ph.D. at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, he became an academic activist (continuing even into his seventies) with his first teaching job at the Hampton Institute, a historically black university in Hampton, Virginia. Wittner was one of the few white professors. He was immediately drawn into the 1960's struggle for civil rights and challenged the passivity of the older black faculty and administration whose goal was to assimilate into the "white" world and not make trouble. Eventually, Wittner lost his job for challenging the dominant ideology of Hampton Institute and firing up his African American students. Years later, after writing the first two of three volumes of *The Struggle Against the Bomb*, he became a world expert on the history of the peace and nuclear disarmament movement.

Denny Abbott grew up working class in Montgomery, Alabama with a violent and racist father who secretly may have been in the Ku Klux Klan. Abbott married his high school sweetheart at the end of their senior year. In the 1960's, right after college, he worked as a probation officer at the Alabama Industrial School for Negro Children at Mt. Meigs. His job was to transfer young black children to what he calls "a slave camp" (xiii) on the outskirts of Montgomery.

Typical of the time, Alabama had separate accommodations for black and white juvenile delinquents. Observing the conditions the black children were forced to live in --daily beatings, severely cramped living conditions, starvation, and filthy mold-infected bathrooms -- Abbott started complaining and filing reports. In the beginning he

was rewarded for his efforts to "clean up" the detention center and stop the child abuse.

At twenty-three, due to exemplary recommendations, Abbott was promoted to chief probation officer, the youngest in Alabama history. And that's when the trouble really began. According to Abbott, "Mine was the last generation of white privilege and dominance and the first with a real opportunity to change and even help it along. It was an opportunity most of the white people I grew up with didn't exactly embrace" (xxiv). When little changed, Abbott ended up suing the State of Alabama in federal court for its mistreatment of the black youth in its care. After eleven years he was forced out of his job in the probation system and had to leave the state.

He was out of work for nine months, cleaning bathrooms part-time until he was asked to run a regional youth detention center in West Palm Beach. He grabbed the chance and uprooted his family. Once settled in Florida, Abbott realized the conditions of the West Palm Beach youth detention facility were similar to those in Montgomery. He complained and was forced out of his job again. Later he became the national director of the Adam Walsh Child Resource Center and created the first computerized data bank of missing children, testifying before Congress and state legislatures.

Unlike Wittner, who wanted to get away from Brooklyn and experience the world, Abbott had never planned to leave Montgomery, which to him was a great place to grow up. He became a reluctant and unwitting activist. And in contrast to Wittner, Abbott had no supportive coworkers and no "connections." From his undergraduate and graduate days, Wittner always had sympathetic and helpful colleagues. Although both suffered severe social ostracism for many years, Wittner's privilege served him well. Always "connected" to someone higher up on the academic ladder, Wittner (unlike Abbott) was able to draw on his long list of supportive colleagues around the country for continued teaching positions and research funding.

The scope of Wittner's activism is astounding. From civil rights activism to labor organizing, from fighting against the Viet Nam war to the front lines of peace activism, he never stopped. One of the most powerful stories is his fight for secure employment as a professor. He was repeatedly fired from one academic job to another. After Hampton, he was an assistant professor at Vassar, lost his job there due to political activism, and was "demoted" to an instructor position at the State University of New York, Albany. Like Abbott, he spent years living with the threat and often the reality of financial insecurity.

After a long, protracted fight among faculty over Wittner's radical leftist politics -- his scholarship was never challenged -- he ended up a full professor at the State University of New York, Albany, and author of seven books (and editor of four), and countless scholarly articles. What's remarkable about Wittner is that he was not just an academic activist through his writing and teaching. At the same time, he was also "out in the streets," going to demonstrations, speaking to the media and getting

arrested. He became an internationalist, traveling around the world giving lectures on the need for disarmament.

Because Wittner was involved in every major political battle from the 1960's to the present, it is surprising and disappointing that he doesn't mention the Women's Movement, and the impact that Second Wave Feminism had on his peace activism and personal life. Although he mentions briefly being part of a men's group, he writes that they had nothing "really" to talk about, so they socialized instead. Discussing masculinity and gender issues did not seem to engage the participants. So the group disbanded soon after it started. Although Wittner could imagine a world without nuclear arms, he didn't imagine or care deeply about male dominance and its impact on the global peace movement or his role in perpetuating male privilege personally. The question is: why didn't Wittner incorporate feminist theory into his political work? Unfortunately, he didn't have to. His life didn't depend on the disruption of gender roles and fighting the tight grip of patriarchy.

***Pedagogically speaking, both memoirs are excellent teaching tools, although for different reasons.***

Central to both men's memoirs is the role that their wives, Patty Wittner and Sharon Abbott, played in their careers. Patty was often angry, because she wanted Wittner to give up his political work and "just" be a professor. An ambivalent supporter of her husband's work, she stayed with him throughout the numerous times he was forced to relocate the family from state to state in search of employment, including outside the United States. At one point, Patty and Julia, their young daughter, had to move to Japan so Wittner could teach. Later they lived all over the world, including Africa.

Sharon Abbott was totally supportive of her husband's work, and encouraged him to make a moral, public stand about the horrible conditions at the state youth detention center -- even at great social cost to herself and their children, who were bullied at school. Ironically, neither man discusses the political impact or implications of his wife's support or mentions feminism. For Abbott, the omission of feminism from his memoir is more understandable, as he was a "single" issue activist. The fact that Wittner never mentions feminism is more disturbing because he was a historian with a long activist history in all the most pressing issues of the time. The truth is, neither activist could have succeeded without the total support of his wife. Years after Wittner and Abbott became national figures, both divorced and remarried. To Wittner's credit, he does discuss the fragility of his marriage and the many painful fights he had with Patty throughout his activist career. He wanted to divorce her long before Patty was ready.

These books are political autobiographies more than literary memoirs. For each author the goal is to "tell" the story chronologically, in linear narration, rather than to

engage in creative storytelling technique or in-depth psychological reflection. And in this both succeed well. Although the range of the stories differs in content and style, Wittner's is more erudite compared with Abbott's simple, strong prose. At the same time, I wish there had been more deep personal reflection in both texts. While Wittner's story is about a lifetime of activism, Abbott's story is centered almost entirely around his legal fight with the State of Alabama. Wittner does ruminate deeply on his life-long friendship with Michael, his freshman college roommate at Columbia University, but he doesn't offer great insight into his feelings about male bonding except to say Michael was like the brother he never had. He does discuss the emotional toll his activism took, however: one of the most moving sections of Wittner's book chronicles his long battle for tenure and the petty narcissism of the academy that cost him so much wherever he taught.

Pedagogically speaking, both memoirs are excellent teaching tools, although for different reasons. Abbott's *They Had No Voice* exemplifies the difference a single person can make in committing him/herself to a specific cause, child advocacy in Abbott's case. Students in introductory political science, sociology, or American Studies courses would benefit a great deal from reading this book. It is an effective text to generate group discussion and lends itself to personal reflection and writing. It's perfect also for high school juniors or seniors and reminds me of Mab Segrest's *Reflections of A Race Traitor*. Segrest's memoir is about her personal fight against the Klan and exposing her family's racist ideas. Born in 1949 in the South and a life-long radical feminist activist, she confronts her bigoted relatives and coins the political theory of queer socialism. Students rave about this text.

Wittner's *Working for Peace and Justice* covers a personal commitment to all the significant historical movements, except feminism, from the 1960's to the present, which makes it an excellent text for understanding the development of the radical left in US politics. It zeroes in on civil rights, labor struggles, and the Viet Nam war, in addition to his disarmament work. For undergraduates this is a terrific text, because the author himself offers a macro view of activism and has written so much on the specific issues in other articles or books that further reading is invited.

The inspiration that both books engender is electrifying. It is hard to believe that Wittner didn't collapse from sheer physical exhaustion from his total commitment to a life of activism. Repeatedly his narrative made me ask myself, *what have I done or could do that would make a difference?* Abbott's memoir is visionary because he never wanted or planned to take on a cause or get involved in political issues. The issue of child advocacy came to him and propelled him to action. In the end, reading these texts together is a great way to understand the different ways the personal becomes political.



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# RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

## Addressing Ageism through Eudora Welty's "A Worn Path"

by Regina Dilgen



**A**t Palm Beach State College, where I teach English, I have found my classes deeply responsive to Eudora Welty's 1941 "A Worn Path." This much anthologized short story allows readers to enter an elderly woman's reality and to experience her perceptions. The protagonist Phoenix Jackson is on a journey she makes twice a year to a clinic for medicine to treat her grandson, who has been injured by swallowing lye. Her journey, a walk of many miles on part of the Natchez Trace in Mississippi, reveals her courage and tenacity, and, more broadly, also symbolically explores the obstacles she has faced throughout her life on this Worn Path. Phoenix is old, black, a woman, and impoverished. The intersection of these aspects of her reality allows students to understand the complexities of identity in a hierarchical society. Phoenix's rising out of the over-determination of this culture, as her name implies, is what the reader comes to appreciate.

Age is an important component of Phoenix's identity as she makes her journey of love for her grandson, and she is of an older generation than all the other characters in the work. Referring to the end of the Civil War, Phoenix explains how her background has defined her: "'I never did go to school, I was too old at the Surrender,' she said in a soft voice. 'I'm an old woman without an education. It was my memory fail me. My little grandson, he is just the same, and I forgot it in the coming ' ' " (222). The reader becomes aware of her reality in historical context as, throughout the work, Phoenix is treated disrespectfully, due to her age and other aspects of her oppression. When she encounters a hunter—young, white, and male—and he points a gun at her, we comprehend her positioning. The hunter addresses her with arrogance and entitlement: "'Well, Granny,' he said, 'you must be a hundred years old, and scared of nothing. I'd give you a dime if I had any money with me. But you take my advice and stay home, and nothing will happen to you'" (220 ). Although she will not give up, Phoenix acknowledges the very real challenges she faces as an elderly person. "My senses is gone. I too old. I the oldest people I ever know" (218). And yet she behaves with wisdom and tolerance. When the hunter assesses her, "I know you old colored people! Wouldn't miss going to town to see Santa Claus!" (219), we understand that the character with the limited insights into others is the one in the more privileged position. What is it like to be an elderly woman in this complex context ? The narrative lets the reader understand this character's reality and the value of her life of caring for others: her path is truly well worn.

A form of prejudice that is pervasive in America is ageism. And yet it is invisible to many, seeming naturally existing, and thus normalized. Negative attitudes toward the elderly often are not even hidden; this is a group our culture tells us it is okay to feel superior to. Think of the jokes about the elderly: as bad drivers, as rude, as ridiculous. Yet the ultimate irony is that the aged are us. They are our beloved grandparents and parents; indeed they will be us, if we are fortunate.

What does it say about a culture if it does not provide models of what it can mean to enter the last decades of our lives, and to live them with meaning and dignity? Images of the elderly in the media are often simply absent; it is hard to find positive, realistic representations of older men and women. It is well known that we are a youth valorizing culture. We try to erase any signs of aging through plastic surgery and other means. Youth and beauty are conflated, and the elderly are not valued as they should be for their wisdom, for their connections to all of us and to our history.

This literary short story allows for meaningful discussion of how we see and interact with those of other generations, and of the complexities of their lives in specific historical context. And "A Worn Path" does not deny death. Her grandson might not recover fully from this injury; Phoenix, who falls and has delusions on the walk, may not make it back from town. She certainly will not make this trip many more times. But her journey has great meaning. It is a pleasure to teach this story, and to see the empathy and compassion with which students respond to the fully realized character, although she is much further along the path than they are.

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## Ask More Questions?

By Allison L. Ricket

Last year I had a real spitfire in my eleventh-grade English class. He was the most ready to challenge majority views, push his classmates to support their ideas with credible facts, or listen seriously about the need to tackle clichés in his writing.

Then, in January, I made a critical mistake that cost me the vitality of this student.

The class writes research papers in January, and I wanted to invite the students to research a social justice issue they knew nearly nothing about. We watched TED talks and read articles on the failings of abstinence-only education, plastic in the ocean's gyres, the Bechdel test, and the crushing standardization of public schools. Their assignment was to research a problem and then argue for a solution or a set of solutions to fix the problem.

***I wanted my student to know what was happening to his community. In an informal poll at the beginning of the year, I found out that only two students in all my classes knew what Fracking was -- which is a desperate situation considering people in the county, their parents, are leasing their land left and right to the gas companies.***

What I didn't want was another pro-life diatribe, anti-marriage equality tirade, or pro-assault weapon essay that, although properly reflecting the majority beliefs of the community, would not allow enough serious inquiry into the unknown.

To facilitate the choosing of a topic, I assigned the students the task of randomly selecting three TED talks or

articles and using those texts to generate questions for further research. As each student brought their three texts to me and we discussed their questions and potential for research papers, I made suggestions, offering what I knew on the topic with the intention that the students would have somewhere to start.

***I made a critical mistake that cost me the vitality of this student.***

My conversation with the spitfire went like this:

Student rushes up to me in the hall, breathless with indignation. "Ms. Ricket, I just watched the most disgusting thing I've ever seen in my life." No pause for me to react. "In Canada, there is a lake the size of Manhattan filled with waste from the tar sands. One man can't even feed his family now because the water is so polluted. It's so crazy disgusting. You have to watch it."

At once I was filled with pride, disgust, and excitement because I thought we were on the verge of a "teachable moment." This is where I made that fatal mistake. I stepped out of the process of inquiry and into the sage-on-the-stage role.

"You know," I said, with a conspiratorial grin and an air of insider authority, "something just like the tar sands is happening right here in our town. It's called Fracking. Natural gas companies contaminate huge amounts of water and then dump it back into the ground where it's contaminating people's drinking water, hurting agriculture, and even causing earthquakes. Some people can now literally light water coming out of their faucets on fire because of Fracking."

Everything I said was 100% true. Fracking – the process of extracting natural gas from the shale in the



mountains – is devastating many areas of Appalachia. Companies drill here and inject their dirty, radioactive water in the poorest counties – they would never conceive of putting an injection well in their communities – yet they tell us all it's "safe."

I wanted my student to know what was happening to his community. In an informal poll at the beginning of the year, I found out that only two students in all my classes knew what Fracking was -- which is a desperate situation considering people in the county, their parents, are leasing their land left and right to the gas companies.

I wanted to show him the injustice of the entire process, for him to be just as inflamed about Fracking as he was about the tar sands waste. But my intentions -- however noble -- were lost.

***What I didn't want was another pro-life diatribe, anti-marriage equality tirade, or pro-assault weapon essay that, although properly reflecting the majority beliefs of the community, would not allow enough serious inquiry into the unknown.***

He did do his research paper on the detrimental effects of Fracking. Not because he had a burning desire to know and learn, but because he wanted to do what I suggested. He completed the additional assignment for the paper of interviewing a primary source. In fact, he did better than I assigned. He got himself invited to a Fracking well in a neighboring county.

He came back from this encounter pumped up by the heavy machinery and the machismo of the men operating it. He burst into my room announcing in his enthusiastic way, "My paper is all lies." Fracking, he concluded, is wonderful, fascinating, and safe. He did ask questions to the gas company representative present on site, and they fed him many of the public answers I've seen in the papers. He has since decided to pursue petroleum engineering in college.

A veteran teacher told me, after I'd relayed this story as a dismal failure of my teaching ability, that our job as teachers is to help students learn to think – not tell them what to think.

What I've been able to take away from this situation is that I would have furthered the cause of Environmental Justice much more had I simply asked more questions. I could have followed my student's lead, asked questions such as, "What do you feel is most unjust about the tar sands situation?" "What could be done about this injustice?" or "Are there more situations in which people are losing homes and resources to the tar sands mining?"

As a teacher interested in social action, I wonder if critical thinking -- teaching "how" to think – is more important than presenting the students with a situation and declaring it unjust. I wonder how I leave room for the students to refuse to see injustice even after a full, successful inquiry process. Perhaps I was right to alert him to the issue of Fracking in his hometown, to assign it the status of "unjust" outright. Perhaps, as teachers of social justice, we have to be willing to stand quietly in truth sometimes, to let the wandering wander and let them figure it out themselves – but I also wonder if as a society, as a planet – we can afford the time that takes.



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A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

## Contributors' Notes



ORGANIC FARM PHOTO BY NANCY ROMER

**Pam Annas** is Associate Dean and Professor of English at University of Massachusetts Boston; she has taught courses in working-class literature, modern and contemporary poetry, science fiction, and feminist approaches to teaching writing. Her books include *A Disturbance in Mirrors: the Poetry of Sylvia Plath*, the textbook *Literature and Society* (with Robert Rosen), and a poetry chapbook, *Mud Season* (Červená Barva Press). Her poems have appeared in *Pemmican*, *Istanbul Literary Review*, and *Hunger and Thirst*, among other journals and anthologies.

**John Burdick** is a Ph.D. candidate and Instructor of American Studies in the Department of Transnational Studies at the State University of New York at Buffalo, where he teaches courses on critical ethnic studies, transnational cultural studies and food studies. His dissertation entitled "Eating the Global Others: Ethnic Food, Cross-Racial Encounters, and Cosmopolitan Whiteness, 1964 To Present," which will be completed in early 2014, explores the links between food, sensory experience and urban space to reveal how white Americans have used the act of eating "ethnically," and the cross-racial encounters that such eating facilitates, to articulate a flexible privileged globalized subjectivity labeled cosmopolitan whiteness. Using contexts throughout the second-half of the twentieth century where white Americans have developed ethnic food consumption to articulate a global imaginary, including the 1964 World's Fair, the emergence of the New Left, urban culinary slumming and travel television, this project merges the study of food with theoretical work done on bodily and affect theory, examining "eating" as a sensory act that simultaneously enacts race upon the body and urban space. He has presented portions of this work at several major conferences including the American Studies Association Annual Meeting, Critical Ethnic Studies Conference and the Oral History Association Conference, and the Futures of American Studies Institute, among others. He is a recipient of the PCA/ACA Marshal Fishwick Grant, The Mark Diamond Research Grant, and the Arthur A. Schomburg Fellowship. In addition, he is one of the founding directors of the ASA: Food Culture Studies Caucus.

**Sarah Chinn** teaches English at Hunter College, CUNY. A member of the *Radical Teacher* editorial collective, she's the author of two books, *Technology and the Logic of American Racism: A Cultural History of the Body as Evidence* (2000), and *Inventing Modern Adolescence: The Children of Immigrants in Turn-of-the-Century America* (2009), as well as articles in *Signs*, *GLQ*, *Prospects*, *American Quarterly*, and *WSQ*.

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