

**Sowing Collective Liberation: Framing Food Movement Work
with Racial Justice**

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ABSTRACT

Current focus within the mainstream food movement ignores the inherent racialization of our food systems, and subsequently reinforces white privilege and perpetuates racial inequities. One such racial inequity is that people of color are concentrated in neighborhoods with limited food access – a socio-spatial issue that is rooted in structural racism. This study explores how the work of several food justice organizations – New Roots Inc., Louisville Grows, and the Louisville Food Cooperative – are modeling collective liberation through their approaches in combatting these food access issues in Louisville, Kentucky. I conducted my research through semi-structured individual interviews with three leaders of these organizations. The resulting interviews reveal that while it is unclear as to whether these organizations explicitly practice anti-racism, their work reflects several core themes of collective liberation and model liberatory food systems.

INTRODUCTION

Food is an avenue through which a myriad of social and environmental issues can be addressed because it is integral to life itself. Current focus within the food movement is dominated by the mainstream (white, middle/upper-class) and seems to be centered primarily around nutrition with some credit to local economies and environmental sustainability (Slocum 2006). This is not to say that scholarship being done with and by communities of color is nonexistent – leading scholars who forge pathways that challenge racialized geographies and center geographies of color while facilitating conversations around the topic of food justice include Alkon (2011), Guthman (2008), and Slocum (2006), among others. Nonetheless, this literature is dwarfed by the mainstream, so the focus on reforming the food system then translates to benefitting personal health, shifting capital flow to local entities, and slowing environmental degradation and climate disruption (Slocum 2006). These foci are positioned through a white lens and fail to consider cultural differences in food histories for people of color (Alkon and Agyeman 2011). Moreover, these foci contain little to no acknowledgement of whiteness¹ or anti-racist practice, and our efforts are consequently saturated with colorblind racism² (Guthman 2008a). People of color experience systematic and institutionalized discrimination because of their race, but ignoring that fact simply because no one claims to be overtly racist only reinforces white privilege and perpetuates these racial inequities (Bonilla-Silva 2006). Therefore, the notion that this alternative food system is an improvement for everyone is misguided and only exacerbates the exclusionary whiteness-centricity of our food systems (Bonilla-Silva 2006).

¹ According to Bonilla-Silva (2006), whiteness is systemic “embodied racial power” demonstrated by white racial segregation from blacks (145)

² According to Guthman (2008a), colorblind racism is the refusal to acknowledge racial differences and the subsequent attempted erasure of white privilege

I argue that the very nature of our thinking surrounding food needs to drastically shift from that of an individualistic capitalist society in which people focus mainly on utilizing their dollars to simply ameliorate a flawed system (consider the rhetoric of environmental sustainability) to a society that acknowledges the history of and spatial relationship between food and race and utilizes that context to both amplify black and brown narratives and work toward collective liberation. We need to recognize that our food systems are inherently racialized, and in order to liberate both people of color and white people from the oppression associated with operating within a racialized social structure, we need to radically reconstruct the dynamics of our food systems.

A prevailing socio-spatial food issue is food access, which entails a limited ability to obtain sources of healthy food (Ver Ploeg and Dutko 2016). Neighborhoods that experience these issues are labeled food deserts, and the limited access to healthy and affordable food in these areas is often due to a combination of low income level, unreliable transportation, and far distances to supermarkets (Ver Ploeg and Dutko 2016). These food deserts proportionally affect more people of color who, especially in urban areas, are concentrated in neighborhoods with limited affordable, fresh healthy food (American Civil Liberties Union and New York Law School 2012). While government agencies, non-profit businesses, and grassroots organizations are enacting programs to combat food access issues, many of these are not doing so with the mindset of working toward collective liberation. Food access is not code for hunger and unhealthiness but is attached to the spatial organization of our cities, and the distribution of people of color within them is rooted in structural racism. Therefore, we cannot hope to eliminate food deserts, promote food sovereignty, and achieve collective

liberation if our efforts are not intersectional and do not place racial justice at the forefront of our food movement work.

This thesis project aims to contribute to current radical/critical geographical literature by highlighting grassroots food justice work, uncovering problems associated with the intersection (or lack thereof) between racial and food justice work within the context of collective liberation, and set a standard for future liberatory projects in Louisville and beyond. The discipline of geography is very much concerned with understanding spatial relationships to inform our understanding of the way in which the world works. The critical/radical subset of human geography challenges the status quo by promoting praxis rather than strict academia, and by revealing and challenging processes that produce and exacerbate socio-spatial inequalities (Fuller and Kitchin 2004).

I conducted my research by highlighting and exploring how the work of several food justice organizations or projects in Louisville, KY are modeling collective liberation in our food systems. Through interviews with leaders within New Roots Inc, Louisville Grows, and the Louisville Food Cooperative, I compare approaches and utilize those perspectives to develop a working definition of collective liberation as it applies to food movement work.

METHODOLOGY

This section contextualizes this research in the field of geography, details focus areas, discusses methods for creation of map figures, and outlines interview methods.³

Activist Scholarship

Activist scholarship, and this particular research, must not confine the concept of space to the physical dimension. Rather, spaces can be social situations, cultural niches, mental

³ This study was approved under IRB number 17.0062.

wavelengths, or any other number of relationship-based dynamics. Particularly in considering systems of oppression, there arises a theme of belonging, which is spatial in nature because “to belong is to be some place” (Tyner 2006, 5). While the activist seeks to dismantle systems of oppression through movement-building and campaign work, the role of the activist geographer is to create theories and concepts that can be applied to create social change (Harvey 1972). It is not a useful contribution to continue mapping injustices without producing any sort of argument that can be utilized to bring about actual change (Harvey 1972). Kitchin and Hubbard suggest that “if critical geography is serious about its (emancipatory) intentions, then it needs to reconceptualize how it can engage (and participate) with marginalized populations, opening new, alternative routes for ‘doing’ geography” (Kitchin and Hubbard 1999, 196). Critical praxis, or the intersection of academia and action, is needed if geographers want to transform the exclusionary landscapes that they study (Kitchin and Hubbard 1999).

Focus Areas: Geographies of Louisville

Even though I would argue that all people of color experience similar food access issues at the hands of white supremacy, I have chosen to focus my research on the black population in Louisville, KY for two reasons, the first reason being that the black population is the second-most dominant racial group in Louisville by a significant margin. According to the 2010 census, white people compose nearly 73% of the population in Jefferson County, Kentucky, while black people comprise nearly 21% of the population and all other minorities compose only 6% combined (United States Census Bureau 2010). The second reason for my focus on the black population is that white and black people in Louisville share a poignant history. During the era of slavery, the city was one of the most active fugitive slave bases

and crossing points for the Underground Railroad in the United States, and the most significant crossing point from Louisville to southern Indiana was located in the Portland neighborhood (Aubespain 2011). Fast-forward to today and Louisville is a highly racially segregated city mainly due to white flight that was fueled by both urban renewal and civil disobedience in the 1950-70s, and then perpetuated by decades of discriminatory zoning laws (Bennet and Gatz 2008; Ryan and Lopez 2016). This segregation is kept in place by the Ninth Street Divide – a corridor physically dividing the city of Louisville – with poverty, lack of industry and economic development, pollution, and high concentration of the black population to the west; and more affluent and white neighborhoods to the east (Ryan and Lopez 2016). Figure 1 below displays the concentration of the black population in the northwestern portions of the city (West Louisville), east downtown, and the Newburg and West Buechel industrial areas.

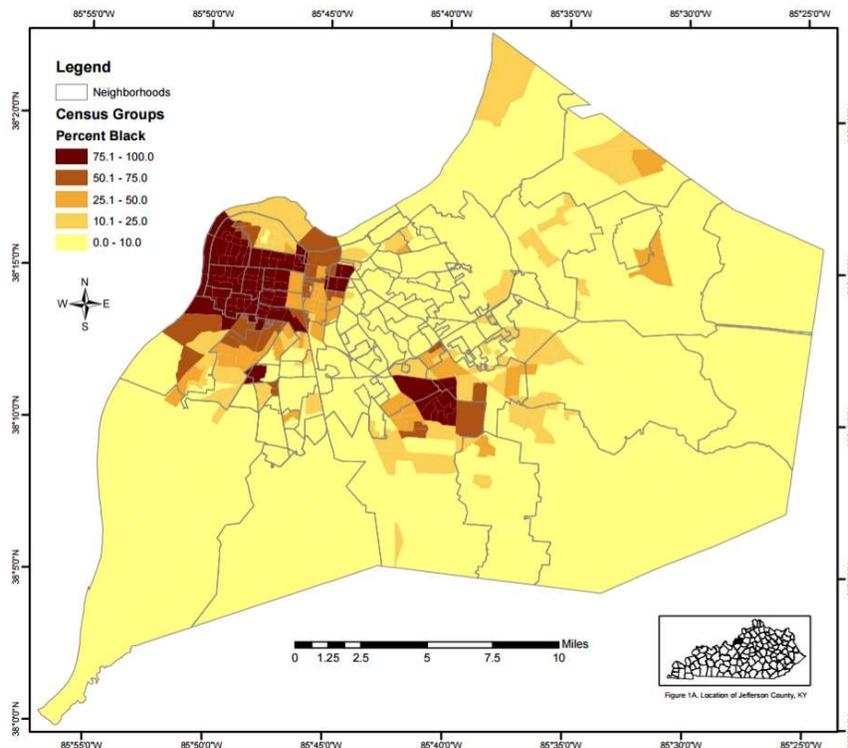


Figure 1. Black population distribution by census block group in Louisville, KY

Louisville also has a significant relationship between black communities and food access. In 2007, the Community Farm Alliance conducted a community food assessment of Louisville, Kentucky and found that West Louisville and East Downtown are underserved by grocery stores and there is a need for affordable, high-quality, fresh healthy foods in those neighborhoods (Community Farm Alliance 2007). These areas outlined in Figure 2 are also areas that have high concentrations of black residents as displayed in Figure 1.

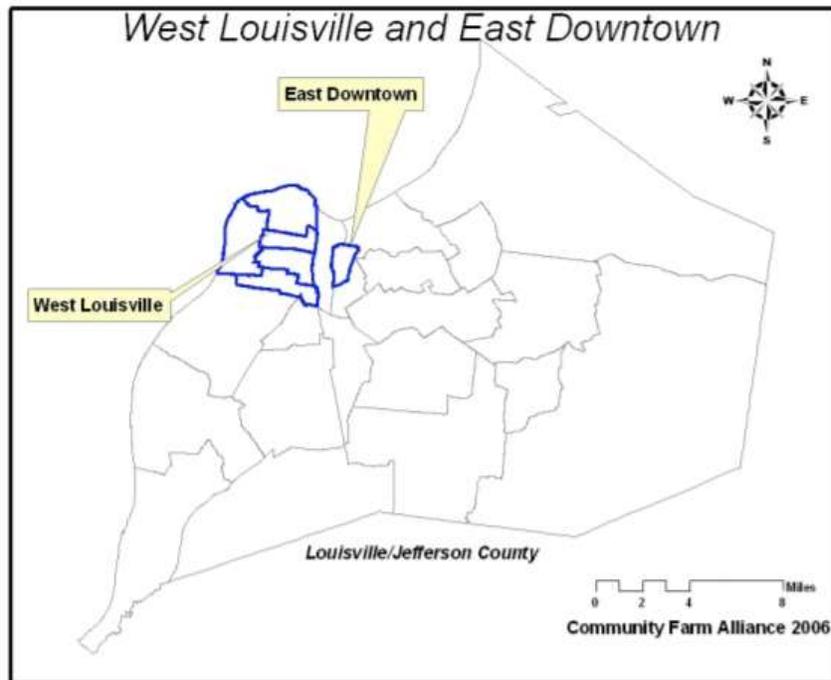


Figure 2. West Louisville and East Downtown areas in Louisville, KY (Community Farm Alliance 2007)

Focus Areas: Local Organizations

Many organizations in Louisville are working to combat food access issues in these neighborhoods, including New Roots, Louisville Grows, and the Louisville Food Cooperative. New Roots, a 501c3 grassroots nonprofit whose mission statement is “fresh food is a basic human right”, has been working with affected communities since 2009 to end

food access issues (New Roots 2016). The pop-up Fresh Stop Markets are a cross between a farmer's market and a Community Supported Agriculture program, where shareholders pre-purchase a biweekly share of produce on an income-based sliding scale and then pick up their produce at their designated pop-up market located at a church, community center, or housing authority (New Roots 2016). The community leverages their collective buying power, which resulted in a \$100,000 investment in local organic farmers last year from the 1600 families involved in the Fresh Stop Market movement. Additionally, an integral part of the movement is the food justice workshops held to spread the purpose and set the foundation of the work. The movement brings fresh and affordable food into limited access neighborhoods, provides more stability for local farmers than a typical farmer's market, and fosters community (New Roots 2016). New Roots only establishes new markets in communities into which they have been invited, and the organization focuses its reach on USDA designated food deserts. Six out of the eight markets located in Jefferson County as depicted in Figure 3 are located in these same neighborhoods that have a high concentration of black residents and that the Community Farm Alliance deemed underserved by grocery stores. Leaders of the movement include farmer liaisons, chef liaisons, site leaders, and transportation leaders for each market, as well as two (soon to be three) paid staff members of the organization, and the majority of the leaders are black women. For this portion of research, I interviewed the Executive Director of New Roots.

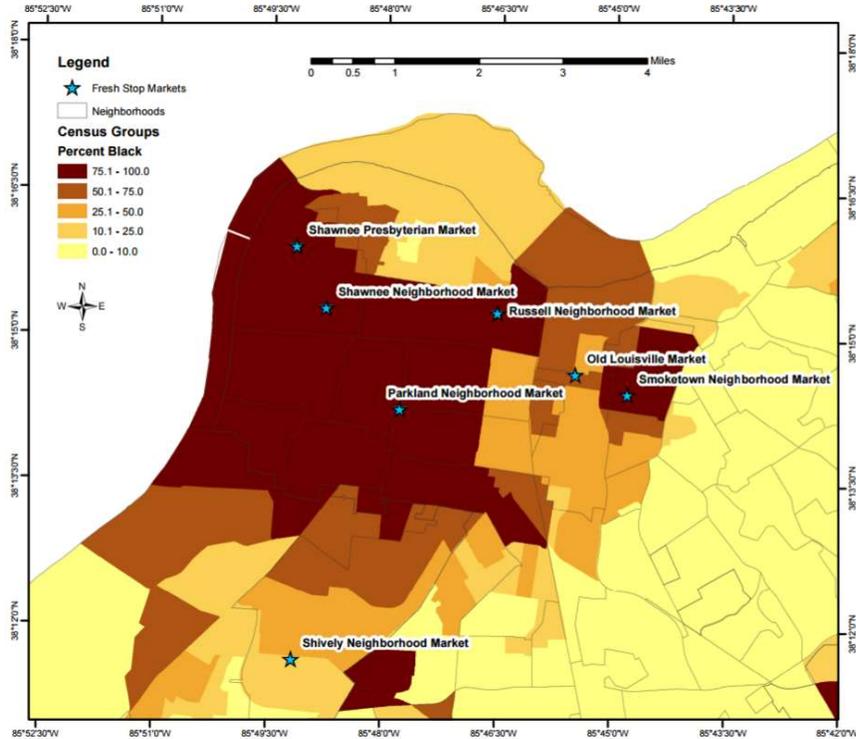


Figure 3. Locations of New Roots Fresh Stop Markets in the West End and East Downtown of Louisville, KY

Louisville Grows was founded in 2009 to promote sustainable communities, through growing the urban tree canopy throughout the city as well as establishing community gardens and food forests in food-insecure urban neighborhoods with a focus in West Louisville communities (Louisville Grows 2017). The organization has worked with the community to create and maintain 13 community gardens, and currently oversees four gardens and four orchards as depicted in Figure 4 (Louisville Grows 2017). For this portion of research, I interviewed Louisville Grows Director of Urban Agriculture.

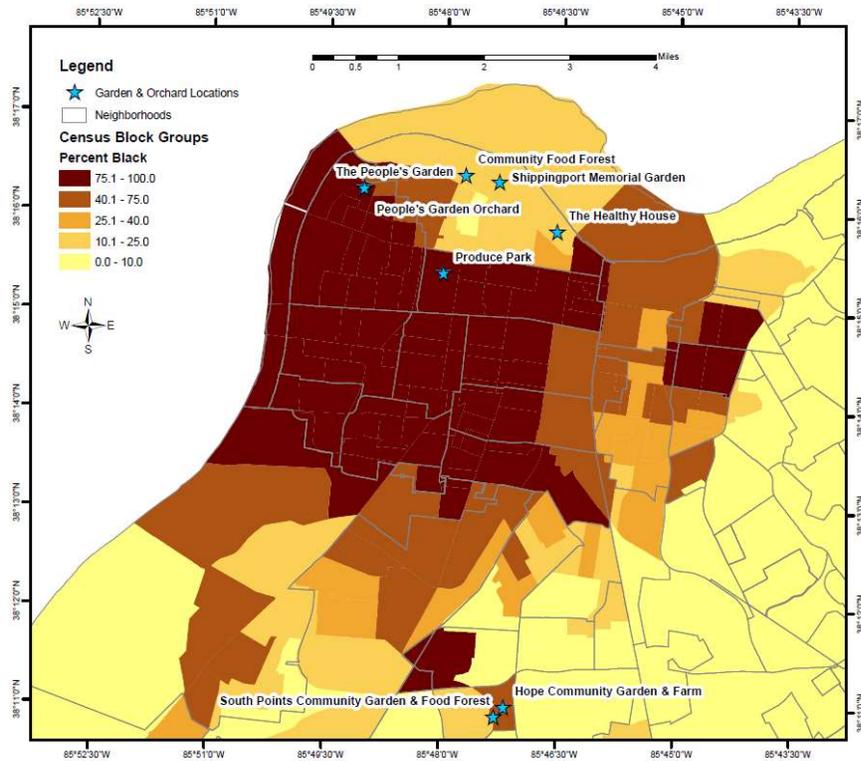


Figure 4. Louisville Grows garden and orchard locations in Louisville, KY

The Louisville Food Cooperative is an upcoming community-owned grocery store project in Louisville. Leaders started meeting about a year and a half ago to research and envision a grocery based on cooperative economics to solve the food access issue. The group holds monthly public interest meetings to gain community input and is currently working to secure funding and launch a membership drive. Leaders plan to locate the cooperative in one of the seven neighborhoods indicated in Figure 5, and they hope to open the doors to the store by the end of 2018. For this portion of research, I interviewed one of the founders of the Louisville Food Cooperative.

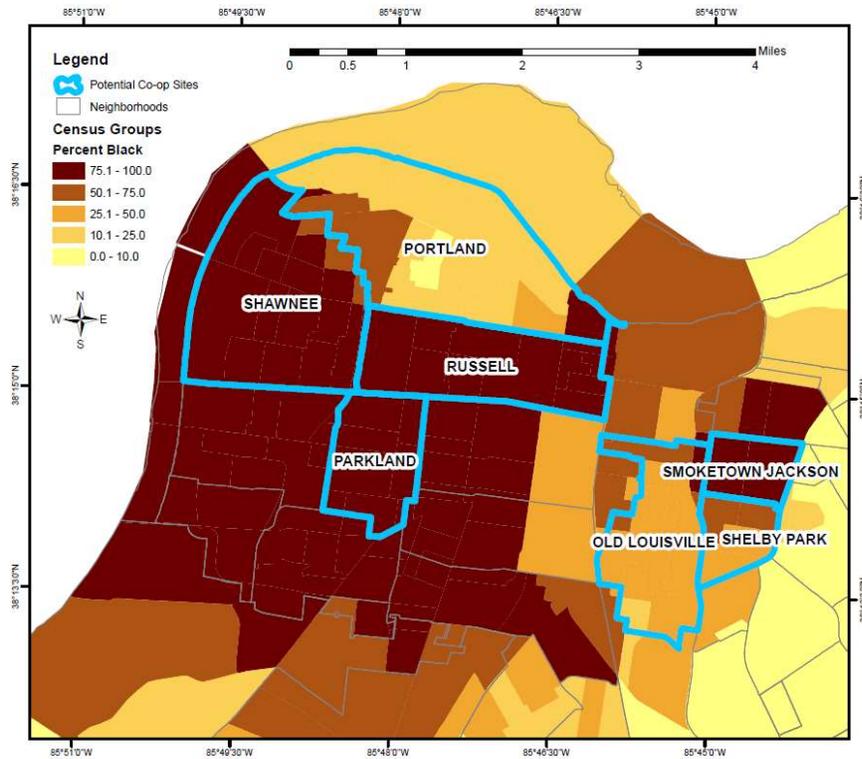


Figure 5. Potential neighborhood site locations for Louisville Food Cooperative store in Louisville, KY

Activist Scholarship in Practice: Shifting from Extractive to Generative Research

In conducting research as a scholar-activist it is imperative to center the needs of the community or communities being researched. If the research question does not originate within the target community, then it must seek to answer questions that the community wishes to explore (Minkler 2004). This research should advance the work of community organizations and/or explore barriers to activism (Derickson and Routledge 2015). I originally approached New Roots seeking to interview several people involved with the Fresh Stop Market movement, including staff and board members, volunteers, and shareholders. Upon approaching the director of New Roots about my research inviting her to participate and asking if she could identify individuals within the movement to participate, she declined the invitation expressing concern that my research would not be helpful in

advancing the Fresh Stop Market movement nor would it directly benefit those communities (K. Mercer, personal communication, February 2017). She added that the communities that New Roots organizes in had been “researched to death” citing an example of several individuals’ negative reactions to another researcher coming into that community for a recent study (K. Mercer, personal communication, February 2017). This conversation was a check on my privilege as an academic, realizing that I had planned to insert myself and my research into that community without first asking the needs of the organization, risking performing a more extractive than a collaborative, generative, and empowering method of research. It was important and powerful for the director to refuse involvement on behalf of the New Roots community in order to utilize their time and resources efficiently for the movement. In considering insider/outsider status, would the community have been more receptive if a black scholar had approached them, and if not for my already established relationship with the Executive Director, would she still have agreed to be personally interviewed?

Data for Figures

I gathered census and neighborhood data for Figures 1, 3, 4, and 5 from the Louisville/Jefferson County Information Consortium (LOJIC) database and loaded it into the ArcMap geospatial software program (ArcGIS). I then calculated the population percentage in each census block and applied a graduated color scheme using a 5-class natural breaks method. I obtained Figure 2 from the Community Food Assessment and Figure 3 Fresh Stop Market location data from the New Roots webpage (Community Farm Alliance 2007; New Roots 2016). I entered the addresses of the Fresh Stop Market locations into the Google My Maps online application and exported the locations to a KML data layer which was converted to a shapefile using the KML to Layer tool in ArcMap (Google My Maps). I repeated this

for the Louisville Grows garden and orchard location data in Figure 4, obtained from the Louisville Grows webpage and email communication with Louisville Grows Director of Urban Agriculture (Louisville Grows 2017). I obtained Louisville Food Cooperative site location data from an interview with a Louisville Food Cooperative organizer and I exported the focus neighborhoods from the LOJIC Urban Neighborhoods layer to a new shapefile.

Interview Methods and Analysis

I conducted semi-structured individual interviews in person with three community leaders, one each with New Roots, the Louisville Food Cooperative, and Louisville Grows. Some of the themes explored include the organization or project's approach and impact, their perceived connection (or non-connection) between black people and food access issues, and their concept of and relationship to collective liberation. I sent participants an unsigned consent form via email, fax, or in person for review prior to their interview. Before conducting an interview, I explained to the subject the purpose of the study, their role in the study, how I would be utilizing their information/responses, and approximately how long they could expect the interview to take. I then asked the subjects for their consent to participate in the research and informed them that they could ask to be removed from the study at any point until the study is complete. Interviews were audio recorded. A list of the interview questions is located in the appendix.

STATEMENT OF POSITIONALITY

I write this thesis coming from the perspective of a white person with food stability who has been residing in Louisville for less than four years. I have been marginally involved in food justice and racial justice work with both national and local ties, and my activism influences my perspectives in approaching this thesis work. As a third party conducting

qualitative research who is neither black, nor food insecure, nor heavily involved in the work that New Roots, Louisville Grows, or the Louisville Food Cooperative is doing, it is imperative to consider my positionality in order to avoid erasing, appropriating, or othering the research population (England 1994). It is subsequently important to recognize my status as either an insider or an outsider in relation to those directly informing my research (Hay 2010). Essentially, an insider shares many identities or qualities with interviewees while an outsider is considerably different from the interviewees (Hay 2010). While I would generally align more as an outsider considering my privilege and lack of sustained direct involvement with food justice organizations, I am also an insider quite fundamentally as I consume food and operate within the same social and economic constructs that shape our urban food systems as those I am interviewing. This insider/outsider binary restricts the researcher from realizing the full multi-dimensions of their identities and how all of their intersecting identities influence the research process. The expectation of researchers to be impartial and objectively neutral is not viable when researching people because valuing people upon the information they provide instead of valuing them as complete persons is immoral (England 1994). Furthermore, the researcher is both a participant and observer in the research process, and consequently my personal identities and experiences influence my research (England 1994).

In shifting my project focus from interviewing both leaders and participants in the Fresh Stop Market movement to interviewing leaders of several food justice organizations, my positionality has changed. I would identify more as an insider now that I am interviewing a small group of leaders who I had either met or could have easily met prior to this research. Because they are the face or one of the few faces of their respective organizations, they

generally occupy a space between the target communities who are directly involved in and/or benefitting from the work of these organizations and more privileged communities who are not. With the shift in focus, the inside has shifted from those target communities to this space that the leaders occupy. As one conducting this research, I am shifting my positionality from the uninvolved privileged outsider closer to that same space that these leaders occupy, and, therefore, would identify more as an insider in this context.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Food access issues are not just socioeconomic issues. They are a problem particularly for African Americans. Multiple studies have shown that “low-income, non-white, inner-city populations experience the poorest access to supermarkets” (Kurtz 2013, 250). A study conducted in New Orleans showed that percentage of black residents was a more significant factor than median household income in determining fast food restaurant density (Kurtz 2013). Predominately black areas – 80% or more of the population consists of black people – contained at least six more fast food establishments, on average, than white neighborhoods – 20% or less of the population consists of black people (Kurtz 2013).

Because food access issues are concentrated in predominately black neighborhoods, race is intricately linked to food access issues. The question subsequently arises of whether a specific approach or leadership from certain groups of people is needed to achieve food justice in these communities. In “Whose right to (farm) the city?”, Passidomo (2014) explores the discourse surrounding the food sovereignty movement, and utilizes a case study of post-Katrina New Orleans to determine whether food sovereignty activism actually helps address social issues in low-income communities of color. The author concludes that projects initiated and sustained by white-led groups actually uphold systems of privilege and

inequality (Passidomo 2014). Similarly, to discuss the importance of community food justice organizations to incorporate black food geographies, Ramirez (2015) analyzes two community food organizations in Seattle, WA: one, a black-led food justice group; another, a white-led urban farming collective. The author concludes that while the work of each group interacts with racialized food spaces, the white-led group often exacerbates issues that plague that poor black community, and the black-led group nourishes community food projects because of their prioritization of alternate (non-white) geographies. However, the black-led organization still grapples with the history of slavery in trying to engage black people in food production (Ramirez 2015). These studies both indicate a need for the alternative food movement to take leadership from black people, as well as a need to frame food work with racial justice and collective liberation.

Since white-led groups have a problematic history of working toward food justice in communities of color, the concept of whiteness and how it manifests in food movement work must be explored. Julie Guthman pointedly exposes the inherent whiteness of the alternative food movement, which has come from whitened cultural histories and therefore white food experiences and narratives are seen as universal (Guthman 2008b). Consequently, whiteness becomes pervasive and any other experience is erased and excluded from the movement. Guthman analyzed University of California Santa Cruz student research on their field placements in various urban food security projects – many students found a disconnect (and even a complete antithesis) between the work that the targeted black participants within these programs were performing and the participants’ actual food habits and views. While these organizations are conducting important work to resist some of the pervasive whiteness of the alternative food movement, their work is ultimately coded in whiteness culminated by a

failure to appeal to the people they are trying to target (Guthman 2008b). Additionally, many black residents with limited food access want conventional supermarkets in their neighborhoods, which is often discounted in alternative food spaces. Guthman suggests that perhaps “the focus of activism should shift away from the particular qualities of food and towards the injustices that underlie disparities in food access” like redlining, poverty wages, toxins in food, etc. (Guthman 2008b, 443). This necessitates broadening the focus of food movement work from the narrow concentration on food to a more comprehensive emphasis on structural inequalities, employing a more nuanced understanding of what it means to be alternative, which is informed by recognizing cultural codings and histories.

While I was conducting this thesis research, Hyden (2017) completed and released research on the New Roots Fresh Stop movement. Hyden posits that racial violence has necessitated the construction of these alternative food systems. Food justice must engage in anti-racism and invest in community organizing (Hyden 2017). Furthermore, the current “without” narrative perpetuated by categorizing neighborhoods with limited food access as food *deserts*, suggests that these neighborhoods and the people residing in them are without value – lacking ideas, skill, intellect, power, community, and even geography. For the predominately black West Louisville neighborhoods, that food desert language is inherently racist – it reduces the people living in these areas to statistics and erases “their creativity and histories of active resistance (actively producing their own space)” (Hyden 2017, 40). Because these supposed deserts then are determined to be barren of life, these communities in question subsequently have neither been allowed to define the problem for themselves nor invited to participate in conversations surrounding solutions. This context explains how the perpetuation of limited food access areas is tied to a rejection of black personhood and

community – so work within the food movement must be rooted in anti-racism (Hyden 2017). The Fresh Stop Market movement practices food justice in a way that engages with and takes leadership from the communities directly impacted and works toward solutions that may not be taken seriously by leaders within the white capitalocentric alternative food movement. Fresh Stop Market spaces are dynamic not built, and stability is gained through relationship-building not brick and mortar (Hyden 2017). The movement is then “investing in people over profits and justice over buildings” (Hyden 2017, 82). The Fresh Stop Markets take direction from African American cooperative economic thought, and through anti-racist community organizing efforts, the movement highlights and practices an empowering narrative alternative to that of the desert (Hyden 2017).

Collective Liberation

This thesis project seeks to explore collective liberation in food justice work, so it is necessary to build a foundation of that concept upon which to move forward in analyzing its role in food movements. While the struggle for collective liberation can manifest differently in different spaces and for different organizations due to varying localized topics, needs, relationships, circumstances, goals, power structures, culture, etc., we can always return to the simple definition that “nobody’s free until everybody’s free,” as stated by civil rights leader Fannie Lou Hamer (Hamer 2011, 136).

Freedom is a place, and the concept of black liberation has been grounded in geography for centuries. While traveling the Underground Railroad, Harriet Tubman discovered that freedom did not inherently exist in the land above the Mason-Dixon line (LaRoche 2014). The North was not the destination – freedom was, and the two were not interchangeable. It was instead a continuous process for all escapees to extract freedom from the landscape

(LaRoche 2014). Consequently, liberation is not bound to a specific, definable, physical location. However, because oppression oftentimes manifests itself in particular locations, and inequalities are organized spatially – like the socio-spatial organization of Louisville with black residents and food deserts concentrated in the West End – liberation is connected to the landscape.

Collective liberation is not a destination but rather a struggle for freedom that “extricates us from the backwards pull of history” (Davis 2016). Collective liberation is the understanding that the intersections of oppression affect both mainstream and marginalized people, as well as the active and shared struggle to end that oppression (Kentucky Student Environmental Coalition 2016). Collective, intersectional liberation allows us to work toward who and what we seek to become, rather than just reacting to how we do not wish to be (Crass 2013). Lila Watson (1985) of the Queensland aboriginal activists group is credited with the quote: “If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.” In the process of achieving collective liberation, marginalized people work to regain and retain the dignity that is denied to them and the privileged take direction from the marginalized and utilize their power granted to them by the system in order to lift up the marginalized groups, in turn breaking their own bondage to the systems of oppression (Kentucky Student Environmental Coalition 2016).

Civil rights leaders, Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton (1967), assert that black liberation is the need to reclaim black history and identity and the struggle to create and have their own terms and community recognized. They reject assimilation and instead call for a complete revision of current political and economic systems because these systems

exploit black people and reinforce white supremacy (Carmichael and Hamilton 1967). Carmichael and Hamilton (1967) express their hesitation about forming coalitions with non-Black Power organizations. White people, no matter how liberal, live in a cocoon of white-dominated society and do not have black interests at heart. Other liberal reform groups, therefore, will not challenge white conformity which is essential for black liberation (Carmichael and Hamilton 1967). However, the victories of the struggle for black liberation will only be meaningful when both black and white people recognize similar goals for political and economic change and accept each other as co-equal partners in the struggle, thus expressing a need for collective struggle toward liberation from oppressive structures (Carmichael and Hamilton 1967).

Since collective liberation is the struggle against all systems of oppression, and the systems of oppression are interconnected, an intersectional approach is needed in the collective struggle for liberation. The Combahee River Collective (1979) black feminist group stressed the need as black feminists to develop a platform that is both antiracist and antisexist. They had been marginalized by one part of their identity in other activist spaces that either focused only on antiracist or antisexist work and did not consider dismantling other pillars of oppression. The Combahee River Collective (1979, 366) believes that “the liberation of all people necessitates the destruction of the political-economic systems of capitalism and imperialism as well as patriarchy,” and it is therefore necessary to develop an intersectional revolution.

From these sources, we can define collective liberation as the rejection of oppressive structures and an active intersectional struggle toward justice, in which marginalized groups

reclaim identity and power, privileged persons take direction from oppressed groups, and community building is centered.

What is the Place of Food in Collective Liberation?

There is a rich history of national black liberation organizations that recognizes a need and took the opportunity to incorporate the reclamation of land and food into their work and build power from it. Civil rights leader Fannie Lou Hamer founded the Freedom Farm Cooperative in 1969 to empower poor black sharecroppers and farmers, as well as unify poor whites and blacks in building power against white landowners (SNCC 2017; Brooks 2014). Hamer purchased 40 acres of land in the Mississippi Delta region to start this grassroots cooperative farm, which eventually expanded to 640 acres. Members planted cash crops to cover expenses and grew a variety of vegetables that were distributed to members of the co-op (SNCC 2017). The co-op started a “pig bank” in which families in need would each raise several pigs from a litter for meat (Brooks 2014). Freedom Farm also helped families secure decent housing and awarded scholarships to youth. While Freedom Farm Cooperative ultimately failed due to bankruptcy in 1974, Hamer believed that Freedom Farm’s unifying radical work exemplified her maxim that “nobody’s free until everybody’s free” – the freedom of all people comes not in fighting for equal rights but in fighting for justice against an unjust system (Brooks 2014).

Around the same time that Freedom Farm began, the Black Panther Party started the Free Breakfast for Children Program in 1968 as a survival program to uplift poor, black communities (Amin 2011). The breakfast program grew quickly and became a requirement for all Black Panther Party chapters nationwide with volunteers serving 20,000 meals per week in 19 communities (Robertson 2016; Nelson 2015). The breakfast programs not only

were an act of resistance in providing healthy food to black communities, but they also reclaimed power surrounding food by establishing that food is a right rather than charity from rich to poor (Amin 2011). This work ties into the party's Ten Point Plan which addresses land reform among other things (Amin 2011). In his speech "Message to the Grassroots", Black Panther Party icon Malcolm X stated that "Revolution is based on land. Land is the basis of all independence. Land is the basis of freedom, justice, and equality", grounding the whole of the Black Panther Party's work in the land (1963).

The Movement for Black Lives (MBL) policy platform, released on August 1, 2016, is a comprehensive vision for liberation created by over fifty black community organizations, including the Black Lives Matter network (MBL 2016a). One of the sub-platforms specifically addresses the need for food justice; it calls for "reparations for the wealth extracted from our communities through environmental racism, slavery, food apartheid, housing discrimination and racialized capitalism in the form of corporate and government reparations focused on healing ongoing physical and mental trauma, and ensuring our access and control of food sources, housing and land" (MBL 2016b). Like freedom farms and breakfast programs, this policy platform rejects the current inadequate and oppressive food system, asserts the value of the black community, and demands a reclamation of power.

ANALYSIS

To explore how collective liberation and racial justice manifest in food work in Louisville, Kentucky, I interviewed New Roots Executive Director, Mercer; Louisville Grows Director of Urban Agriculture, Smith; and one of the founders of the Louisville Food Cooperative, Howard. In interviewing these leaders, I explored the impact of each organization on the community, the leader's positionality within the organization, and their

concept of collective liberation in relation to their work. For a full list of questions, reference the appendix. The content of these interviews provides a significant insight into local food justice work, which is largely community driven, intentional, and empowering. I have divided this section into seven core overlapping themes extrapolated from these first-hand accounts: power to the people, intentional inclusivity as resistance to exclusivity, leveraging privileged people, choice is a privilege...to our liberation or demise?, system failures bring momentum to the movement, are some foods more liberatory than others?, and beyond food and toward collective success.

It is important to note that all three leaders interviewed are women, two of whom are white, which is crucial to explore considering the discussion in the theoretical framework surrounding race in food justice work. Smith⁴ recognizes her whiteness when prompted, but she does not expand upon it in the interview (although it must be noted that I did not explicitly ask any of the interviewees to do so). While Mercer⁵ never explicitly states her whiteness, which can be problematic in performing racial justice work since lack of acknowledgement of race exemplifies colorblind racism, she does recognize her privilege stating that “black leaders created this...I’m just sometimes along for the ride. Sometimes I am more in the creation because...I have that luxury and privilege to see the bigger picture” (K. Mercer, *New Roots*, 2017). All three leaders described their role as one of facilitation and capacity building. Smith, who “spend[s] [her] days teaching other people how to farm and [she doesn’t] do anything alone,” defines her role as directing and connecting others (W. Smith, *Louisville Grows*, 2017). Mercer describes herself as a natural networker and organizer “looking for leader sparks” in the community to bring more people into the work

⁴ I utilized pseudonyms for the interview subjects.

⁵ pseudonym

and expand the organization (K. Mercer, New Roots, 2017). Additionally, Mercer identifies as a first responder whose role is to utilize her privilege to challenge the bureaucracies that hinder expansion of the Fresh Stop Market movement. This position is important for white people to adopt in addressing instances of racism and discrimination against people of color if communities of color seek white involvement. Howard⁶ is both a leader and organizer who is “sensitive to the needs of the community” and is therefore intentional in her work, recognizing that as a woman of color in this position, she holds a lot of power and feels a duty to “do good by people” (C. Howard, Louisville Food Cooperative, 2017).

Power to the People

Prioritizing community leadership and ownership of projects and empowering community members is a core piece of the work of these organizations. Both Mercer and Smith asserted that their organizations do not come into communities attempting to “save everybody” but rather only enter communities into which they are invited and then provide the necessary resources and support for the projects to succeed (K. Mercer, New Roots, 2017). Aside from promoting programs through general word of mouth, Louisville Grows engages with strategic partners for targeted outreach to people in need, and New Roots’ black leaders intentionally inform neighboring communities about the Fresh Stop Market movement. Mercer notes, however, that outreach is a challenge due to an insufficient marketing budget and lack of media coverage. Regardless, the community remains at the forefront of these organizations’ work. Smith emphasizes that “everything we do is owned by the community, is engaging the community from Day 1” and “no staff person makes decisions for a community” (W. Smith, Louisville Grows, 2017). Mercer also emphasizes

⁶ pseudonym

this ownership by discussing the leaders and leadership structure of the Fresh Stop Market movement. Markets are run by the community, and the community determines who comprises the leadership teams based on the needs of the community. For example, a transportation leader position was recently created to assist shareholders within the neighborhood to get to the market because community members realized that transportation was a barrier to some individuals' participation in the movement. Furthermore, leadership continually communicates with and provides mentorship to other markets to ensure collective success. Building from that community organizing work, the Louisville Food Cooperative is only considering building the grocery store in neighborhoods that have Fresh Stop Markets because those are communities that have a need, are already participating in cooperative economics, and have room for growth.

The Louisville Food Cooperative is prioritizing community voices and promoting community ownership of the cooperative through an electronic and paper survey and monthly public neighborhood meetings. They are working to empower anyone interested in the project or living in the target neighborhoods to get involved in any way they can. Howard especially wants to engage “people who have vision but never really thought that their vision would be...cultivated” and create a space where the community's input is taken seriously. Once the community believes that their voice matters, Howard hopes that people will realize that collective power can then lead to personal motivation and liberation. Similarly, black leaders and low income white leaders of the Fresh Stop Market movement have had unique and empowering opportunities to develop their leadership and spread the Fresh Stop Market movement around the country: speaking at local churches, being interviewed on radio and TV, speaking at universities and conferences, serving on an

international board, and just carrying out the everyday community organizing pieces of building the movement. A large part of that movement building, according to Smith, is creating community capacity, so “if you find yourself mulching a tree, you very well should just go inside...start making those phone calls...and tomorrow you better have a team with you mulching the tree” (W. Smith, Louisville Grows, 2017). Coupled with that is creating educational materials and opportunities to leverage more people who can do this work. Louisville Grows, which holds Citizen Forester and Citizen Gardener trainings, has released a community garden toolkit that guides people in getting involved with and starting a community garden, and awards a \$1,000 grant to anyone seeking to start or expand a community garden in their neighborhood.

Intentional Inclusivity as Resistance to Exclusivity

These projects and programs promote inclusive spaces for everyone in contrast to the exclusive spaces of the white alternative food movement. This inclusivity is displayed plainly in Louisville Grows’ commitment to providing service to anyone who asks for it and the Louisville Food Cooperative’s efforts to gain input and involvement from anyone and everyone in the community. However, these alone do not challenge this institutionalized exclusion of both the mainstream food system and white alternative food spaces against disenfranchised individuals. These food justice organizations *actively resist* exclusionary practices and structures by 1) inviting to the figurative table and creating spaces for specific groups of people that have traditionally been excluded, and 2) *intentionally* providing for the needs of those groups *because* they have been excluded.

To the first point, Smith recognizes that refugees, elders, and children are disenfranchised across race, income level, etc., and she proclaims that while they are typically excluded from

American culture and/or the societal expectation to work, “a garden space is a place where all of these people can be engaged” (W. Smith, Louisville Grows, 2017). Similarly, New Roots is expanding their engagement not only to other urban areas across the country, but to rural communities as well, which counters the myth that food access issues are attached to the city and resists the narrative that activism and organizing only occurs in urban areas. As important as it is to invite people to a space, it can be equally important to remove others from that space. Mercer recounted a situation in which the white leader of the Shively (predominately white neighborhood) Fresh Stop Market was being racist toward other Fresh Stop Market leaders and the people they represent by refusing to participate in a joint newsletter, utilizing othering language, and generalizing crime to West Louisville, but the black leaders challenged her and did so with what Mercer calls, inclusive language. New Roots then stopped providing support to that market, and the community started a new market in Shively – this is an important illustration of anti-racist practice in the food movement.

To the second point, each of the three organizations are resisting structures that have been and continue to be exclusive by providing a need to those who have been excluded. Typically, a cooperative grocery is seen as an exclusive space that sells expensive organic foods to white shoppers who have the means to buy them, but leaders of the Louisville Food Cooperative are committed to creating a business model that allows for the store to supply organic and sustainable products while “making it possible that people at any price point are able to shop at [the] store and get the things that they need” (C. Howard, Louisville Food Cooperative, 2017). Likewise, community gardens are traditionally designed for people who have the time and the means to garden, which often translates to financially secure white

people who do not need to rely on that garden for food. While Louisville Grows strives to help individuals utilize space to become economically viable, whether making “money to get food or grow[ing] the food to get money”, the organization understands that community gardens are not the solution for people with an immediate need but rather a long-term goal (W. Smith, Louisville Grow, 2017). That recognition is revolutionary in and of itself. To provide the service that these individuals need, Louisville Grows relies on partnerships with food banks and other nonprofits. In addition, drawing from her experience as a former farmer’s market founder and manager and current occasional shopper, Mercer expands upon the limitations of the farmer’s market, noting that the products are expensive, attempting to double SNAP benefits is not helpful because many of the markets are located in higher income areas, and her experience has been intimidating and awkward because it is a competition for the shopper’s support. Conversely, Mercer describes Fresh Stop Markets as liberating because the food is paid for ahead of time, the sliding scale method eliminates the income gap barrier, shareholders have access to the same food that is at the farmer’s market, and it is a welcoming environment where “you just come and be a part of it and you’re with your buddies and you meet new people” (K. Mercer, New Roots, 2017).

Leveraging Privileged People

While all three leaders interviewed recognize that much of their organizations’ work is done in and led by residents of lower income neighborhoods of color, they mentioned ways in which their organization explicitly leverages the power and support of more privileged people. The Louisville Food Cooperative hopes to capture the buying power of “highly educated white people who have choices about the food that they have” and has already seen support from that demographic at community meetings where they are showing up because

they recognize the need to address food access issues. Similarly, Fresh Stop Market movement leaders “have purposefully recruited higher income shareholders not only to add money to the pot but to add diversity to the pot and start building a movement of allies and desegregate the city,” which is an incredibly powerful approach (K. Mercer, New Roots, 2017). Smith mentioned that Louisville Grows’ various workshops attract many residents from the East End of the city to attend, but she did not explicitly discuss what the retention looks like for engaging that privileged demographic as future volunteers, donors, etc. Beyond engaging privileged individuals, the Louisville Food Cooperative is actively working to get a financial commitment from the Louisville Metro Government to support the project. Howard notes that while many government officials are verbally supportive of the cooperative, because the project is not standard and “our power is people power” rather than money, many other officials “don’t get it” (C. Howard, New Roots, 2017). The group specifically is working with council members and economic development officials to add a line item in the city budget for both the cooperative grocery and the Fresh Stop Markets.

Choice is a Privilege...to Our Liberation or Demise?

Whether choice is liberatory depends on who is given choice and who creates that choice. Those shopping at (white-led and exclusionary) farmer’s markets and cooperative grocery stores are typically white people who hold the privilege of having choices about their food – that choice exists because of their privilege. Conventional grocery stores are more unstable due to the diversity of options for each product; the greater the diversity, the more customers spending more money is needed to keep the store in business. Smith challenges this by

asking “how much choice [do people need] and is that amount of choice destroying our options to have food at all?” (W. Smith, Louisville Grows, 2017).

In those cases, it is society and the grocery store that creates the choice, but choice can be liberatory when the community or an individual has the power to create choice rather than only receive it. Black leaders of the Fresh Stop Market movement “have the power to make the decision on what [their] community eats.” Creating this choice is particularly powerful because it is often that these communities are left without that power at the will of conventional grocery stores. (K. Mercer, New Roots, 2017). Howard asked a member of a worker’s cooperative about her experience, and her response was that the cooperative “allows me to have input on what I buy and what choices I have and so that within itself is liberating,” which is particularly empowering about belonging to a cooperative instead of shopping at a conventional grocery store (C. Howard, Louisville Food Cooperative, 2017).

System Failures Bring Momentum to the Movement

Following several other grocery store closings in the West End and downtown, the Second Street Kroger in Old Louisville closed in January, leaving residents in that area (many of whom are seniors and other people with limited mobility) with even less access to food. When conventional grocery stores look at neighborhoods like the ones being considered for the cooperative grocery,

they usually say that the neighborhood is too black, too poor, too uneducated for them to open a business there. But we know that people eat. They may not be spending their money in their neighborhood, on crappy food, but just because people are poor doesn’t mean they don’t have the resources to eat (C. Howard, Louisville Food Cooperative, 2017).

Furthermore, attempts to bring new conventional grocery stores into communities “hasn’t necessarily yielded outcomes that community wants” (C. Howard, Louisville Food Cooperative, 2017).

This grocery store closing has increased interest among community members in these alternative food projects. Leaders of the Louisville Food Cooperative feel a sense of urgency to complete the project, and more people are following their work. Similarly, Louisville Grows received an influx of people in the neighborhood asking how to start community gardens. However, leaders within the Fresh Stop Market movement expected the Kroger to close but were ignored when they expressed that concern. While community interest in the Fresh Stop Market movement has not necessarily increased because of the closing (perhaps because there is already a market in Old Louisville), leaders nevertheless persist in their work.

While this increase in momentum is positive for alternative food systems, it cannot be ignored that this momentum arises out of necessity, not unimpeded desire for change. In these situations, residents of these communities are looking toward alternative food projects perhaps for long-term sustainable solutions, but that does not solve the immediate need. According to Smith, Louisville Grows relies on partnerships with organizations such as food banks to provide immediate services to people with an immediate need. However, as Smith notes about community gardens, food banks, too, are “not the same as walking down the street and going to Kroger” in terms of services and accessibility (W. Smith, Louisville Grows, 2017). Moreover, she admits that although corporations like Dollar General are taking advantage of low income communities, those stores may be the only access to groceries that people have nearby their homes, and are, therefore, filling that need. If

privileged leaders of alternative food spaces expect residents of limited food access neighborhoods to fully embrace the alternative and reject the current system while these leaders continue to take advantage of their comfortable access to affordable, fresh, healthy food at an easily accessible grocery store, they are in no way building a liberatory food system. Food justice organizations must not utilize their work in poor, black communities as an experiment for innovative food practices that challenge the system because this only continues to elevate privileged white food spaces and exacerbate socio-spatial issues of food and race.

Are Some Foods More Liberatory Than Others?

When discussing food and collective liberation, there arises the question of whether particular kinds of food are more liberatory than others. According to the leaders interviewed from New Roots, Louisville Grows, and the Louisville Food Cooperative, organic food, above others, exists in these organizations' visions of liberatory food systems. Mercer emphasizes that unhealthy fried food is causing chronic illness in the communities she works in, but organic foods, on the other hand, are revolutionary. Smith recognizes that people do not need to be eating healthy all the time, and they can choose daily to eat the homegrown apple over the donut. Likewise, Howard wants the food sold in the cooperative grocery to be as sustainable and organic as possible but recognizes that conventional foods will also need to be sold.

Beyond Food and Toward Collective Success

Food movement work is beyond food. As Mercer explains, community building "is the real core. The food is almost like a side project in a way, it's not, but it is about building a movement and being together and building power, and we need food to do that" (K. Mercer,

New Roots, 2017). Food is a vehicle through which other systemic issues can and must be addressed, like redlining, violence, education, disinvestment, housing, crime, fair wages, etc., which have caused and have resulted from food access issues. Since these issues are interconnected in a feedback loop, food access issues cannot be solved if food is the only focus and a holistic, “long-term sustainability approach” is not adopted (W. Smith, Louisville Grows, 2017). Food justice workshops are an integral part of New Roots’ work because without that foundation to position one’s thinking and understanding about why and how the work needs to be done, the work can be harmful, invasive, extractive, and not result in justice for the community.

Furthermore, one person or organization can produce a ripple of impacts for a community and “your success as an individual is directly tied to the success of your neighbors...if the West End doesn’t do well, the East End won’t do well” (W. Smith, Louisville Grows, 2017). When people realize their collective power, they can direct “their collective energy beyond the co-op” to tackle other issues and envision the possible for their community (C. Howard, Louisville Food Cooperative, 2017). Mercer asserts that the Fresh Stop Market movement is the backbone of the food movement because the collective power of “a community of mostly limited resource families making a commitment to farmers six months in advance” benefits not only those involved in the Fresh Stop Market movement but also benefits farmer’s markets (K. Mercer, New Roots, 2017). With that commitment, farmers have the capacity and support to grow organic food for the entire community. Smith and Howard both mentioned the Fresh Stop Market movement having influenced their work, which only supports the argument that the Fresh Stop Market movement is integral to all food movement work in Louisville.

STUDY LIMITATIONS

Limitations of this study must be considered when interpreting this research. First, this research topic is complex and this platform as an undergraduate thesis cannot fully explore all aspects of working toward collective liberation and framing food movement work with racial justice. As a full-time student conducting an unfunded study on an eight-month timeline, my time and resources were limited, and I did not have the capacity to become involved in the organizations' work in a meaningful way, which limited the depth of my research. Additionally, interviewing only one person per organization and not coupling the interviews with field observation makes it difficult to distinguish between personal views and organizational views because one person, even a core leader, cannot speak for an entire organization or community. This also makes it difficult to evaluate the dynamics of whiteness and blackness in each organization and assess whether their work is truly practicing anti-racism.

To further this research, I would become involved in each organization to directly contribute to their work instead of observing from the outside; interview more than one leader per organization, including the perspectives of shareholders, volunteers, farmers, board members, community leaders, committee members, gardeners, additional staff members, etc.; explore additional food justice organizations in other areas of the country; and review additional literature surrounding cooperative economics and the application of anti-racist practice in the work of organizations.

CONCLUSION

The failure of both the conventional food system and white alternatives to recognize the inherent racialization of our food system only perpetuates racial inequities. Grassroots food

justice work that centers anti-racist practice is therefore necessary in constructing liberatory alternatives. From interviews with core leaders of New Roots, Louisville Grows, and the Louisville Food Cooperative, I have determined that these organizations actively resist oppressive systems, center marginalized voices and prioritize community ownership, leverage the power of privileged people, and emphasize relationship building through their work. This reflects several key aspects of collective liberation as defined by drawing from case studies of alternative food organizations; as well as queer black feminist, civil rights, environmental justice, and black power organizations. This research has reinforced my understanding that taking leadership from marginalized communities and building power are integral pieces of collective liberation. I have discovered that there is no one definition that I can extrapolate from this research and apply to all food systems because collective liberation is a dynamic state rather than a static destination. Furthermore, New Roots, Louisville Grows, and the Louisville Food Cooperative embrace Guthman's position that activism needs to focus on underlying injustices rather than food itself. Rooted in the foundations of these organizations' work is the acknowledgement that working toward collective liberation is beyond food.

Food serves as a unifier around which we can build power within communities to resist oppression and be liberated collectively – all people in all aspects of life. Despite this perspective, due to the relatively narrow depth of my research methods, I am unable to determine if a specific focus on anti-racism is pervasive in each organization's work, though it can be implied. I can, however, argue that these organizations are radically reconstructing the dynamics of our food systems. Together, they influence the spatial politics of Louisville

food systems and are sowing the seeds of collective liberation while edging closer to a liberatory food system.

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APPENDIX

Interview Questions

1. Could you tell me about your organization and your role in it? Why are you a part of this organization?
2. In what ways and to what extent do you feel that your organization/project impacts the community?
3. What is the significance, if any, of where your organization is located or where its reach extends?
4. Who is your target population?
5. What, if any, connection do you see between people of color and food access?
6. Do you believe that people of color, particularly black people, experience food violence? How so?
7. What is your understanding of collective liberation? How do you define it?
8. What do you understand your role to be in collective liberation?
9. Do you feel that your organization is working toward collective liberation? If not, why not? If yes, how so?
10. Do you believe that you and your organization should be working toward collective liberation?
11. Demographics:
 - a. What is your neighborhood of residence?
 - b. What is your race?
 - c. What is your gender?
 - d. What is your age?
 - e. What is your income level (i.e. affluent class, middle class, working class)?