Washington University in St. Louis
Washington University Open Scholarship

Volume 13
Washington University Undergraduate Research Digest

Spring 2018

Cultivating Community: Towards a Black Women-Centered Alternative Food Politic

Sally Rifkin
Washington University in St. Louis

Follow this and additional works at: https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/wuurd_vol13

Recommended Citation
Rifkin, Sally, "Cultivating Community: Towards a Black Women-Centered Alternative Food Politic" (2018). *Volume 13*. 177.
https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/wuurd_vol13/177

This Feature Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Washington University Undergraduate Research Digest at Washington University Open Scholarship. It has been accepted for inclusion in Volume 13 by an authorized administrator of Washington University Open Scholarship. For more information, please contact digital@wumail.wustl.edu.

Cultivating Community: Towards a Black Women-Centered Alternative Food Politic

Author:

Sally Rifkin

Sally majored in Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. She was a 2016 recipient of the Andrea Biggs Undergraduate Research Award, which enabled her to undertake research for her honors thesis. In the Spring of 2017, she discussed her findings at Washington University's Undergraduate Research Symposium and the Central States Anthropological Society's annual meeting. She graduated magna cum laude from the College of Arts & Sciences in May 2018.

ABSTRACT

Black women are often on the frontline of the battle for food justice in their communities. This research examines the motivations, successes, and challenges of two food justice organizations in St. Louis, Missouri, both of which were started and are sustained by Black women. A central thread through this project is naturalization—how linking identity with inequality "naturalizes" social difference and limits the potential for radical reimaginings of equality and food justice. It seeks to "denaturalize" the process of gentrification and the assumptions that food injustice can be solved on the individual level, that food work is women's work, that alternative food is for white people, and that parenting is apolitical. Operating with the understanding that lasting change originates within a community, not from outside, this project reveals how Black women have taken on leadership roles in food sovereignty projects in their own communities. It examines the organizing principles that guide these women, including the politics of parenting, women-centered organizing, and free spaces. It also discusses the potential for collaboration between people of different identities and organizations while maintaining the vital importance of Black women. By revealing the historical roots of alternative food in Black communities, this research makes the case for a food justice movement built around survival strategies particular to Black communities. This project argues for a movement that centers the legacies of Black alternative foodways and Black women-centered community organizing as the building blocks for food justice and food sovereignty.

KEY TERMS

- Alternative Food
- Soul Food
- Mothering
- Community Organizing
- Black Feminist Anthropology

FACULTY MENTOR: REBECCA WANZO, PH.D., ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF WOMEN, GENDER, AND SEXUALITY STUDIES

Professor Wanzo's research interests include African American literature history and culture; theories of affect; popular culture (particularly the history of popular genre fiction and graphic storytelling in the U.S.); critical race theory; and feminist theory. She is also the Associate Director of the Center for the Humanities.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I thank the members of the City Greens and United People communities for sharing their stories. Your words bring my project to life and I can't thank you enough for your vulnerability, candor, and ongoing friendship and support. Thanks to the members of the WashU community, who offered me vital support; to my advisor, Professor Wanzo, who encouraged and challenged me to make this project the best it can be; to my readers Professors Zafar and O'Leary, who have offered me resources, suggestions, and mentorship; to the Office of Undergraduate Research for supporting and promoting my project; and to Henry and Theresa Biggs for generously funding my research. I could not have completed this project without you all.

Peer Editor:

Derrick Ogola, a junior majoring in Philosophy-Neuroscience-Psychology

INTRODUCTION

On a surprisingly mild July day in 2017, I sat outside the basement entrance to Greater St. Mark Family Church in North St. Louis County, Missouri. Next to me were the grandchildren of Reverend Abby Harris, a dedicated church member and community organizer, and Lisa Smith, a founding member of United People Market. The market is an organic food co-op dreamed up by Abby. Each Saturday, a truckload of fresh produce was brought over by staff from City Greens Market, another St. Louis food co-op started by women in 2008. United People was still in its early stages and we were working to find community members to purchase market memberships so we could afford to continue selling affordable organic produce to a community of low-income, mostly Black residents. Attendance at the market had been sparse that day, but an event at the church that had drawn lots of attendees began to let out as we enjoyed the breeze outside. Lisa caught the attention of one man on his way to his car, telling him from a distance about the "fresh, local, organic" produce we were selling inside. The man surveyed us with an impressed expression. "Y'all black?" he asked. Lisa laughed, gesturing to the herself and Abby's grandchildren and said, "yeah, look at us!"

The man clearly saw that everyone sitting outside the market (except for me) was Black. But he wasn't asking the question for clarity. He was simply surprised that an organic food market could be conceived of and run by people that looked like him. United People Market is an example of a market that works towards a goal of *food sovereignty*, or gaining "power for managing and regaining ownership of the food system" (Alkon and Agyeman 2011, paraphrased by Kato 2013). Community food initiatives like United People Market are often the projects of well-meaning white people (Alkon and Agyeman 2011, Kato 2013). To have a food co-op in a community of color run by women of color is unusual and even radical. This moment is representative of the intersection of race, food, and gender that fueled my interest in food work led by Black women in their own communities.

Throughout this paper, I make use of various terminology to describe the current movements towards the access and consumption of healthy, fresh, organic, natural, slow, and/or locally-grown food. I employ the term "alternative food" as an umbrella term to encompass the sentiment that the solutions to the problems of the industrial food system lie in some "alternative" form of food production, procurement, preservation, preparation, and/or consumption. I also use the language of "food justice" and "food sovereignty" separate from that of "alternative food," which encompass the understanding that the utopic alternative food scene needs intervention when it does not engage with issues of race, class, and gender. They envision a world in which "communities [exercise] their right to grow, sell, and eat [food that is] fresh, nutritious, affordable, culturally appropriate, and grown locally with care for the well-being of the land workers, and animals" (Just Food 2010, cited in Alkon and Agyeman 2011). I imagine food sovereignty as a necessary antecedent to just food systems. However, organizations often fail to address the importance of community agency in developing food solutions, instead identifying access as the primary inhibitor to food justice. Yuki Kato (2013) found that when community members at a New Orleans CSA box program were presented with "foreign" food items, such as microgreens or arugula in their boxes,

they took it as a sign that the CSA was out of touch with the community's needs. The residents, therefore, often had food access without food sovereignty. Finally, I use the language of "community food" to draw a link between the theory of alternative food and food justice and the praxis of community engagement with food issues.

The focus of my research is food justice organizations because of the particular way food issues galvanize communities; as a few of my interviewees pointed out, "we all have to eat" (Smith 2017, Harris 2017). Black women are often on the frontline of the battle for food justice in their communities and are frequently mobilized through their positions as mothers to their families or to the community. Because of the hypervisibility of white people (often white women) in food justice projects, contributions made by Black women are sidelined or made invisible. Yet women of color like Abby, Lisa, and the women of City Greens are leaders in their community and on the frontline of food justice concerns, demonstrating how Black women occupy roles of significant influence in the food justice movement. My project focuses on particular ways in which Black women mobilize around food issues, challenging the notion that women's food work is apolitical. I look at two food justice organizations—City Greens Market in Forest Park Southeast and United People Market in North County—both of which were founded by and continue to be sustained by Black women.

METHODS

I began by conducting a critical review of literature surrounding the subjects of soul foodways and alternative foodways, looking for potential sites of overlap in the hopes of expanding the meaning of alternative food. I also conducted immersive field research at two alternative food sites in St. Louis. I approached this research through the lens of ethnography, an anthropological method which helped me to develop a rich, immersive understanding of the individuals at my field sites. Because of my commitment to a holistic approach, I utilized mixed methods, including participant observation, short unstructured interviews, and long semi-structured interviews. This approach allowed me to make unexpected observations outside the realm of any single method.

My approach was informed by the field of Black feminist anthropology, which attempts to reorient traditional anthropology away from its colonialist tendencies. For contributors to the volume *Black Feminist Anthropology* (ed. McClaurin 2001), what this often looks like is taking on an approach per which researchers see their commonalities with the researched as assets rather than detriments. Johnnetta B. Cole defines feminist anthropology as weaving into traditional ethnography "an analysis that is informed by a sense of the importance of 'race' and gender" (quoted in McClaurin 2001, p. 57). Black feminist ethnography is inherently political, because it participates "in some way in the struggle against racism, sexism, and all other systems of inequality" (Ibid). An implicit definition suggested by many of the authors in the volume is that Black feminist anthropology is anthropology conducted by Black women. As a white woman, I certainly do not presume to be a Black feminist anthropologist.

My first site of research, City Greens Market, is a 501(c3) community food cooperative started by a group of women in the Forest Park Southeast neighborhood (FPSE). According to their website, City Greens' mission is "to provide access to fresh, quality and affordable produce to neighbors, to promote healthy living in the

community, and to provide space for members to interact." The women who started City Greens, called the Midtown Mamas, meet weekly at Midtown Community Services (also known as "Midtown"), a local community hub which also hosts a men's club, a youth group, summer camp, and an outreach program for pregnant women and newborns. In 2008, the Midtown Mamas decided to address the lack of healthy food options in their neighborhood by starting a small fresh food market in the basement hallway of Midtown. Since its inception in the hallway of Midtown, the market has known various locations—the basement of Midtown, a mobile market, and now a storefront on Manchester Avenue—and various degrees of availability, growing from one day of operation per week to five. The market is financially independent, having split from its sponsor, Catholic Charities, in 2016. Interviews with full- and part-time employees and volunteers were key sources of information for this project. The informants I had at City Greens were instrumental in helping me paint a picture of the market's history and mission, as well as their personal perceptions of the roles of race, gender, and other identities within food justice.

United People Market is a new project in an unincorporated part of North St. Louis County near Ferguson and Dellwood. The founder and director of the market, Abby, is on the board of directors for City Greens along with her husband. Before the inception of the market, Abby and Lisa surveyed the neighborhood to gauge interest for an organic food co-op in North County. As of March 2018, United People Market is open one day per week. It is supported by City Greens, receiving produce from them, and run by volunteers and the director's family. The market operates out of the Greater St. Mark Family Church, a social justice-oriented Baptist congregation which was an important site of resistance in the aftermath of the murder of Michael Brown in 2014. During my time at United People Market, Abby was focused on establishing community partnerships so she could tap into networks of people that the market would be able to serve. Both she and her husband noted the importance of working with other women of color, who often hold powerful sway in their communities.

The bulk of my research consisted of long, semi-structured interviews. My questions focused on life stories, constructing oral histories of City Greens and United People, and perceptions of race, gender, and age dynamics within the food justice movement in St. Louis. I entered each interview with a set of slightly different questions depending on the person's role in the market, but was prepared to change the course of the interview depending on what the participant wanted to talk about. Interviews lasted between 30 minutes and three hours. I conducted interviews onsite at neutral locations, mostly at United People Market and City Greens. I recorded each interview on my iPhone.

I felt that the more I was able to make myself visible in the community, the more receptive informants would be to me. Since I am studying communities where people are used to being researched and may be skeptical of researchers, I wanted to be cognizant of the ways in which I might be perceived by identifying myself as a researcher and subvert those perceptions. This is another reason that spending eight hours a day at City Greens was important to my project. I attended two community "coffee talks" at Midtown to make myself visible as someone with a stake in the community, rather than a dispassionate researcher. I also did some of my own networking within the community food movement in St. Louis, meeting with a representative from the St. Louis Food Policy Coalition, to begin to become a part of the community of researchers dedicated to food

justice, a community to which I am also an outsider. After my official research period concluded, I continued to stay involved with City Greens as a grant writing volunteer. My visibility helped me to establish common ground and rapport with market personnel and community members. By continuing to involve myself with City Greens, I subvert the expectation that researchers are disinvested with the communities they study. It is my goal to remain actively involved with City Greens as long as I live in St. Louis.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

A central thread through my project is naturalization, or the ways in which linking identity with inequality "naturalizes" social difference and limits the potential for radical reimaginings of equality and food justice. The conversations I had with my informants "denaturalized" the assumptions that Black foodways are unhealthy, that food work is women's work, that alternative food is for white people, and that parenting is apolitical. Based on my findings, I argue for an explicitly feminist food justice movement that regards the roles Black women play in their communities as vitally important. I argue for a movement that centers the legacies of Black alternative foodways and Black women-centered community organizing as the building blocks for food sovereignty.

Towards Redefining The "Alternative" In "Alternative Food"

Through a review of literature, I found that deriving power from alternatives to the food system has a strong history in Black communities because the food system was not designed to meet their needs. John T. Edge distills the power of the alternative in one salient example; in the antebellum days, when slaves would cook greens for their masters, the masters would only allow the slaves to drink the potlikker, the liquid substance at the bottom of the pot. Unbeknownst to them, this liquid was more nutrient-rich than the greens themselves (Edge 2017). Over the following centuries, other institutions have demonstrated how Black communities can derive power from opting out of the mainstream food system. In 1920s Chicago, recent African-American migrants from the South opened up a variety of restaurants and grocery stores, helping to create a Black metropolis in which migrants "resisted 'bending down'" by "exercising their freedom to spend hard earned wages on what they wanted" (Poe 1999, p. 6). In the South in the 1960s, house restaurants provided an informal economy for Black women to garner income independent of white dollars (Edge 2017). The Black Panther Free Breakfast Program, established in 1969, served children nationwide without government dollars, eventually putting enough pressure on the government to increase funding for children's food (Patel 2011). These examples are just some of the ways Black Americans have resisted white supremacy in the food economy. Melissa Danielle (in Harper 2009) cites this history in her appeal towards an ethic of Black veganism, writing, "We can choose to create health-supportive lifestyles that take cues from our cultural heritage—communal living, susus, bartering, creating relevant community-based businesses, potlucks, daycare co-ops, eating locally and seasonally, establishing food-buying clubs or food co-ops, and growing our own foods„ (n.p.). Danielle's argument shows potential for a culture of Black alternative food that both celebrates historical Black foodways and strives towards an ethic of health.

In founding City Greens, the Midtown Mamas were clearly determined to "take

cues from [their] cultural heritage." To Brenda, one of the store's founders, the store is "alternative" to the mainstream food system because it is community-conceived and run. "When we were in the basement, it was staffed with volunteers of the neighborhood. When we had discussions, it was staffed full of people in the neighborhood. So the community always had an input on what was in the store. And if you couldn't afford something, we always tried to find a supplement to assist people" (Stokes, B. 2017). Unlike corporate supermarkets, an integral part of City Greens' mission has always been responsibility towards the community, even when it compromises profit.

Patrice, a longtime City Greens volunteer, shed some light on why the community garden associated with City Greens has been a particularly important site for her as she grows into food justice activism. "What I love about it is everyone comes in and helps," she said. "We're not just working in the garden. It's our garden" (Edwards 2017). This sense of ownership that Patrice describes underscores the importance of community members feeling that entitled to the sites of alternative food production.

While the (white) alternative food movement romanticizes agriculture by branding urban farms as blank slates with the potential for the "novelty" of growing one's own food, the history of slavery and sharecropping suggests that sites of food production are not the "blank slates" that these projects assume (Woods 1998 and Ramirez 2014). Abby spoke to this dynamic in our interview. "A lot of Black people don't want to garden, or, as they say, 'dig in the dirt.' Because of their heritage, because of slaves and because their parents made them do it, or their grandparents" (Harris 2017). Through alternative food projects, Black communities can regain autonomy over sites of food production.

Reformulating Essentialism Through Food Work

Black women are at the helm of healthy food activism in their communities. They occupy multiple, overlapping roles which intersect with food injustice: subject, parent, and centerwoman. Like the naturalness of the food itself, the women behind City Greens perceive there to be a natural connection between women's temperament and community food work. This perception is characteristic of essentialism, which is the belief that "all women share certain experiences because of biological similarities" (Mascia-Lees and Black p. 15). Kelly, United People Market's garden manager, demonstrated an essentialist understanding when speaking to the leadership of the food movement, saying, "I think it's led more by women. I think because women carry a mothering type of nature. Even if you're not a mother, being a woman, you come with caring for others" (Roper 2017). Within the realm of City Greens and United People, the perception that certain identities are "natural" in alternative food spaces, such as femininity and whiteness, limits the possibilities for radical futures within the movement. But there is also power to be found in these women's insistence on politicizing "women's work."

Black women who participate in community food work must reckon with the conflicting meanings of essentialized Black women's work and food sovereignty. Rafia Zafar (1999) writes that "for a twentieth-century African-American female to publicly announce herself as a cook means she must engage with the reigning ghosts of American racism; she must tackle literally visceral ideas with metaphor, individual agency, and historical memory" (p. 450). For Black women to participate in food work, they must contend with, among other things, the controlling image of the mammy, defined by Patricia Hill Collins (2000) as "the faithful, obedient domestic servant" who was

"[c]reated to justify the economic exploitation of house slaves and sustained to explain Black women's long-standing restriction to domestic service" (2000, p. 72).

One way the women challenged the conflation of community food work with the image of the mammy was by repositioning community food work as radical self-care. Rebecca, City Greens' former co-director, discussed the ways in which a desire to improve her health mobilized her into food justice activism. "My sister died, my mom survived lung cancer, my dad died of lung cancer, my sister died of pancreatic cancer, my niece just died of diabetes, and it'll be three years since my sister died," said Rebecca. "So all of that took place and it's like, it's gotta be linked to diet. So I started caring"(Stokes, R. 2017). Rebecca changed her whole diet and continues to be conscious of ways to eliminate toxins. Kelly spoke about how her own shift in diet acted as a bridge between her and other people:

> When I was in nursing school, I was actually 150 pounds heavier. And when I got out of nursing school, I was like, oh my god, I'm gonna have diabetes, hypertension, but I just lose weight, that will give me a start. And for losing the weight, instead of just exercising, I decided to do a complete diet change. I stopped eating red meat when I was 18 but I didn't want to eat fast food. I didn't want to eat a lot of sugar. So I took all those things out of my diet, I took bread out of my diet, and I was able to lose 150 pounds. And during my weight loss mission, other women were like, 'oh, you lost weight, tell me how to lose weight,' and helping others just somehow made me passionate about food and its importance to our bodies. (Roper 2017)

Rebecca and Kelly show that a healthy diet can simultaneously be a political act and an act of self-care. By aspiring towards healthy bodies, Rebecca and Kelly reject the association between Blackness and an unhealthful diet. Their words suggest that having control over one's body is another facet of self-determination essential to Black liberation. Their weight loss, and subsequent healthy food activism, is a manifestation of the personal being made political. Kelly also describes how "helping others" became an extension of helping herself. The relationship between carework and activism characterizes the way in which women often mobilize around social causes.

In the interviews I conducted, women were able to identify leaders or centerwomen in their communities who generated community interest and investment in causes by tapping into their various social networks. Informants often carefully distinguished between the leadership of these women and the leadership of elected officials, which they considered to be less radical and effective. Many women suggested that there was something "natural" about their own leadership abilities that enabled them to rise to positions of influence in their communities. The potential for "natural leadership" gives Black women a positive framework within which they may enact confidence, as opposed to the "angry Black women," a common cultural image that polices Black women's outspokenness. Patrice discusses how white supremacy affects the ways in which Black women feel that they can enact confidence. "We need to be heard," Patrice said. "We need to quit being so quiet and doing it just because somebody said so. That matters to me.

For women to know that. Like I said, I have been a single mother. You can have anything anybody else has, but it just might take a little bit longer to get" (Edwards 2017). Melissa Harris-Perry (2011) writes that Black women often show the "pattern of assessing themselves as gentle, thoughtful, and kind while believing that others more frequently considered them aggressive and brash" (p. 89), suggesting that the tendency to keep one's head down is an attempt to combat others' perception. The possibility for a Black woman to be a "natural leader" allows her to appropriate assertive leadership qualities in a non-detrimental way. Inscribing women as leaders gives them the grounds to advocate for themselves. Telling women they are "natural leaders" has a far different material effect than telling them they need to keep their heads down "just because somebody said so."

Another role subject to essentialism that many women inhabit is that of the mother. I found that when speaking about carework, my informants talked about the work of "parenting" as well as the work of "mothering," a discursive distinction signaling that these two types of carework, while deeply entwined, are categorically different. For example, here, Patrice discusses her decision to work hard so her children could focus on high school:

> I've always taught my kids, your high school diploma belongs to me. Your college diploma belongs to you. Because me as a parent, and as a single parent, I went out, worked hard, made sure you had everything that you needed so you could go and get that education. You didn't have to work. I did all that because I wanted you to get your education, so to prove to me that I've done my part, your high school diploma belongs to me. (Edwards 2017, emphasis mine)

In describing how she was able to provide for her children, Patrice positions herself as a parent rather than a *mother*. She later emphasized that it is not a clean trade-off, that the roles "go together" (Edwards 2018). Patrice perceives motherhood and parenting to be distinct, yet constantly in conversation with each other. Although she sees herself as a mother first, the realities of being a single parent require her to occasionally step outside the work of nurture and moral upbringing to engage in the gender nonspecific tasks of working outside the home and disciplining children (Edwards 2018). As single parents, Patrice and many of the other women must contend with the category of "mothering work." By categorizing some of their work as "parenting," they acknowledge its difference from "mothering" but still include it in the more expansive category of carework. In another instance, when Patrice discusses how she became a community advocate, she ways, "I saw women and men when a lot of them hadn't been nurtured by a mother or a grandmother." When a parent is "nurturing," Patrice uses the language of mothering and motherhood. The idea that mothering and parenting go together insists that women can and do participate in the work of nurturing their children while participating in externalized forms of carework, like working outside the home or advocating for changes in the community.

This externalized carework which Patrice and many of the other women deem "parenting" evokes Nancy Naples' definition of "activist mothering" as "all actions, including social activism, that [address] the needs of their children and community" (p. 448). By leaning into "parenting," when the women breach gender roles by working

outside the home or advocating for a better community, their actions are automatically subsumed under the "parenting" category and they no longer feel the need to justify them. The different ways in which the women invoke "parenting" as an alternative to "mothering" represents the feeling that "mothering" discourse cannot capture the full extent to which women perform carework. By removing gender from the equation, the women also demand that others perceive their labor as legitimate and intentional, rather than simply an extension of motherhood.

CONCLUSIONS

Julie Guthman (2011) argues that "many of the discourses of alternative food hail a white subject and thereby code the practices and spaces of alternative food as white" (p. 264). When we remake the alternative food subject as the Black women, the approach to food politics becomes less "messianic" (Ibid). I argue that a Black women-centered form of organizing around food would preclude the concerns about inclusion that foreground debates in the food justice movement. If we devote more resources to free spaces where Black women can meet and collectively identify their community's needs, then they will conceive of how best to address their own concerns. Community food projects that already exist should attempt to locate centerwomen in their communities who can mobilize many women and families around the issue of food. By engaging children in food education, these projects can tap into broad networks of community women concerned for their children's welfare.

Food work is primarily women's work; most women I interviewed agreed with this. But it is not so clear to me whether it should remain that way. Patrice talked about how, in recent years, she's seen men become more involved with food work. "Women have always seemed like, for our culture, to take charge because it was all for men to get jobs or different things, so women had to make up for that," she says, alluding to the work of survival that encompasses everything outside of being a breadwinner. "And now that the door is slowly opening and the men are coming in and finding out that, our women have been doing it for so long, come on in and help them out...I'm just glad to see them coming in"(Edwards 2017). I think Patrice is right to celebrate the trickling of men into food work. I do not necessarily think it's a problem that the "door is opening slowly." Because women have been doing this work for so long with so little political recognition, it's important for men to be cognizant of that. Historically and currently, there is a lot of unrecognized power in the ways Black women connect over food. Reworking essentialism in the food movement rests not only upon making food work more gender inclusive, but also upon making visible the important work that Black women are doing and have been doing for generations. Whether by watching one's mother can and preserve food as Brenda did, doing cooking demonstrations like Patrice did, or reminiscing with another community leader about a shared upbringing in the south as Abby did, women contribute much to cultural foodways by preserving traditions and knowledge.

As more men become engaged in food justice issues, Black women stand to lose their claim over the issues of—and therefore the solutions to—food injustice. Lower-income Black mothers who maintain their own gardens, who can and pickle to make food last longer, and who cook for their neighbors when times are hard, are rarely recognized for their contributions for food sovereignty in Black communities. The involvement of men

in food justice projects politicizes and legitimizes food issues, while women's everyday work is sidelined because community food work is still considered an extension of domesticity unless it is performed by men. I want men to ask themselves how they can contribute meaningfully to food justice projects without erasing the historical and contemporary food work of women of color.

This process of questioning the space one takes up in the food movement and "stepping back" accordingly is one way that Black women on the frontlines of food injustice will come to be regarded as vital knowledge sources for transforming food politics. Another way in which food justice projects can center Black women who experience food injustice is by prioritizing them in the hiring process and appointing them to organizational boards. This prioritizing needs to go beyond tokenizing. All that Rebecca has accomplished by helping to reopen City Greens and serving as its co-director did not make her immune to discrimination from other board members when the board was predominantly white, underscoring the need to actively recruit a diverse board. "What I had to say wasn't important and they didn't want to hear me talk. They wanted to hear Daniel talk. And every time we went to a meeting to say what we were doing, what we needed from them, [they wanted to] shut the Black woman up" (Stokes, R. 2017). That has likely changed since the board has become more diverse. According to City Greens' internal data, 73% of board members are low-income, 65% of the board is African-American, 25% are Caucasian, 5% are Asian-American, and 5% are two or more races. And Rebecca is now the president of the board, a position that confers respect. Other organizations might take cues from the diversification of City Greens' board and the appointment of Black women as more than just tokens, but as key informants who experience the effects of food injustice and strategize against it daily.

At a recent grant-writing session, I was chatting with Daniel and Adam, the market's current co-directors, about what City Greens brings to the neighborhood (beyond food access). We talked about how the market is a "space for neighbors to interact" like it says on the website, but more explicitly, "a space for all neighbors to interact," regardless of social difference. What FPSE needs is more of these "free spaces"—public places for neighbors to interact where social change can be conceived of and brought about. That space might function as a shared kitchen where people can learn how to cook delicious greens without meat. Or a space for communal eating in the spirit of a house restaurant or a lunch counter. Or maybe it looks like a community garden where women grow kinds of vegetables that they ate growing up. Or it could simply be a space where women gather once a week to talk about the labor of care work. The food justice movement needs more spaces for neighbors to interact.

Tracy Poe (1999) discusses these spaces of interaction, or "commensality" as "one of the most important features of Southern African American culture" (p. 11). The communal style of eating, which can be traced back to life in African villages, is central to traditions of Sunday dinners, picnics, fish fries, and barbecues. To claim a Black sense of ownership over a communal food space like City Greens or United People Market is to map this shared history of commensality onto a type of space that has historically been hostile to Black people. For Abby, learning to farm and produce food was part of her own path to self-sufficiency; it was something she wanted to do. "I wanted to learn how I was gonna be able to put this big spread of food on the table three times a day," she said. "[My grandparents] raised animals so they could feed themselves and

they had a smokehouse...they slaughtered their animals and that was very interesting to me. Opposed to seeing my mother go to a grocery store that didn't have any Blacks [working] in it" (Harris 2017). For Abby, self-sufficiency meant an alternative from the racism of the commercial food industry. It was a way for her to produce and consume food that was wholly her own without someone else's stigma attached to it. Abby and the other women's work of procuring, preparing, and sharing food in ways that speak to self-sufficiency and the alternative assert their exceptional capability to determine their own food system. Yes, we all have to eat. But just because we all do it does not mean it's apolitical. As these Black women have shown, you are the best person to identify the change you need in your community. That change can start with food.

Some names have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals.

References

Alkon, Alison Hope, and Julian Agyeman. *Cultivating food justice: Race, class, and sustainability*. MIT Press, 2011.

City Greens Market. Retrieved February 26, 2018, from https://stlcitygreens.org/

Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. Routledge, 2002.

Edge, John T. *The Potlikker Papers: A Food History of the Modern South*. Penguin, 2018.

Edwards, Patrice. 2017, August 16. Personal Interview.

Edwards, Patrice. 2018, February 27. Personal Interview.

Guthman, Julie. "If they only knew: The unbearable whiteness of alternative food." *Cultivating food justice: Race, class, and sustainability* (2011): 263-281.

Harper, A. Breeze. *Sistah vegan: Black female vegans speak on food, identity, health, and society*. Lantern Books, 2009.

Harris-Perry, Melissa V. *Sister citizen: Shame, stereotypes, and Black women in America*. Yale University Press, 2011.

Harris, Abby. 2017, August 8. Personal Interview.

Kato, Yuki. "Not just the price of food: Challenges of an urban agriculture organization in engaging local residents." *Sociological Inquiry* 83, no. 3 (2013): 369-391.

Mascia-Lees, Frances E., and Nancy Johnson Black. *Gender and Anthropology*. Waveland Press, 2016.

McClaurin, Irma, ed. *Black feminist anthropology: Theory, politics, praxis, and poetics*. Rutgers University Press, 2001.

Naples, Nancy A. "Activist mothering: Cross-generational continuity in the community work of women from low-income urban neighborhoods." *Gender & Society* 6, no. 3 (1992): 441-463.

Patel, Raj. "Survival pending revolution: What the black panthers can teach the US food movement." *Food movements unite* (2011): 115-137.

Poe, Tracy N. "The origins of soul food in Black urban identity: Chicago, 1915-1947." *American Studies International* 37, no. 1 (1999): 4-33.

Ramírez, Margaret Marietta. "The elusive inclusive: Black food geographies and racialized food spaces." *Antipode* 47, no. 3 (2015): 748-769.

Roper, Kelly. 2017, July 25. Personal Interview.

Smith, Lisa. 2017, July 20. Personal Interview.

Stokes, Brenda. 2017, July 27. Personal Interview.

Stokes, Rebecca. 2017, July 21. Personal Interview.

Woods, Clyde. *Development arrested: The blues and plantation power in the Mississippi Delta*. Verso Books, 2017.

Zafar, Rafia. "The signifying dish: Autobiography and history in two black women's cookbooks." *Feminist Studies* 25, no. 2 (1999): 449-469.