

Difference, power and community food: A report to interview respondents

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Table of Contents	
Preface.....	2
I. Introduction	4
II. Staff and board composition	5
III. Does racism have anything to do with the food system?.....	5
IV. Race and.....	7
V. Farm workers and food processors	8
VI. Anti-racism training.....	9
VII. Accountability and Action.....	9
VIII. What questions should organizations put to themselves to further a diverse movement?.....	10

Preface

In the late summer of 2004, I requested participants for a study that sought to determine whether community food organizations have 1) engaged in an analysis of power structures underlying the food system, 2) if and how that analysis translates into practice and 3) whether they have sought to create alliances across race, class and other social differences to enable or enhance their work. I was particularly interested in the how community food leaders understood racism and the *relationship* among race, class and gender—as systemic processes operating to produce the modern food system and to shape community food.

I have reframed my questions in light of further thinking. I have redefined the research focus toward a study of whiteness and community food. Questions I am now considering include:

WHITE SPATIALITY

- Where is whiteness located in community food? How do whites experience food space?
- What is whiteness in community food (how produced, cultivated, fed, how does it flourish, how restricted)?
- What racial geography does whiteness in community food produce? How does community food politics create a racialized landscape or inscribe race into the food system and alternative food systems?
- What is the spatiality of whiteness in community food? What is the role of whiteness in the production of community food space(s)?
- What else is there besides whiteness in community food, what alternative spatial politics?

RACIAL JUSTICE

- How does the notion of justice articulated by community food advocates and anti-racist community food activists contribute to its problematic race, class and gender politics?

COMMUNITY FOOD AND THE POLITICS OF DIFFERENCE

- What politics follows from the anti-racism as currently practiced in community food?
 - What *is* difference in community food?
- How does the community food movement create a politics of food, place and race (via what objects, strategies)? Other ways of asking the question:
 - How are people racialized through community food politics?
 - How does community food work produce gendered, classed and racialized subjects?
 - How is race made or what racial meanings are normalized through the politics and places of community food work?
 - How are racial formations reproduced, shifted and subverted through or in spite of community food?
 - How do community food organizations negotiate difference?
- How is race made or what racial meanings are normalized through the politics and places of community food work?
- How are racial formations reproduced, shifted and subverted through or in spite of community food?

These questions are more nuanced than the focus on racism that you may remember from the interview questions. I decided, eventually, that not only is it more theoretically rigorous to think more broadly about race and to conceptualize it in terms of whiteness rather than racism, but it is also more useful to the project of dismantling oppressive systems. First, theorizing whiteness through a lens of feminist theory enables a discussion of white supremacy but also an acknowledgement of the forms whiteness takes in addition to supremacy—such as progressive or even radical left whiteness. Race, then, is understood as not just about racism. Thus racism neither adequately explains whiteness nor encompasses relations among and within groups such as American Indians, African Americans, Chinese Americans, European Americans and Somali Americans. Second, the standard theorization of racism and race is oppositional. That is, race and racism are discussed in terms of absolute oppositions of white and people of color. I am concerned that such a framing leads to identity politics in which society separates politically on the basis of color. Such a politics establishes a hierarchy of oppression and obscures from view the fact that we all exist in positions of power relative to others in particular time/space contexts. Failure to consider these relations is inimical to the project of dismantling all oppression and to understanding these relations as more than simply oppressive.

Though my training in feminist theory has always emphasized recognizing these many positions of power, the fact that I let racism dominate my questions speaks to the power of a particular sort of race politics in this country. For whites, a typical starting point in practicing anti-racism is to invest in race and racism a power beyond other relational identities as a consequence, perhaps, of the guilt and anger we feel over our privilege and the continuing presence of racism in US society. Nonetheless, from your responses, the questions did function to encourage thought on racism, which is important and necessary. Such consideration of racism appears to have been largely absent (until the questions were asked) from the minds of community food leaders and/or from the institutional practices of their organizations.

The paper that I submitted to interview respondents earlier (Anti-racist practice and the work of community food) raised issues that I derived from the interviews as well as participant observation. The paper represented a partial truth, which, I felt, needed to be said. In that paper, I discussed white privilege and the focus on poverty and class among other issues. Further work will also represent partial truths rather than a complete, finished narrative of what whiteness is and how it works through community food.

My additional work derived from these interviews and other material will also be shared in the interests of furthering discussion and reciprocating the gift of time and knowledge that respondents gave me. I am grateful to my interview respondents, staff and board of the CFSC and members of the Outreach and Diversity Committee (ODC) for their insights and support. I am releasing this report to coincide with the Annual Community Food Security Coalition conference in Atlanta, GA because a central theme of this conference is dismantling racism. I have tried to make my writing in this report reflect my awareness and discomfort that I have a voice and a means to express it and my respondents do not. This research was funded by a grant from the National Science Foundation (BCS 0417592). The report may be circulated without asking my permission but please reference my name when using it in any published material. As always, I look forward to any comments you might have time to give.

I. Introduction

The following report summarizes some of the data I collected between September 2004-December 2004 via interviews with community food leaders in organizations in the North East (Washington DC to Burlington, VT and west to Pittsburgh, PA). In addition, I add relevant information from my work with the Outreach and Diversity Committee of the Community Food Security Coalition (October 2003-September 2005). Throughout the report I refer to ‘community food’ as a term that encompasses hunger alleviation, community food security, new immigrant farming and sustainable agriculture.

Community food is a white effort. I am in the midst of writing about whiteness in community food but, briefly, its whiteness can be seen in terms of the people that comprise and lead it, how they got to and maintain positions of power, the position of the white leadership relative to those served by the movement, the distribution of resources, and finally its strategies and aims. Whiteness is apparent in the idea of and approach to justice promoted by community food, in its appeal to whites who are able and willing to buy organic or support local farmers and in the white spaces of farmers markets, coops and Whole Foods. Whiteness is also visible in the desire to reach out to people who are different, in the desire to rework modern food systems and to realize food variety. Whiteness, in its versatility—as a force exerting itself in oppressive, emancipatory and many other ways—needs to be addressed to cultivate the roots of real change, as the 2005 conference in Atlanta proposes.

Among my respondents, I found, overall, a willingness to think about relations of power and a recognition of the importance to community food of a discussion about race and racism. A few had thought deeply about race and racism and a few were very uncomfortable with the subject. Some respondents have insights that are not currently part of (but should be) a discussion about how race and racism are framed in the work of the CFSC and the larger movement. These insights go beyond the oppositional politics of identity and are based in how community food leaders read power in their particular contexts—New York City, Lewiston, ME, Rochester, NY and Worcester, MA. Several pointed out that the movement should not seek to *include* people of color, women and the economically marginalized but should instead enable all to shape its practices.

Disquieting elements I noted in the interviews and my participant observation include the lack of previous thought about race and racism, the neglect of gendered issues, the failure to theorize class, the celebration of identity politics and a certain anti-intellectualism. As much as people may have been willing to consider race in discussions with me, the movement, as a force for change that is more than the sum of its individuals, has not considered and addressed these relations vis à vis its work. It has, however, begun to do so. My critiques of the movement are not aimed at my respondents. Indeed, as I pointed out in the paper that preceded this one, it would be more politically useful if all involved in this discussion would leave their perceptions of individual intention at the door, difficult though that may be. Community food members and committees would benefit from an approach that addresses many forms of inequality and that is non-hostile and open to many views, divergent as they will be.

The following presents some analysis of parts of the data collected via interviews and participant observation.

II. Staff and board composition

I collected data on the staff and board composition of community food organizations according to race, gender and class and by authority and non-authority positions. I obtained data on the staff and board of 66 of the organizations that I interviewed. Using the 13 organizations that fell in a middle range with 10-35 employees, there were 0 people of color in the position of ED and 13 white EDs. The composition of authority positions is: 8 women, 5 men, 4% low income, 16% people of color, 84% white. For non-authority positions the break down is: 72% women, 28% men, 11% low income, 24% people of color and 76% white. Board composition is: 48% women, 52% men, 11% people of color, 89% white, 12% low income. These figures were similar across all 66 organizations in the sample.

One organization has embarked on a conscious policy to increase the numbers of underrepresented groups on its staff. Though it has not disaggregated its data by authority and non-authority positions, this nonprofit has developed an apparently successful method of finding people of color to fill positions. The method involves tapping into people of color networks and holding positions open or re-opening them should only white candidates apply. Respondents mentioned funding difficulties in pursuing active affirmative action.

The representation of people of color or women or members of the working class in authority positions does not mean that race, gender and class relations will be analyzed and acted upon. Thus the identity politics argument that some in community food subscribe to suggests that someone of color is always best suited to lead others of color is suspect. Additionally, it does not follow that someone visibly of color should be a representative or leader because her/his color is visible. That beneficiaries of programs should come to work in and lead those programs or begin their own organizations is not a panacea for the unequal and potentially exploitative relations that govern service work. And that the informally or less educated could better serve the food insecure or should replace the highly educated merely reverses the equally fallacious notion that highly educated people are best suited. Both groups have something to offer the work of community food but neither more education nor more life experience provides perfect perspective. My argument, instead, is that it is simply important that positions of power in nonprofits are held by women, the disabled, lesbians, Hmong Americans and people who are or were once working class from the standpoint that all organizations should reflect society's diversity and all people should act from an awareness of their positions of power relative to others.

III. Does racism, class and gender relations have anything to do with the food system?

Ninety percent of 80 interviewees said yes, racism, combined with gender and class, has something to do with the food system. The following is a breakdown of where respondents saw racism operating: Yes it is visible in:

- 1) Nonprofit leadership versus beneficiaries—66%
- 2) Land ownership—81%
- 3) Food insecurity—90%
- 4) Wealth and income—78%
- 5) Food processing, farm work—74%
- 6) Organizational lack of diversity—58%

When asked the question directly, and when provided with examples of the specific workings of social relations of race, gender and class, the vast majority of respondents recognized the role of race and racism in the food system and particularly in food insecurity. Approximately one third added categories to the above list. The encouraging news, then, is that community food leaders do see that racism works in the food system—but are they willing to act on this recognition? Many cited a desire to acquire materials that would expand their knowledge of racism and resources that would enable their organizations to address the intersection of inequalities.

Though still over half, the percentage of respondents concluding that racism is visible in organizational lack of diversity (58%) is the lowest, followed by those who acknowledge that institutional racism is evident in who leads nonprofits compared to who number among the beneficiaries (66%). Both were questions about the class and race privilege associated with positions of power in community food organizations and the class, gender and race identities of people experiencing food insecurity. 26% of my respondents expressed some consternation in answering either question one or six or both. That is, they provided me with comments such as:

“This is not the issue”

“It is insignificant”

“I don’t have experience with that”

“[It is] convenient but not intentional”

“We can’t find qualified people”

“We don’t have the resources...”

“The state of ___ is 97% white”

It is true, this is not *the* issue from the perspective that anti-oppression should not focus its limited resources on including more of group X in an organization and there are far greater problems and interesting questions associated with food, race, gender and class that need to be addressed. As one interviewee noted, affirmative action will not necessarily change the way people think (or avoid thinking) about race nor will it make us reflect more on the structures of power that frame the work of community food. Many respondents did not agree that affirmative action was central to building a diverse community food movement although they thought it was a part of that project. Respondents told me that they were less inclined to put faith in affirmative action because of their sense that it has acquired a negative connotation in recent years.

The above responses to questions one and/or six do serve as the means by which organizations avoid a discussion of race and racism and thus institutionalize inequality. Further, it is clear that the white middle class leaders are defining what is significant and what is not without necessarily having a conversation with anti-racist activists in community food. In feminist theory, the ability to plead ignorance and to excuse oneself on the basis of good intentions is based in one’s position as white and/or middle class and/or male power. Further, the lack of ill intent or the existence of good intentions is a common response to questions like these in my study. But if intention is the standard by which people judge their complicity with systems of oppression, then they will never be held to account. Intention individualizes the relationship and fails to focus on institutionalized systemic processes.

Complicating the high recognition of race, gender and class oppression in the food system is the two thirds who responded that the reason some people are more food

insecure than others is poverty among choices including the feminization of poverty, wealth and income inequality and racism. The response might indicate that the economic feature of food insecurity is the most powerful explanation that community food recognizes. Economic circumstances are perceived as a unifying, as opposed to divisive, factor under which gender and race fit. The left has long sought to promote class as the political platform around which to organize and in the process, failed to address how race can divide class coalition and how gender does not register in such analyses. I would argue that if there are populations who are disproportionately more food insecure than others, whether that is taken to mean in the entire population or solely in the population of food insecure people, then it is the feminization of poverty, racism and extremes of wealth and income that are largely responsible.

The imagery community food uses on its home or program pages is another factor complicating the high recognition of race, class and gender in the food system. The major (by size or stature) community food organizations in the North East, featured people of color, mostly African Americans, and often children on their home or program pages. The use of these images may indicate a desire to show that nutritious food or growing your own food can be desirable to all people. It may also be interpreted as an effort to reach out across race, gender and class difference. The images may be of the communities with which the organization works, but even then, they reveal this stark difference between the purveyors of services and the beneficiaries. But it begs the question of *why* a predominantly white organization uses images of people of color. Though I do not suggest removing the images, the question needs to be considered.

IV. Race and...

Thoughtful responses from people who work with new immigrant communities of color and youth among others pointed out that the people with whom they work are differently positioned in many ways—by their race, sexuality, gender, age, class and nationality—not just by race. Their work confronts how these positions interact. Other interesting proposals noted that not all people of color see their struggle as against racism nor do all want strong anti-racist language used because the alliances they have built cannot survive and use such terminology. And, based on historic learning that suggests it is safer to be less visible, some groups of color may not want anti-racism so vocally and visibly leading them into battle. Another respondent remarked that internalized inferiority is something that people of color live with and must come to recognize for their own well-being. We are advised, as well, to present strong, positive images of the food insecure or the marginalized and to note that there are hopeful, ongoing efforts in all sorts of communities. Similarly, it is important to emphasize that many people of color are food secure and many whites are food insecure. Any conceptualization of race, racism and anti-racism that seeks to avoid identity politics and that desires to speak to the work of diverse community food organizations and populations must consider multiple, intersecting differences. The difficulty with an anti-racism-only agenda that focuses on race and racism is that it does not enable a discussion relevant to the many differences that obtain in the work of community food.

One recurring argument in the interviews concerned the importance of class and corporate power in an analysis of the food system. A suspicion I entertained while listening to successive interviews in which respondents voiced concerns about corporate

power, class and poverty was whether these terms served as a mechanism to avoid looking at race. However, several respondents did note that economic and white privilege often go hand in hand. A radical left analysis of capitalism and racism that recognizes that class and race are not mutually exclusive but instead variably intertwined would serve the proponents of community food. But as far as I can tell, such an analysis of either has yet to be made by the Coalition, its committees, or the movement. On its own, class as an analytic device and as an organizing strategy, does not adequately explain race or speak to racism. And if the economic as the cross-difference organizing strategy purportedly in effect now were successful, then the movement would not be so white. The honest accounting of history that one respondent called for would consider the many ways that our society has come to encompass such extremes of material inequality and what we might do about it.

The response to one question on the division between programming designed for the food insecure and that which is aimed at well off consumers of local and/or organic food illuminates the discussion of class. Most agreed that there was such a split in programming. To some this division enabled community food programs, to others it was a reality about which they could do little. And, as some noted, there are middle class people who do desire organic, fresh, nutritious food and who are useful to building a more equitable and ecologically sound food system. My question—can the movement exist with this dichotomy—struck some as odd because, they argued, it does exist. I was asking something more philosophical—can community food ethically continue relying on social inequalities to further its programming and its overall agenda?

Strikingly absent from most responses was any reference to gender. Yet it is poor women who disproportionately experience food insecurity relative to men. It is poor women and their children who experience workfare and its sanctions that lead more quickly to food insecurity. It is women farmers who often struggle with lack of resources and with their identity in the heavily masculine world of farming. It is also women who have become successful niche food producers and who continue to be largely responsible for purchasing and preparing food. Also absent from all but three interviews was recognition of homophobia. These few expressed the importance of work to counter homophobia as a part of community food programming particularly with youth in urban settings and among rural populations generally. Gender and sexuality should be part of what community food addresses in its thought process and subsequent work on power and difference.

V. Farm workers and food processors

The majority of responses indicated that farm worker concerns were not well enough integrated into the programming and policy work of community food but should be. Apart from those who advocate on behalf of workers in food processing, this group was not mentioned. According to some of my respondents, the niche of community food is health and perhaps the right to food. What is the right to food if it is guaranteed on the backs of invisible farm workers and food processors? And though a discussion of race and racism has begun, still absent in that discussion are the people of color, women and the deeply exploited, in the Marxian sense, who work processing our chicken and picking our tomatoes.

VI. Anti-racism training

Most respondents, citing funding issues, had not done any training related to gender, race or diversity. I had initially advocated for anti-racism training and its strategic focus on racism, even promoting anti-racism trainers Crossroads Ministry and Changework over diversity trainers, Visions. One respondent proposed that diversity training is half a generation ahead of anti-racism training. Another suggested that anti-racism training is primarily to help whites understand how racism works. Though anti-racism training may be useful to people open to thinking about racism, my sense now is that any training that does not emphasize all positions equally and the relationships among positions of power (gender, race, sexuality, class) does a disservice to alliances of difference, already so difficult to achieve. Feminist theorists (of all colors) have long warned against identity politics and establishing a hierarchy of oppression—all of which anti-racism training leans toward. Moreover, the conclusion of anti-racism training—that all whites are racist—though comprehensible to most at the end of training, is not a message useful to building coalitions in which all people can value their (un-chosen) identity while at the same time acknowledging systemic relations, institutionalized inequality and privilege.

One key element of some anti-racism training is the establishment of caucuses divided on the basis of white and ‘of color’. Such caucuses are sometimes necessary for safe and supportive discussion. However, the strategy begins from a politics of opposition that reinforces a notion of whites *versus* people of color in which racism is the only operative process. It offers the simplistic idea that people of color all have a common bond in race and racism when people are very differently racialized and all groups are divided by class, gender and sexuality too. It does not allow for any fuzziness in identity—people who are mixed, who are visibly white but are part of a racialized group, people who do not identify with a racialized group but who may be of color, people who feel more comfortable identifying by class or gender and so on. When lines are drawn so fundamentally, it may be much more difficult to encourage a politics in which people can question, learn, acknowledge power other than whiteness and bring out the complex and nuanced nature of race rather than only the negative ways in which race has been deployed as racism.

There are definitely positive aspects to the training. White participants in the anti-racism training held by Changework in Chicago this summer (for CFSC staff and board and ODC members) indicated that they had rarely, if ever, had the opportunity in their day to day lives to talk about race, racism and privilege. The trainers’ were able to draw out Euro-American participants’ (often women’s) emotions such that racism becomes something much closer to people than it would be were it to remain an abstract concept.

VII. Accountability and Action

The majority of leaders could not demonstrate that they were accountable to the communities in which they work. Telling misinterpretations of the question indicated that the organization is required to submit reports to its funders. While most recognize the role of social relations of race, class and gender and specifically racism in the food system and most agree that dismantling oppression would be part of a community food system, the majority of organizations are not acting against structural oppression through their work. I was struck by the honesty of many who told me that they were not

addressing uneven relations of power or bringing about social change in their work. At least one respondent claimed that that was not actually what the organization had been set up to do and others pointed to the role of funding agencies in weakening the ability to use an analytic of power in their work.

VIII. What questions should organizations put to themselves to further a diverse movement?

Most of the questions my respondents proposed focused on interactions with communities, organizational diversity and power. Here are some of them:

Interaction with communities

- Are we approaching problems as a member of a community?
- Are we empowering people or providing services?
- Are we inclusive?
- How do we place ourselves in the world vision of the community we want to serve?
- How do we build trust?
- Where and how are decisions made?
- How do we explain our funding constraints and constraints from grant makers to communities?
- Is the community we work with represented in our organization?
- What is our role in/with communities?
- What community based leadership has evolved as a result of our programming?
- Are organizations taking too much credit for work done by community members?
- What does this community we work in need for the long run?

Diverse organizations

- What do the top levels of power look like?
- What sort of representation do we have in our organization?
- What outreach have we done to fill jobs?
- Does our internal structure mirror the world we want to see?
- How firmly do organizations believe that having diverse voices at the table is necessary to the movement's success?
- Do we have what it takes—the chutzpah—to go through the process of becoming a diverse organization?

Power

- Should we link to campaigns like living wage that would help to make people less desperate and more able to think about food?
- Why are people unable to afford good food? Why are people not paid well enough?
- Why is the idea of shifting power a challenging idea for community food?
- Where is the power? How many points of access to it are there?
- When is it time for us to shift power? Are we ready to turn over control?
- How can the work we're doing address the power structures underlying race, class and gender?
- How much do funders drive the lack of attention to racism and class structure?
- How are resources allocated in community food?

- Why isn't dismantling racism part of the CFSC mission?
- What are our strategies and do they fit the problems of the food system?
- Are we making assumptions that we shouldn't be making?
- What is our role in the larger movement?
- Have we considered societal structures that affect our work?
- Are we working ourselves out of a job?
- Does every program serve the food insecure or are we instead working to create or support a system that benefits people like us?
- How do we confront fear?
- How can we ensure that regardless of race, class or gender, anyone who wants to be a farmer, can?
- Do we think of ourselves and act as a movement?
- Should we exist as organizations that deal with food insecurity if we don't ask the question—why are more and more women coming in?
- What are we doing to change the conditions that led to disproportionately higher levels of food insecurity among women and people of color?
- The question should not be what the community food movement has to offer diverse groups, but what they have to offer community food that would make it a different place to be.

It is hopeful, finally, that so many respondents came up with such good questions. If the movement can think through and act on some of them, it would come closer to building just community food systems.