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Rethinking Food System Transformation

Second Edition

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Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| Introduction to the Symposium: Rethinking Food System Transformation—Food Sovereignty, Agroecology, Food Justice, Community Action and Scholarship | 1 |
| T. L. Pendergrast, Bobby J. Smith, Jeffrey A. Liebert, and Rachel Bezner Kerr | |
| Food Justice, Intersectional Agriculture, and the Triple Food Movement | 7 |
| Bobby J. Smith II | |
| Pockets of Peasantness: Small-Scale Agricultural Producers in the Central Finger Lakes Region of Upstate New York | 19 |
| Johann Strube | |
| Action Research on Organizational Change with the Food Bank of the Southern Tier: A Regional Food Bank’s Efforts to move beyond Charity | 31 |
| Alicia Swords | |
| Gardens and Green Spaces: Placemaking and Black Entrepreneurialism in Cleveland, Ohio | 49 |
| Justine Lindemann | |
| Participatory Plant Breeding and Social Change in the Midwestern United States: Perspectives from the Seed to Kitchen Collaborative | 61 |
| G. K. Healy and J. C. Dawson | |
| To Save the Bees or not to Save the Bees: Honey Bee Health in the Anthropocene | 73 |
| Eleanor Andrews | |



Introduction to the symposium: rethinking food system transformation—food sovereignty, agroecology, food justice, community action and scholarship

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Within the last decade, there has been a growing interest in merging community-based knowledge with scholarly voices to understand how food systems can be used to create or maintain sustainable, just models of social change (Alkon and Agyeman 2011; Millner 2017; Schipanski et al. 2016). As an example of such efforts, Patricia Allen's (2008) publication in this journal, "Mining for Justice in the Food System: perceptions, practices, and possibilities," marked an important scholarly call-to-action and mapped out ways academics could have an active role in shaping a more "diverse agrifood system that embraces the discourse of social justice" (p. 157). According to Allen, educators can help students explore, understand, and de-naturalize the root causes of persistent food inequalities related to production and consumption; researchers can craft participatory projects on food issues; and scholars can work to inspire improved policy and practice (Allen 2008, p. 160). Allen's hopeful piece presented issues as opportunities and systemic ills as possibilities for new strategic alliances within academia and between researchers and non-academics. In the 10 years since Allen's piece, much more scholarship on the subjects connected to food justice, food sovereignty, equity

in agriculture, and agri-food system problems has emerged, and examples of creative strategies for reform are widely evident (Alkon and Agyeman 2011; Holt-Giménez and Shattuck 2011; Holt-Giménez and Wang 2011; Heynen et al. 2012; Clendenning et al. 2016).

Looking back on the last decade of scholarship and on the words of Allen (2008) in particular, we see that the authors of this symposium ask: What are different advocates, stakeholders, growers, and community members today "mining for" when it comes to justice, action, and transformation in the agri-food system? The research conducted by the scholars in this symposium reflects the diverse range of approaches scientists have taken to investigate this aforementioned question. The papers also come out of a conference, detailed below, that represented a combined effort to creatively educate, share, and connect work being done by stakeholders. Reviewing the origin story of this conference not only supplies more context for the content of the papers that follow, but this story also details how these pieces were presented to non-academics to connect research meaningfully to community.

The 2017 *Farm-to-Plate: Uniting for a Just and Sustainable Food System* conference in Ithaca, New York, was in many ways exemplary of Allen's call to "foreground and work towards social justice in the food system" (Allen 2008, p. 157). This conference grew out of visions from and exchanges between Damon Brangman, a local Ithacan farmer, staff at the Groundswell Center for Local Food and Farming, Rachel Bezner Kerr, Professor in the Department of Development Sociology and Noliwe Rooks, Professor in Africana Studies, both at Cornell University. Thus, from the beginning, the conference included a range of perspectives and leadership from community members, small-scale growers, nonprofit sector advocates, and academics. However, the subsequent planning process was by no means easy: different concepts of the conference's purpose, who should be included and how, the scope of the event, and

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other aspects became subjects of long deliberation and, at times, friction. The planning committee meetings revealed the tensions within different food system-oriented entities in Ithaca and the perceived divisions between groups in town and the university across racial, gender, and class lines. The planning sessions often shifted into discussions about power, inclusion, and equity, as experienced by different committee members. The careful process of putting together the conference's logistics and elements echoed a desire to bridge divides between academics and non-academics.

Despite some frictions stemming from intersecting issues and interests, the conference was widely considered a success by the various partners who planned it as well as by the attendees. The opening night highlighted some of the key focal points of the event by bringing together a panel of Black food justice activists, including Jamila Simon, Rafael Aponte, Malik Yakini, and Karen Washington. These activists commented on a range of observations from their advocacy, for example noting that we need to ensure that food justice projects are led by the marginalized themselves and that power relations between academics and community members continue to be a point of concern warranting attention. These conversations on power relations and transformative possibilities continued at the next morning's events. Breakout sessions and workshops brought together farmers, small business owners and academics for public dialogue about the struggle to use ecological and social justice principles in their work.

The keynotes by Raj Patel and Malik Yakini amplified these aforementioned themes in the context of food sovereignty. Each speaker emphasized the need to acknowledge connections between current inequalities in the food system and past injustices in order to truly build food system transformation. Workshops, presentations, field trips, and small group discussions followed these presentations, allowing for fruitful dialogue, exchange, and learning amongst a diverse group of local community members, activists, farmers, academics, students, and non-profit organizations. Reflections from attendees highlighted the unusual mix of intellectual, practical and activist orientations that permeated the event (see <https://groundswellcenter.org/farm-to-plate-conference-re-cap/for> more information on the conference).

The intellectual foci of the papers in this symposium mirror these orientations and considerations of the Farm-to-Plate conference itself. They illuminate the challenges of community conversations on food system transformations and the potential of inclusive discussions on food justice to break new ground in thinking, in community action, and, importantly, in scholarship. Although several of the papers recognize the merit of community-centered models as opposed to large-scale industrial ones, the authors featured here attempt to avoid the trap of reductionism and essentialization in their focus on local communities. Instead,

these papers underscore the complexity of the communities being analyzed in case studies, from the groups of people of color involved in re-imagining spaces in post-industrial landscapes to the networks of queer farmers creating new possibilities for themselves or others. In this way, each paper in this symposium contributes to a larger understanding of farm-to-plate relations at the nexus of locality, social movement activism and coalition-building, and food system participation and transformation.

Symposium contributions

The contributions of this symposium examine farm-to-plate relations as an effort to deepen our understanding of food system alternatives by exploring the narratives and models seeking to address unsustainable food production and the injustice and inequality that result. While some of papers consider the various means of fostering agroecological production methods within a social justice context, others focus on knowledge creation and the role of experts when faced with concerns about food sovereignty, food justice, and control over resources. Together, these papers explore the possibilities, connectedness, and differences between movements and practices linked to food justice, food sovereignty, and agroecology. Concepts such as *food justice* and *food sovereignty* have arisen out of social movements, both as a critique of the dominant agri-food system (Alkon 2014; Clendenning et al. 2016) and as a way forward to create a sustainable and equitable food system. Food justice, built on earlier environmental justice scholarship, examines the ways in which systemic racism and class inequalities shape access and control over healthy, sustainable food supplies with its origins and focus largely in the urban United States (Alkon and Agyeman 2011; Clendenning et al. 2016). In contrast, food sovereignty arose from rural social movements, and is more broadly focused on shifting political control of the food system away from the highly concentrated agri-food industry back into both producers and eaters' hands (Wittman et al. 2010). As an alternative approach to farming, agroecological management attempts to mimic natural systems through energy, soil, and water conservation, increasing biodiversity, and leveraging ecological relationships among crops and other organisms across spatial scales (Gliessman 2015). Although many scholars continue to describe agroecology in narrow terms, a more comprehensive understanding of the concept—one in which sociopolitical and cultural dimensions are explicit and indivisible from the ecological aspects—has increasingly been intertwined with food justice and food sovereignty approaches in more recent years (Méndez et al. 2013; Holt-Giménez and Altieri 2013). Recent scholarship has

argued that *transformative agroecology* uses participatory action research that draws on local and indigenous knowledge, and addresses social inequalities within the food system (Méndez et al. 2013). Yet, there is limited research to date on bringing these different approaches—food justice, food sovereignty, and agroecology—together in spaces that integrate scholarship with action (Brent et al. 2015). Thus, an underlying goal of this symposium is to begin to address this gap, with a series of papers focused on the galvanization of local and regional food system transformation using food justice, food sovereignty, and agroecology concepts together with participatory, action-oriented, community-centered research.

Bobby J. Smith II, in “Food Justice, Intersectional Agriculture, and the Triple Food Movement,” challenges another perception of similarity across a form of community, one that presupposes LGBTQ communities are predominantly affluent and food-secure (2017, p. 20, cf Brown et al. 2016, p. 2). To do this, he uses food justice documents to situate how eco-queer farming reveals overlapping vulnerabilities of poverty, discrimination, and lack of access to institutions. These concerns of LGBTQ food producers are both unique in some ways and run parallel with those of other struggles, such as black farmers addressing the food needs of low-income people and people of color in urban areas. Smith in turn considers the similarities and intersections between these two struggles in terms of approaches to activism. He sees and offers what he coins “intersectional agriculture” as needed to combat systems of domination that marginalize particular experiences. Intersectional agriculture, to Smith, maintains that “simultaneously addressing food issues and structures of inequality such as racism, classism, or sexism” is critical to agri-food system reformation.

Eleanor Andrews, in “To Save the Bees or Not Save the Bees: Honey Bee Health in the Anthropocene,” explores how upstate New York beekeepers produce knowledge and make sense of what constitutes sustainability in their management of bees. She argues that the framework of the ‘anthropocene,’ a term for a geological age marked by human influence on environmental systems, is helpful for understanding the dilemmas beekeepers face when it comes to their work with bees. Her qualitative research explores ideas of what qualifies beekeeping practices as natural, commercialized, community-oriented, or innovative to those who work with bees. Her interviews reveal a world of entanglement: one in which a form of human–environment interaction defies simple binaries like traditional/modern and wild/domesticated. In her consideration of research like Tony Weis’ (2013) work on systemic effects for species, Andrews wonders about the bee as a representative of the complexities of the Anthropocene; these creatures are managed by humans and in turn shape us tremendously. Andrews explores the data on honey bee health and the debates about population crises,

but ultimately her focus takes readers to the community of bee-keepers themselves and the kinds of knowledge they draw on, refine, and re-make for a changing environment.

Justine Lindemann, in “Gardens and Green Spaces: Placemaking through Arts, Food, and Culture in Cleveland, OH,” interrogates how conventional community development models have tended to “focus on singular problems such as unemployment or malnutrition” versus the interplay of needs within the arts, culture, entrepreneurship, equity, and food production. She argues that this interplay could enhance how communities make sense of place-making, rather than relying on the conventional single-focus community development models that do not adequately address broader systems of oppression. Lindemann unravels the ‘participation-as-buy-in paradigm’ that many community development models employ by examining what she terms ‘needs-only’ perspectives. Projects that address housing attainment, food, employment, and access to healthcare are all important, she argues, but many of these operate from a survivalist mentality rather than a consideration of the means to thrive. The difference between surviving and thriving might lie, in part, in types of participation: Lindemann suggests that resident-driven models of community development include participation in culturally-meaningful projects of reclaiming place.

Johann Strube’s piece, “Pockets of Peasantness: small-scale agricultural producers in the central Finger Lakes region of Upstate New York,” shows through qualitative research that non-market agricultural subsistence work—or ‘peasant’ production—is not merely an antiquated practice or a reality restricted to the Global South. Rather, peasant forms of agricultural production are visible in ‘pockets’ enmeshed with capitalist market forms. The documentation and exploration of these pockets of peasantness has theoretical implications. In terms of theory-building, such spaces contrast with conceptual frameworks of the dualist nature of production, either capitalist or peasant/non-capitalist. These ‘pockets of peasantness’ support Van der Ploeg’s (2008) suggestion that models of farming can allow for both modes and that peasantry itself is more than a population; peasantry includes associations of values and behaviors as well. Strube uses a case study of upstate New York small-scale farms to demonstrate Van der Ploeg’s reconceptualization of what peasant conditions look like, providing evidence that while farmers are embedded in capitalist modes, they also grow alternatives to capitalist production alongside their market-based work. This case study gives voice to growers in upstate New York, especially those frustrated by market-related challenges, and provides stories of ways collectivity can retain vibrancy even if the capitalist model is not wholly upended.

Grace Healy and Julie Dawson’s work, “Participatory plant breeding and social change in the Midwestern United