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Food Injustice in Poughkeepsie

The Creation of and Challenges to Oppressive Food Structures

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Abstract

According to a 2012 study by Poughkeepsie Plenty, one in four residents of the City of Poughkeepsie are classified as “food insecure”. This statistic is often presented as a major problem – in this case, the vast array of food injustices that burden City of Poughkeepsie residents. A good representation of food consumption is often quantitative, constructed by rigorous counting, measuring, defining, and evaluating a population. Many studies on “food insecurity” and “food deserts” (such as the 2012 Poughkeepsie Plenty study) illustrate symptoms of food injustices quite helpfully. Poughkeepsie food justice organizations have used such representations to justify and support their work. However, these representations have two drawbacks. First, these representations can become caricatures that lack necessary context. Without context, the true severity of injustices can be radically understated. Second, such representations can undermine the agency of the subjects. Those facing barriers to food access can be portrayed, and subsequently treated, as though they are helpless and desperate when they are not. “Embeddedness” provides the opportunity to resist both dangers at once. Food institutions with residents “embedded” into their infrastructure set up the possibility for multi-racial, cross-class alliances to address the root of food injustices. While food infrastructure in City of Poughkeepsie is currently unjust, it includes some aspects of existing “embeddedness” and many other possibilities for further “embeddedness.”

Chapter 1

Children and Food in City of Poughkeepsie

I have worked as an education intern for Poughkeepsie Farm Project since the beginning of my junior year (part time for my junior and senior school years; and full time the in between summer). I am an educator for local students on food related projects, lessons, and activities. Over the past few years, I have become far more attuned to the nuances of local school systems. My experience with local students revealed to me a distinct injustice in City of Poughkeepsie: City of Poughkeepsie residents are unfairly limited in their food options. When I work with any given group of students from one of the four City of Poughkeepsie elementary schools, the kids rarely have already established, positive relationships with food. It is rare, for example, to work with a student that already likes vegetables and is excited to taste them. Instead, when we work with City of Poughkeepsie students, we often have obstacles: we have had students that say “ew” when we hold up vegetables; we have had students who do not have regular access to a variety of fresh fruits and vegetables at home (for a number of reasons); we even have issues with the bus system (for example when an entire class missed their trip because the bus never showed up); we have worked with families who may not be able to prioritize cooking – who maybe never have had the opportunity to focus on their food choices. In short, most of the students we work with rarely have opportunities to learn how food is farmed, transported, processed, bought, sold, and cooked.

Contrast this with visits from Poughkeepsie Day School, a private school in the Town of Poughkeepsie (a much whiter and more affluent residential area). Many of these elementary students demonstrate an impressive set of food related knowledge. From talking to the students, teachers, and parents, I know Poughkeepsie Day School has a school garden, many of the students have gardens in their backyard, and most students

regularly visit other farms. These students are very likely to taste our fresh vegetable recipes, and most often, enjoy it – many of them have clearly been have been taught to prepare and enjoy healthy food at home. Not only is it clear that these students, and likely their families, have healthier diets, they also have a better understanding of how to be healthy and why it is important.

Meanwhile, City of Poughkeepsie students and their families (as I explained above) have far more obstacles in the way of a healthy diet and a positive relationship to healthy food¹. The former injustice has the immediate impacts of hunger, vulnerability to sickness, and poor performance in school (to name a few); the latter injustice, if left unchecked, will continue to prevent City of Poughkeepsie residents from making positive food choices far beyond their graduation. It might, for example, prevent them from making healthy food choices, understanding the food system, and knowing about available food options. The only way I have come to understand the extent of these injustices injustice is by interacting with City of Poughkeepsie residents and focusing on their experiences.

There is another lesson I have learned from working with City of Poughkeepsie children over the past two years: adaptability. To be a better educator, I have had to adapt to the particular needs of each group of children I work with. Much of my teaching experience has been dependent upon developing this skill. When I have focused primarily on conveying information, I have not been as effective. This makes sense because the value of our work is not a transfer of information. The education team at

¹ For now, I will define a “positive” relationship to food as, among other things, being open to trying foods, eating a variety of foods, eating fruits and vegetables, having a good body image, knowing how food is produced, and being grateful to food producers. I expand on this discussion in Chapter 4.

Poughkeepsie Farm Project is successful when they are able to adapt to the obstacles facing. In other words, educators strive to create an educational experience *with* them, not *for* them.

I share these personal insights because they are representative of larger trends within food justice work. Some food scholarship underestimates agency of individuals by losing sight of their lived experience. Other scholarship promotes oppressive neo-liberal structures, stopping short of a broader structural critique. Academics must “center” the voices of marginalized people to fill these gaps. I borrow the term “center” from Light Carruyo’s book *Producing Knowledge, Protecting Forests*, in which Carruyo aims to “center” local Dominican voices in foreign-led, large-scale development projects. In this case, “centering” involves finding a “vocabulary to connect large structural processes to the ways in which people live, love, and labor” (Carruyo, 2012). Carruyo’s definition pulls in two directions. On the one hand, it requires a serious commitment to an analysis of suffering people. In my case, this means developing a vocabulary that fully describes the struggles of City of Poughkeepsie Residents. On the other hand it requires consideration of residents’ most personal desires and motivations. Incorporating the complexities of how residents “live, love, and labor,” requires structures through which city residents’ can express their opinions and to speak for themselves. This thesis will attempt to address the structural issues facing City of Poughkeepsie residents while recognizing and amplifying their ability to participate in alternatives.

“Food Insecurity” and City of Poughkeepsie’s Food System

A 2012 study by Poughkeepsie Plenty contains illustrative empirical evidence of some of specific injustices in the city. Poughkeepsie Plenty is an organization seeking “to transform the City of Poughkeepsie into a place where everyone can secure, prepare, enjoy and benefit from healthy food” (Nevarez et al, 2012). Their 2012 study focuses on a variety of criteria including hunger, household economic resources, and selection. It standardizes and measures these criteria in order to provide a somewhat comprehensive view of the primary issues of food access. For example, the study finds correlations between access to healthy food on the one hand, and household income, shopping habits, and transportation on the other. Among its findings are: over one in four households in City of Poughkeepsie are food insecure (11% with hunger); 60 % of households that earn \$15,000 or less annually experience food insecurity (32% with hunger); 37% of Hispanic residents and 36% of black residents experience food insecurity (22% and 12% with hunger, respectively); residents are extremely reliant on social programs to make food more affordable; and 44% of households that do not use a car to go grocery shopping are food insecure (22% with hunger) (Nevarez et al, 2012). The study points to income, ability to participate in social programs, race/ethnicity, and transportation options as heavily influential factors on individuals’ lived experiences.

Plenty of Structures, Little Agency

One of Poughkeepsie Plenty’s primary representations of injustices is “food insecurity.” The federal government defines food insecurity as “limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or limited or uncertain ability to

acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways” (Life Sciences Research Office, 1990). This concept is illustrative: it pinpoints the amount of residents who have measureable barriers to food access. It depends, however, on measurable *proof* that there is an unavailability of nutritionally adequate or socially acceptable food. Thus, the concept of “food insecurity” only includes quantifiable and measurable phenomena. It does not, for example, include the negative relationships with food some PCSD students have (as demonstrated above). Such omissions construct incomplete accounts of food injustice in City of Poughkeepsie.

People of color, for example, have a disproportionate correlation with food insecurity (36% black and 37% Hispanic compared to 19% white). However, the effect of race in City of Poughkeepsie’s food system cannot be boiled down to this discrepancy. In the United States racial constructions and policies of immigrant workers has rendered them powerless to contest poor treatment; housing practices have sorted populations by their race and allocated resources accordingly; and a trajectory of white supremacy continues to claim ownership (both symbolic and material) over the land and that which is produced by it (Gilson, 2015). These (and other) diverse racial issues have become heavily intertwined with issues of food access. It is often extremely difficult to quantitatively evaluate such deeply historical issues.

The material insufficiencies put forth by Poughkeepsie Plenty are merely a slice of the many injustices. They are symptomatic of larger, structural issues of race, ethnicity, and class that have been playing out for as long as people have lived in Poughkeepsie. That the City of Poughkeepsie has more low-income residents and more minorities, is no an accident; that it only has two full-size grocery stores is no accident;

that its transportation system is unreliable and not conducive to grocery shopping is no accident. Systemic forces have also produced hidden, harder to measure food injustices. Poughkeepsie Plenty's study could, therefore be complemented by extended structural analysis in some areas.

While it is important to continue developing structural analysis of the forces behind suffering, in some circumstances such analysis can happen at the expense of suffering communities' agency. Poughkeepsie Plenty's research study – with its reliance on quantifiable evidence – is *somewhat* removed from the voices of the residents. In the surveys, for example, residents were presented with a set number of options. There are no quotes, stories, or accounts from individual residents. Furthermore, the heavy use of demographic classification suggests an equation between individuals and their demographic category. Thus, subjects seem passive and one-dimensional, rather than active agents in the food system. This analysis, while insightful, should be supplemented by analyses that recognize and amplify the agency of residents.

Neo-liberalism Makes Matters Worse

These gaps in structural analyses and the collective agency of individuals are widened by neo-liberal assumptions. Neo-liberalism involves a de-politicization, individualization, and compartmentalization of structural issues. It treats structural injustices as problems of mere efficiency restricting possible solutions to the boundaries of the existing structures. It also de-politicizes the issues – recognizing only technical failures, rather than collective, structural failures. Finally, it places the burden of the problem with the individual – presuming that the injustices will be solved by better

decision-making on the part of oppressed individuals (Johnson, 2010; Guthman, 2006; Roff 2006).

If ideology of neo-liberalism successfully subdues critical analyses of market solutions, then neo-liberal rationalities are inscribed into our geography: economic, market ideology is built into our infrastructure; it guides our governance; and it is taught as the primary decision-making rationale (Gilson, 2015). Diminishing critical structural analysis in any form reduces communities' collective ability to make demands upon food systems. Especially important for food justice academics is that neo-liberalism creates a devastating misrepresentation of truth vis-à-vis the suppression of certain voices and ideas (Gilson, 2015).

Continued racism and classism in contemporary food justice work demonstrate the danger of neo-liberal spaces. Food justice advocates have a tendency to brush off the importance of critical racial analysis in addressing food injustices, reproducing racial hierarchies (Ramírez, 2014). “Alternative food” activists have demonstrated insensitivity to low-income tastes and needs, contributing to oppressive phenomena like gentrification (Anguelovski, 2015). Through these neo-liberal mechanisms white, upper class individuals often recreate a situation where they are the majority, the authorities, or those who set the parameters for the conversation.

This is how City of Poughkeepsie residents are continually marginalized: powerful people – white, upper class, nourished, and otherwise privileged people – make decisions on behalf of less powerful people. City of Poughkeepsie has many disempowered people: people of color, poor people, and immigrants. Thus, City of Poughkeepsie residents have many of their food choices made from a distance by non-

residents: agribusiness, large food corporations, packagers, and chain grocery stores, to name a few (Gilson, 2015).

Embeddedness: Agency and Community

Upon interacting with City of Poughkeepsie residents, two things became apparent to me. First the difficulties residents face became much clearer. Second, the power they have to fight oppression became undeniable. The managers at Casa Latina, Fresh Market, and Tropical Fresh (all city residents) have a tremendous amount of power over the City's food availability. In certain circumstances, they share this power with residents who, because of the grocery stores, have a greater autonomy over their food. City of Poughkeepsie food justice organizations also hold a considerable amount of power over City of Poughkeepsie food availability, variety, health, and quality. At times, these organizations also share this power with residents. When community members make coalitions with either grocery stores or organizations (or any other food-related institution) they demonstrate a surprising ability to make the most of strenuous circumstances. However, when residents do not have a share in the power to make decisions, they do not have the power to create a true justice in the food system.

The concept of "embeddedness" helps institutionalize the ideals of structural analysis and empowered agents in such a way that recognizes both the difficulties and the strengths of suffering populations. An "embedded" institution is one that is also governed by collective social goals rather than only individualistic, economic decisions; individuals have a higher capacity to express agency beyond individual consumptive agency. An "embedded" institution is responsive to the demands of individuals, making

decisions (at least in part) based on the desires of the people they represent. As such, “embeddedness” connects agency and structural critique, allowing them to complement one another.

Comprehensive “Food Justice”

Whatever the criteria, it is clear that City of Poughkeepsie residents live in an unjust food situation. With the recognition of such injustices many have begun to work under the banner of “food justice”. This thesis hopes to inspire discussion about what comprehensive food justice might look like in City of Poughkeepsie.

As an employee of Poughkeepsie Farm Project and a student writing a thesis on food injustice in Poughkeepsie, I have spent a considerable amount of time grappling with my participation in this discussion. Initially, I imagined the goal ultimately as a material one: to increase the community’s intake of healthy food. While it is extremely important to understand the material conditions restriction food access, it is not the entire story. To limit food justice work to mere nutrient intake is to deny the cultural context within which food is consumed. Material food insecurity is bound up in cultural practices that reinforce (and at times, contest) unhealthy food practices. City of Poughkeepsie residents face many more obstacles in securing healthy food than the Poughkeepsie Plenty study demonstrates. We cannot discuss material obstacles without the social and cultural context within which they operate. These factors can reinforce one another creating more pervasive injustices.

Based on this assessment, the reader might worry that I am vulnerable to the trap of despair. As sometimes happens, focusing only on the tremendous obstacles to an ideal

can overwhelm and subsequently prevent people from creating change. Therefore, I must point out the possibilities that this point of view creates. Rather than merely identifying a few central causes of food insecurity, I recognize the diffuse nature of the issue. City of Poughkeepsie residents actually navigate complex food options on a day-to-day basis. This recognition demonstrates that residents at least have some capacity to express agency in their food consumption. Approaching my research with this mindset, I have discovered many ways that residents of City of Poughkeepsie do in fact express agency in their food choices.

In discussing a particular “food system,” we must consider both the power of structural-material circumstances *and* the power of individuals, especially disenfranchised individuals within the system. From this point of view, there are a huge number of possibilities for change. City of Poughkeepsie’s food system relies on the constant participation of the residents and their ability to make demands upon the food infrastructure. There is a huge amount of latent potential in this participation to reconstruct a more just food system. Food justice advocates should be working primarily to unleash this potential. My analysis does not present food injustices as insurmountable. It does, however, hope to recognize the possibility for transformation toward food justice through systemic structural critique as well as through active, engaged residents.

Methods

This paper uses a variety of methods. Historical information will come from various archival sources including the Poughkeepsie Journal, oral history records, as well as more traditional academic sources. The 2012 study from Poughkeepsie Plenty

provides a trove of (relatively) up-to-date quantitative information, primarily with regard to material access to food. Other quantitative data, from sources such as census records, details helpful demographic data establish a baseline context. On top of these sources, I conducted a number of interviews with various residents and organizers in City of Poughkeepsie. I interviewed the managers of three City of Poughkeepsie grocery stores. I used interviews, supplemented by my personal experience, to investigate organizations including Poughkeepsie Farm Project, Poughkeepsie Plenty, Dutchess outreach, and the Mobile Market. Finally, I attended a community listening session about food and health issues for City of Poughkeepsie residents.

Linda McDowell encourages Geographers to approach their research critically, specifically with attentiveness to the subjects. She believes that ethical research requires establishing a trusting relationship. In other words, a researcher cannot just show up and expect to be able to do as they please; they need to negotiate and earn access to certain communities (Cloke, 2004). I did not have enough time or resources to establish a fully trusting relationship with residents of Poughkeepsie, given the issues I would want to discuss. Thus, my qualitative data is limited. This restriction highlights my inability to speak about comprehensive food justice. With such a limitation, I can only hope attempt to contribute to the possibility for such justice.

Chapter Overviews

Chapter two focuses on two troubling tendencies in food justice literature. One body of literature is pre-disposed to (oppressive) neo-liberal market activity. Another body is liable to ignore the agency of suffering individuals. Both of these tendencies

require restorative action on the part of food academics. Chapter 2 discusses how academics have come to promote these tendencies as well as possibilities for thinking beyond.

Chapter three presents local grocery stores as spaces where residents express agency in their food system. At Casa Latina, Fresh Market, and Tropical Fresh, City of Poughkeepsie residents act as more than consumers. Grocery store owners, managers, and staff at these stores have been negotiating conditions by which City of Poughkeepsie residents eat for the past 16 years (Casa Latina opened in 2001). They provide high-quality, healthy, culturally appropriate options at relatively low prices. These grocery stores also empower (in many ways) the low-income and immigrant communities in City of Poughkeepsie. Of course each of the three stores serve the community in a different way. Nevertheless, each is embedded (to some degree) into City of Poughkeepsie's low-income community. These grocery stores demonstrate the justice potential of embedded relationships with oppressed groups in City of Poughkeepsie.

Chapter four investigates the value of embeddedness in creating food justice. Embedded relationships with City of Poughkeepsie residents can empower residents to participate in their food system. However, when food organizations fail to become embedded into the City of Poughkeepsie communities, it can have harmful consequences. Chapter four is comprised of three case studies. Each of these case studies is a project led by a food justice organization, targeting a specific form of food injustice in City of Poughkeepsie. I describe, analyze, and evaluate these projects based on their benefits and harms. Chapter five serves as a conclusion, wrapping up and tying together the themes of this paper.

Food activists and scholars, at times, fail to recognize the breadth of the injustices they are dealing with. Thus, in City of Poughkeepsie, it is extremely important to recognize the overwhelming intersection of injustices that pervade resident's daily lives. Yet despite the overwhelming odds stacked against City of Poughkeepsie residents, they have developed aspects of alternative and more just food geographies. Thus, it is also important to recognize the agency of the residents. This includes owners and workers in grocery stores, corner stores, bodegas, delis, farmers markets, and restaurants. It also includes small-scale producers and even gardeners that are trying to reduce the discontinuity between food production and consumption. Finally, it includes residents, who with their limited range of purchasing options, cooking resources, and food system access, have found ways to keep them and their families fed to the best of their ability. In learning how City of Poughkeepsie residents have navigated Poughkeepsie's current food geography, we can understand how to move toward a future of collaboration with residents of the city. Some academic food discourse and food activism can reduce individuals to mere subjects, and injustices to isolated problems. Instead academics should recognize the layers and interconnections of the injustices, and resupply City of Poughkeepsie residents with greater agency to give them a stronger voice in shaping their community's food geography.

By understanding that the residents themselves negotiate obstacles, we can recognize more opportunities through more latent power already within the community. The project should not be to "help" disadvantaged people through charitable acts of good will; it should be to do justice to a population who continues to experience injustice: to provide City of Poughkeepsie residents with the opportunities, power, and autonomy that

has been systematically denied to them. We must strive for a shift in the geography of the city that challenges neo-liberal market ideology and gives voice and agency to those who have been historically denied it. This thesis hopes to contribute to this larger project.

Chapter 2 – Academia and Food Justice

“The vocation of the intellectual is to let suffering speak, let victims be visible, and let social misery be put on the agenda of those in power, and second, that moral action is based on a broad, robust propheticism that highlights systemic social analysis of the circumstances under which tragic persons struggle.” – Dr. Cornel West

Introduction

In the epigraph, Dr. Cornel West defines the work of intellectuals in two imperatives. If food academics take West’s definition seriously, food justice must pursue these two things: they must “let suffering speak” – by recognizing and amplifying their agency – and engage in “systemic social analysis” – by critically questioning, evaluating, and reimagining food systems. Some food justice literature has come short of fulfilling these objectives: neither analysis with a neo-liberal framework, nor analysis without marginalized voices, has fully succeeded in both of these endeavors.

Neo-liberal food literature undermines systemic structural analysis of the conditions of suffering people. While this literature might contain useful insights into the nature of our food system, its neo-liberal assumptions prevent a sustained structural critique of this system. Neo-liberalism renders subjects legible primarily as consumers who behave primarily in self-interest. Such an approach diminishes possibilities for collectively (and politically) remapping food systems. In food academia, neo-liberalism pushes intellectuals to rely on structures that are compatible with free-market economics. Such academics are unlikely to challenge market outcomes, opting for market

amendments, rather than political change. These neo-liberal framings of the issue fail to adequately pursue the form of systemic social analysis Dr. West calls for in the epigraph.

Some food justice literature has maintained a distance from the struggles of suffering communities, losing sight of these individuals' lived experience. This trend, if left unchecked, can actively suppress the agency of suffering individuals. Such academics are prone to portraying their subjects as mere pawns who are manipulated by the oppressive structural forces of our society. This tendency also manifests in the portrayal of food injustice as mere technical issues – issues that requires small adjustments rather than comprehensive reform. Without the voices of affected individuals food injustices can thus become problems that are managed and controlled by technocratic elites.

Food justice academics can do more to illuminate the structural restraints preventing suffering individuals from food justice; they can also do more to recognize and amplify dissent and negotiations from suffering individuals affected by these structures. In order to accomplish this, food justice academics must “let suffering speak” and “let victims become visible.”

Race, Class, Ethnicity and Voice

Existing food systems have proven to produce racist and classist food structures. In fact, our food system effectively insures that white and higher-class individuals have louder voices and greater influence in food institutions. Meanwhile, the voices of poor people of color are underrepresented in these institutions. To understand why this is I will briefly discuss how race and class can shape food access.

According to Ramirez, the black ontology begins with the site of the plantation; it sets parameters for black food experience in the United States. The violence that African Americans experienced on plantations continues to haunt their historical memory. Our political system and its ideals of freedom and justice were drafted knowing the oppressive plantations would continue to be central to the political economy of the country. Even when slavery was outlawed after the civil war, many newly freed peoples entered into new subordinate positions though sharecropping. The same land that continues to act as a site of suffering and pain in the black ontology continues to be an inherited site of profit and prosperity to white America (Ramirez, 2014).

In fact, America's food systems continue to be both a site of suffering for people of color and a site of prosperity for white Americans. People of color, for example, have systematically been confined to ghettos – areas with an unnaturally high proportion of people of color. This segregation works to concentrate poverty and create self-perpetuating cycles of violence, deteriorating infrastructure, and declining economic situation (Massay and Denton, 1993). Because food access is deeply intertwined with these processes, non-white communities are disproportionately vulnerable to food insecurity, in comparison to whites. Gentrification of low-income communities of color is one current manifestation of this disparity. Gentrification happens when white community members and consumers undertake development projects in attempting to address problems associated with poverty. Instead, they drive up cost of living, whiten social spaces, and undermine non-white social and economic behavior. As food prices increase, culturally relevant food options, alternative language opportunities, and

community spaces for ethnic and racial minorities, all decrease (Massay and Denton, 1993; Anguelovski, 2014).

During gentrification white, higher-class residents have louder voices in shaping the food landscape because of their heightened social, economic, and cultural resources; economically disenfranchised racial and ethnic minority residents' have far less power. Food injustices are thus inseparable from the experience of racial and ethnic minorities in this country. When food activists deny the central role of race in food injustices, they might unintentionally recreate a situation where whites are the majority, the authorities, or those who define the relationship (Ramirez, 2014).

On top of such racial barriers, there are also many socio-economic barriers to food justice. Of course, lack of economic resources inhibits certain food choices by decreasing economic power in the marketplace. Beyond that, the relationship between higher-classes and working classes can also produce boundaries that pervade beyond a strictly economic basis (Southerton, 2002). Bourdieu proposes that class creates a “habitus” for all people. The “habitus” is the individual’s lived environment; it imbues them with particular social ideals, influencing their tastes and decision-making processes (Bourdieu, 1984). Samples of Middle-class Americans, for example, put a high value on the health, aesthetic, and flavor of their food. They judge food (and teach their children to judge food) using these values as their point of reference (Paddock, 2016; Wills et al., 2011). Meanwhile, samples of lower-class people suggest that such values were less important to them than self-sufficiency and autonomy. Impressing to their children a healthy and sophisticated food culture was secondary to the assurance that their children know how to feed themselves. This suggests that lower-class families do not

misunderstand or neglect the importance of nutrition; because of their situation, it simply falls lower on the hierarchy of expectations inside the “habitus” (Wills et. al., 2011).

Judgments of “good” food choices are only appropriate in the context of the correlating “habitus.” Nevertheless, such socially constructed judgments are projected on people in a different “habitus.” When such judgments are made out of context, they are more likely to misrepresent others’ choices. Upper-class people often represent lower-class food cultures as consisting of poor food choices (Wills et al., 2011). This practice, of separating and degrading others’ food choices, creates yet another obstacle that a working-class family needs to overcome to prevent food injustice. Instead of committing to understand the context of a person’s food choices – including their “habitus” – privileged people degrade the choices, uncritically (and often unfairly) projecting metrics from their own “habitus.”

These examples are by no means meant to exhaust the current suffering of disenfranchised communities. Instead, they are meant to be representative of a certain danger relevant to food justice academia and activism. As demonstrated in these examples, suppressing or ignoring the voices of economically and racially marginalized people, heightens the injustice towards these groups. Food justice advocates are complicit in these injustices to the degree that they ignore or suppress the agency of marginalized groups.

Leaving out Agency

As I argue in the introduction to this chapter, food justice academics should strive to recognize, understand, and amplify suffering communities’ agency. This section

attempts to demonstrate how food literature might diminish the possibility for individuals to express agency in the food system.

Some academics diminish the agency of suffering populations simply by “centering” more privileged individuals. Johnson and Szabo’s article provides an example of this in their investigation of Whole Foods Market consumers. They recognize privileged consumers as agents: active navigators of their many obligations, including work, budget, time constraints, and social constraints. Their article is focused on how these privileged consumers *choose* to shop how they do. Throughout the investigation speaks of the “complexity” of the subjects and the “difficulty” of their decisions. Yet when they describe, they portray them as passive subjects unequivocally oppressed by the structure. Johnson and Szabo posit that: “most consumers do not have a choice in the food system,” referring to less-privileged consumers (Johnson and Szabo, 2006). This brief description – especially positioned after in-depth analysis on the motivations, complexities, and layers of more privileged individuals – presents less privileged individuals as one-dimensional non-agents. An effort to recognize and understand the complex choices of less privileged individuals, by contrast, would begin to restore agency to these individuals.

Academics that focus explicitly on the issues of disadvantaged groups are also prone to diminishing agency by portraying individuals only in the light of their suffering. This pattern reveals itself when, like in the Poughkeepsie Plenty Study, academics focus on measured, structural injustices at the expense of lived experience (Nevarez, 2014). As described in Chapter 1, an over-reliance on quantitative data can portray agents as

nothing more than their demographic categories. Doing so, diminishes the inclination to improve choices, opportunities, and demands that suffering individuals have available.

Instead, such neglect of individual agency leads to solutions such as the Healthy Food Financing Initiative, which funded by the U.S. government. According to the USDA, it is designed to “expand the availability of nutritious food to food deserts – low-income communities without ready access to healthy and affordable food – by developing and equipping grocery stores, small retailers, corner stores, and farmers markets with fresh and healthy food” (Gallagher, 2011). This type of technocratic solution implies that food injustices are nothing more than technical problems. It also empowers the privileged people that exert influence over such food infrastructure by granting them greater power to manage suffering populations. As such, it precludes democratic participation on the part of suffering people by treating them as individuals without agency. In such situations, academics and those who they influence are liable to begin making decision on behalf of their subjects, rather than with *their* subjects. Again, this situation can be improved or even avoided by a more explicit focus on the agency of suffering populations.

Michael Pollan: Neo-liberal Food Justice Literature

Neo-liberalism In many ways, Michael Pollan’s work The Omnivore’s Dilemma is a paradigmatic example of how neo-liberal assumptions can undermine structural critique. Before I continue, I must note that Pollan is writing as a journalist, not an academic. However, given Pollan’s popularity (and the fact that The Omnivore’s

Dilemma was assigned to my Introductory Sociology class here at Vassar College) I believe it is safe to say that he has had wide influence in food literature.

The Omnivore's Dilemma is a plea to redefine our collective relationship with food. Pollan critically investigates the harm of the systems that have been designed to feed us. He traces the journey of a calf as it is produced into meat for consumption, describing their problematic diets, consisting almost exclusively of corn. He exposes the environmental, health, consequences of even so-called "organic" food. His writing is captivating and provocative: describing our development of a dependency on chemical fertilizers and pesticides, Pollan says, "instead of eating exclusively from the sun, humanity now began to sip petroleum" (Pollan, 2005). But the way Pollan ends his book re-positions his otherwise polemical analysis well within the mainstream neo-liberal boundaries of food commentary. Pollan spends the final section of his book documenting his own personal attempts to collapse the divide between producer and consumer by hunting, foraging, growing, and making his own food. By ending the book with this description, Pollan appears to promote it as a sufficient type of reaction to the problems just described. He implies that if we each create better habits in our individual food consumption, we can change these enormous problems in the food system (Johnston, 2016). While there's nothing wrong with the behavior in and of itself, Pollan's description does not acknowledge the structural boundaries that prevent many people from engaging in this type of individualistic consumer behavior. Market-driven structures implicitly prioritize privileged people because the market favors people with more economic resources – predominantly upper class, white people. To make matters worse, there are very few consumer options that even presume to address food insecurity.

If one commits to “vote with their dollar,” how might they presume to vote against food insecurity?

So-called “ethical” consumer movements can even leave the lower-class people in a double bind. On the one hand, anybody that fails to consume “ethical” food – regardless of socio-economic background – is constructed as morally inferior (Guthman, 2008). On the other hand, consumers with low-income are vulnerable to criticism for being imprudent if they decide to shop at “ethical” or “luxury” food stores; they have trouble justifying to others spending so much on food if they have other financial challenges (Johnson, 2016). This creates a situation where lower-income consumers are susceptible to be ostracized no matter what they do.

In order for Pollan to carry out his duty as an “intellectual” (see West quote above), he would have to take seriously the structural barriers ingrained into individualistic, consumer structures. Instead, he defaults to neo-liberal assumptions, treating consumer choice as the only legible form of political agency. Pollan is no doubt concerned with the structural problems of our food system. However, he reduces these structural concerns by viewing them almost exclusively through this lens of the individual consumer behavior. Ultimately, this type of food research “has become a progenitor of a neoliberal anti-politics that devolves regulatory responsibility to consumers’ via their dietary choices” and that it “reproduces a neoliberal climate where broad and substantive public regulation is shunned for the ‘culture of audit,’ corporate social responsibility, and individual consumption choice” (Guthman, 2007).

Neo-liberalism in Food Justice Activism

Neo-liberal ideology shapes consumer's relationship with food, other people, and our society as a whole. It isolates individuals' choices, detaching them from relationships with all others. As such, neo-liberalism blames to consumers for negative consequences of the food system; meanwhile, racist and classist structures persist, and privileged individuals continue to benefit (Gilson, 2015). There is another affect of neo-liberalism particularly affecting food justice organizations. By redistributing the burden of social change to the individual consumer – the private realm – activists can, in their food justice work, absolve the state from responsibility; political activists become consumer advocates (Johnson, 2010; Guthman, 2008; Roff 2006). Just like Pollan, they frame the individual as a consumer rather than a citizen – preferring market solutions over political solutions (Guthman, 2008; Roff, 2006). However, such food justice work institutionalizes certain neo-liberal shortcomings.

Julie Guthman explains how the reach of neo-liberal ideology extends to NGOs, preventing them from proposing certain types of projects. To defend this, she points to the disparity between several organization's ideals and implementation. Organizations might have ambitious goals, but those goals are not always reflected in the approach. Some have a tendency to prioritize incentive-based approaches, attempting to lure self-interested customers toward somehow better decisions. Such market-based approaches are hardly capable of structural demands (Guthman, 2008). Other food activists are too focused on ensuring their organization's reproduction or reputation. They opt for projects that more easily attract funding and more visibly produce results. As a result, NGOs once again choose for more manageable and implementable changes. Notably

lacking in these approaches are collective structural demands upon the government. Guthman calls this preference for implementable market solutions, a “neo-liberal box” (Guthman, 2008).

The confluence of the neo-liberal political economy and the internalized “neo-liberal box,” allows plenty of room for oppressive structures to continue. As a telling example, Johnson and Szabo’s Whole Foods Market “respondents primarily saw themselves as individuals confronting a food system behemoth, and there was little evidence that they understood themselves as part of a larger collective that could petition the state to make changes to the food system” (Johnson and Szabo, 2010). Neo-liberalism tends to produce citizens that act as consumers, and structures that prefer markets. This demonstrates the pervasiveness of neo-liberal ideology. In order to prevent this ideology from devaluing the work of their organizations, food justice activists must recognize the danger of the “neo-liberal box.” They should treat their subjects as more than self-interested consumers, and increase the possibilities for food activism beyond the boundaries of markets and donors.

Conclusion

Some food justice discussion has revolved around the agency of *consumers* in mounting pressure against our current food system’s role in environmental degradation (soil erosion, pest resistances, butterfly and bee populations, use of harmful pesticides) worker health (exposure to pesticides, long work hours), and consumer culture (fast-food). Such discussion, while important, does not challenge the neo-liberal framing of consumers as the primary actors shaping our food system. An uncritical emphasis on

consumer identity is an uncritical emphasis on individualistic, self-interested, market-based, and highly implementable solutions. Instead, food justice literature should develop a critique of the racist and classist history of neo-liberal food structures.

Structural analyses of class, racial and ethnic identities – and their relationship to neo-liberalism – are critically important; they illuminate the logics through which food injustices continue to thrive, sometimes hardly challenged. However, some literature that is focused on the structural oppressions does not fully recognize the agency of those involved. In fact focusing on the logics by which the oppression occurs can prevent one from recognizing agency. Without explicitly “centering” marginalized groups, it is difficult to recognize how space already exists for subjects to exercise their agency; how this agency is already defying the logic of oppressive structures; and how people are already creating alternative structures. Without this recognition, it is more difficult to create alliances that are poised to challenge the structure of the injustices from within.

These two worrisome trends – promoting neo-liberal solutions and downplaying individual agency – do not necessarily come together; nor are they mutually exclusive. Food academics have produced many examples of systemic social analysis on issues of difference, interrogating race, ethnic identity, and class to understand their effects on food injustices. The goal is to understand more deeply the nuances and complexities of these socially and spatially uneven, and ever-changing relationships. However, even this type of illustrative analysis can reduce power of suffering people by failing to recognize them as agents. On the other hand, food scholars that do not conduct structural analysis might well prioritize increased choices for suffering people. Yet, absent systemic social analysis, these academics might revert to neo-liberal assumptions, which are less

equipped to address the root of food injustices. If these tendencies come together, they could greatly damage to the democratic participation of suffering individuals in the food system. By focusing on neo-liberal solutions, one softens their critique of larger structures that create injustices, such as residential segregation, worker exploitation, and class oppression. Then, by overlooking the agency of one weakens these individuals' demands for change. Together, these trends can only strengthen one another in their defense of racist and classist food structures that already exist.

Food scholars would do well to remember that, as Shiva puts it, “The ‘ownership’ of the rich is based on the ‘dispossession’ of the poor” – that it is the poor who are “disowned economically, politically, and culturally” in the name of our food system (Shiva, 2005). Oppressive food practices have continued only because our society has “dispossessed” the most disadvantaged, attempting to shut them out from participation in our food systems. Justice, then, requires that intellectuals a) perform comprehensive, structural, non-economic critiques and b) recognize, engage with, and amplify suffering individuals as agents.

Chapter 3 – Embeddedness: A Case Study of Poughkeepsie Grocery Stores

“On the one hand, sustainable agriculture involves the innovation, development and diffusion of more environmentally sensitive production practices. On the other, it entails a form of resistance to and mobilization against the socially and environmentally destructive conventional agricultural paradigm. But neither theories of technology change nor of social movements address the workings of sustainable agriculture very far beyond the farm gate.” – Clare Hinrichs

Pollan-style consumer advocacy movements such as the “alternative food movement” have developed critiques of animal cruelty, monoculture, mechanized food production, transportation, and other woes of industrial agriculture (Galt, 2017; Hinrichs, 2000). But as explained in Chapter 2, such a consumer-based food systems approach often de-politicizes the injustices. It focuses on the *individual’s* relationship to the food system, rather than the *society’s* relationship to food. Of course the alternative food approach must be applauded for a) rendering more visible the very real problems of industrial agriculture and b) establishing and improving *some* alternative consumptive possibilities. However, these approaches often do not look “very far beyond the farm gate” – they treat injustices as issues of insufficient market options, rather than as collective social issues.

Hinrichs uses the concept of “embeddedness” to demonstrate this tendency of “alternative food systems”. “Embeddedness” means that, in addition to personal economic motivations, individuals act on social, non-market relationships. Embeddedness implies higher levels of collective decision-making. Nutritionist Gail

Feenstra argues that embeddedness has the ability to “enhance social equity and democracy for all members of the community” (Feenstra, 1997). Thus, the concept of embeddedness illuminates the possibility for more inclusive and participatory – rather than primarily market-based structures (Hinrichs, 2000). Embeddedness means individuals a) are able to express more agency in their food choices and b) act out for collective social non-economic reasons. In the absence of embeddedness neo-liberal market ideology becomes stronger. Then individuals are more compelled to act out of self-interest rather than collective interests; and producers are more compelled by profits rather than the interests of the consumer (Hinrichs, 2000).

According to Hinrichs many food scholars believe that “alternative” food systems demonstrate a high degree of embeddedness. They assume that because alternative food systems operate in “direct markets” – with more interactions between consumers and producer – these food systems will be driven by social, rather than economic decisions (Hinrichs, 2000). Clare Hinrichs analyzes two types of direct agricultural markets – farmers markets and Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) – to test if this theory holds up. Interestingly, even within in these direct alternative markets, price and self-interest are still the primary driving factors in determining the relationship between producers and consumers; they are only slightly “softened” by the embeddedness of the consumers (Hinrichs, 2000). In this chapter I extend this concept of embeddedness as Cornel West advocates, including the “victims” of “social misery.” The level of inequality within these “alternative” food systems is remarkably high. Farmers markets and CSAs are primarily accessible to higher-income communities. In areas that they are accessible to lower-income communities, “many direct agricultural markets involve

social relations where the balance of power and privilege ultimately rests with the well-to-do customers” (Hinrichs, 2000). In other words, while these “alternative food systems” do not demonstrate much embeddedness with their well-to-do customers, they prove even less embeddedness with suffering populations. Ultimately, they are only an alternative for *some*.

As discussed in chapter 2, neo-liberalism tends to push social responsibility to the individual consumer and promotes free market, neo-liberal agency. From this perspective, the individual is expected to change their situation using only the tools granted to them by the market. This is quite impossible for less privileged consumers. Instead of giving them agency, neo-liberal institutions ignore their voices.

“Alternative” food spaces aren’t the only place where social factors condition the relationship between the consumer and the producer. Embedded institutions in poor communities protect against these neo-liberal injustices. They allow citizens to construct their own definition of value – separate from that of capitalistic value. Embedded institutions provide agency to the communities that they are embedded into. Grocery stores in City of Poughkeepsie are one such example of an embedded institution.

City of Poughkeepsie residents, as demonstrated in chapters one and two, are suffering under our current food system. Thus, a case study on three grocery stores in City of Poughkeepsie – Fresh Market, Tropical Fresh, and Casa Latina – reveals how embeddedness in the community provides agency to “suffering” communities.

Customers in these grocery stores demonstrate more opportunity to participate in their food choices. The following is an analysis of the differing contexts and levels of embeddedness of Fresh Market, Tropical Fresh, and Casa Latina.

Fresh Market

Fresh Market is the largest grocery store within the boundaries of the City of Poughkeepsie. Its parking lot can hold 30-40 cars – not an insignificant amount of space for a central location on Main Street. The store was built only about five years ago. It looks very new. It is ordered similar to large chain grocery stores like the (Stop-and-shop located neighboring in Town of Poughkeepsie). Lining the perimeter of the store, it has a large produce section as well as meat and other animal products. In the center of the store it has long, tall aisles taking up the bulk of the store space. The manager describes it as “clean and orderly,” further reminding me of the more sterile aesthetic of larger chain stores. Nevertheless it is independently owned, which allows it more flexibility in purchasing goods as well as in setting prices. Thus, community members can be more embedded into the store and influence food systems as agents.

The manager refused to claim a particular customer base, instead insisting that his store had something for everybody. The produce section, he pointed out, was comprehensive, providing all the standard fruits and vegetables one would expect at a Stop-and-Shop, for example. The manager spoke about the stores explicit attempt to cater to different niche customers in the area as well. This is evidenced, in one example, by the section for “Mexican ingredients,” which is no doubt an attempt to appeal to the significant Oaxacan population. Furthermore, the manager explained, if the store doesn’t have an item that a customer wants, the store will put in a special order specifically for them. Also, the manager and much of the staff spoke Spanish, providing the opportunity for Spanish-speaking residents to communicate their opinions. Finally, the low prices,

along with the newness, the “clean and orderly” aesthetic, the large parking lot, and the central location, are meant to provide an environment, where the large variety of City of Poughkeepsie residents can all feel comfortable shopping. As a for-profit, market-based institution, this grocery store certainly still focuses on profits. Nevertheless, this store clearly demonstrates a certain degree of embeddedness to City of Poughkeepsie residents: it has channels through which consumers can express agency in their relationship to food.

Tropical Fresh

Many immigrant communities in the United States have a higher standard for fresh produce. Whether it is because they are unfamiliar with frozen and processed foods, or because they have cooking preferences for produce that is not common here, or because they are used to fresher and tastier produce back in their home countries – immigrants demand higher quality and variety of options (Koc and Welsh, 2002). For Poughkeepsie, Tropical Fresh is one place where residents – specifically immigrant residents – have a high degree of influence over the type of produce they consume.

The most important skill, according to the manager, is knowing what the customers want. While this observation might appear obvious, he certainly took his own advice very seriously. The manager at Tropical Fresh prides himself on their produce selection. The reason: he has made a point to learn about all the different types of vegetables, not only so he can provide them, but also so he can satisfy customer questions and complaints. His customers include South and Central Americans, Jamaicans, Mexicans, Filipinos, and Koreans, each which have their own diverse range of tastes. When I asked if he ever gets requests from the customers, he laughs and tells me that

requests are constant; he is always changing the store's selection to meet the needs of the customers.

Each week he goes down to the Hunt's Point Korean Produce Association in New York City. Hunt's Point Korean Produce Association began in response to discrimination by other white wholesalers. Koreans had reportedly experienced injustices ranging from price discrimination to physical violence. Thus, immigrants began this organization during a boycott as a collective effort to create a new channel and people of color could source high quality produce. Ultimately, the organization became focused on "collective strategies to protect their common interests when dealing with white wholesalers at Hunts Point Market" (Yi, 2000).

Sourcing there allows Tropical Fresh to consistently provide a wide selection of high quality produce. If the quality isn't good, according to the manager, people won't come back. Perhaps most importantly Tropical Fresh tries to keep their prices low by buying in bulk. The manager is well aware of the low income of his residents "It's a penny business. I'm not going to make a lot of money."

Again, because this is a for-profit store, the manager's decisions include profit calculations; however, the storeowner is concerned with more than just profits. He is concerned with the well being of his relationships with his customers – or, at the very least, he is willing to listen to their needs and work to address these needs. Thus, his store's embeddedness into the immigrant community – even into the lower-income immigrant community – is quite high. In other words, immigrants are able to participate more fully in Poughkeepsie's food system because of Tropical Fresh.

Casa Latina

Casa Latina is a grocery store on Main Street. Located directly across the street from the larger Fresh Market, Casa Latina offers a competitively wide selection of grocery items, especially for the Latinx community. The store has an interesting history. It opened up in 2001, at a time when there were no full-size grocery stores in the city at all (the previous sizable grocery store closed in 1992). It served as the primary grocery store for the entire city for a number of years. Then the owners suddenly faced eviction in February 2015, endangering the future of the store at a time when it was still one of the primary grocery stores in City of Poughkeepsie. As the Poughkeepsie Journal put it, this “would reduce variety and competition in a city keen to add more food stores.” If Poughkeepsie Journal’s story is at all representative of the city residents, then there was concern among many that diversity of selection was already a problem before the eviction. Fortunately, by the end of the year, the supermarket was taken over by a new management. The now two-year-old management that I spoke with tells me that their relationship with the Latinx community is thriving.

The current manager does not know the details of the transition. However, one thing is clear: there is a significant market niche that has kept the store going all these years. Almost as soon as the previous management closed the store, a vacuum sucked in the new management in order to bring the institution back. Importantly, location was not the deciding factor – people simply could have gone across the street to Fresh Market. Nor was it mere routine – during the period that the store was closed, customers had an extended opportunity to adjust to another store. Something else about the store brought customers back and keeps them coming.

The manager seems to know very well what his customers want. He tells me that he constantly asks what his customers want, rather than waiting for them to tell him. He pointed out several varieties of cheese and cream, telling me that these are specific types that his Latinx customers prefer. He then reached up and pointed to rolls of paper towels and said that he has customers that want the convenience of cheap paper towels at his store – so he provides them. A large portion of the customer base is people that come regularly. These regularly especially help the manager choose what items to stock. Most of their customers are from Poughkeepsie, but several come from further away. Behind the meat counter several of the workers confirmed that customers came from Kingston, Newburgh, and even some from out of state. One reason they come so far, according to the manager, for the meat. Latinx customers, he tells me, require especially high quality meat selection.

The community aspect of the consumer's relationship also appeared to be specifically important. Although there are a variety of people who shop at Casa Latina, the primary customers are Latinx, from Mexico and Central America. From the several times I visited, I heard at least as much Spanish as English. When I asked him whether all the workers are bi-lingual, he suggested that it is more important for his workers to know Spanish than English, but that all are proficient at both. Whether it's in English or Spanish, everybody is greeted at the door. He told me that he once found a specific product for a Peruvian customer and that customer brought more of their Peruvian friends. From these demonstrations the manager is clearly incorporating into his store a diverse group of specific interests. Thus, this willingness to engage the consumers is how the community forms. While this behavior is somewhat consistent with profit

maximization the manager rarely referred to profits as he spoke about his decision-making criteria. Instead, he remained primarily focused on the interests of his customers.

Analysis

One of the questions that I asked each of the stores was this: what brought people back? Each of them gave basically the same answer: freshness, variety, comfort, and price. From this it might appear that there isn't too much difference between any of the three grocery stores. These answers appear to demonstrate a market shifting to match its consumers' demands. Each is trying to please the customer; for example, each is each is willing to order products for any of their customers. But the particular contexts reveal factors that condition the relationship between grocery stores and its customers. Grocery stores in Poughkeepsie are not neutrally committed to greater variety, better quality, low price, and increasing comfort. They are, in different ways, *embedded* into the local context of the city. That is the reason the Fresh Market never simply take-over the customers of Casa Latina: it lacks something Casa Latina does not. This might be, for example, a Latinx community space or a manager more committed to City of Poughkeepsie residents.

This is not to say that Fresh Market isn't embedded into the city as well – it certainly is. The manager and much of the staff speak Spanish, there is a very large produce selection, the prices are very competitive, there is an aisle for Mexican cuisine, and they will order anything that you request. There is no doubt that the manager is taking input from City of Poughkeepsie residents. It is simply not embedded into the Latinx community as Casa Latina is. All three stores are certainly more embedded with

the city than, for example, Stop-and-Shop, which is the larger grocery store just outside the city boundaries that some residents drive to. Stop-and-Shop is a chain store, not independently owned. Many decisions come from management, which are not responsive to the needs and demands of the population. Further, the market is large enough that the needs of one or two people will not cause the store to adapt so easily.

So the more involved the customer in the decision-making process the greater ability of the customers to make a reflective choice about the type of food they want in their community. Greater agency in our food system does not necessarily decrease “food deserts,” or reduce “food justice,” as these terms are defined. Instead, it focuses on the quality of each citizen’s relationship with food according to each persons’ own definition. In order to increase the possibilities of individual agency, structures need to become more embedded.

These three Poughkeepsie grocery stores demonstrate differing levels of embeddedness. They all certainly have potential for greater “embeddedness”. As demonstrated in Poughkeepsie Plenty’s study, there are still many low-income residents that cannot afford to shop at these grocery stores – whether it is because of transportation, convenience, or income. Furthermore, it is not clear whether these stores would be safe from strong economic forces like gentrification. While embeddedness *reduces* the role of market economic variables, during economic exchange, price and self-interest still do play a significant role in determining the relationship between the retailer and the customer. If higher-class customers enter the same markets as the lower-class customers, the higher-class customer’s voices might still be disproportionately valued, because they have more economic power. It is not clear at what point this would happen. What is

clear, is that a community embedded institutions – which are less responsive to price and self-interest they are to social concerns – will be much more resistant to gentrification, and other oppressive economic pressures. Instead, citizens will be able express greater agency in community-based decision-making process.

Chapter 4 – Applying Embeddedness to Food Justice Work in Poughkeepsie

Introduction

If Chapter Two illuminates how intellectuals can challenge neo-liberal and agency suppressing food injustices, and Chapter Three demonstrates mechanisms through which institutions effectively recognize suffering communities' agency, then Chapter Four is meant to examine how intellectuals can promote such structures. Using three case studies of food justice projects in City of Poughkeepsie, this chapter investigates and evaluates food justice advocates' use of structural analysis to create alternative structures that are more just. I will use my analysis of two troubling trends in food discourse, along with my analysis of "embeddedness," to trace the effectiveness of these projects.

Remember from Chapter two that food systems often consist of neo-liberal market structures that perpetuate certain injustices. These structures prioritize the voices of relatively privileged participants in the food system and diminish the voices of marginalized communities. Thus, the issues of marginalized communities are secondary to the competing desires, ideals, priorities, and opportunities of the privileged. Neo-liberalism would have this power dynamic left unexamined; it disproportionately recognizes individual consumer agency – a form of agency that is, by definition, held by privileged people. Anybody attempting to understand City of Poughkeepsie's food injustices would need to "center" residents' voices and critique neo-liberal structures.

Remember from Chapter three that embeddedness is the condition where non-economic factors (social ties and community well-being) are valued more highly than economic factors (price and self-interest). Embeddedness helps prevent oppressive structures from privileging certain groups and ignoring others' agency. When institutions

prioritize social relationships with residents – rather than strictly economic relationships – individual residents have greater agency to demand change; and when individuals are motivated by collective interests – rather than just economic self-interest – they are better equipped to make collective demands. In other words, “embeddedness” ensures that the agency of the oppressed is not undermined or ignored, and that their voices have an institutional outlet by which they can make collective demands.

This chapter is divided into three sections. Each section is a case study on a different food justice initiative in City of Poughkeepsie. While these initiatives were/are led by Poughkeepsie food justice organizations (sometimes several working together), they are not necessarily representative of the organizations themselves – each of these organizations has a variety of initiatives with a vast range of goals, strategies, and tactics. The first initiative I will investigate is a community listening session put together by United Way and the New York Department of Health, along with a number of co-sponsors and volunteers from the community. The second is an initiative by Poughkeepsie Plenty to heighten the awareness of Food Insecurity in City of Poughkeepsie. The third is an education initiative by the Poughkeepsie Farm Project in City of Poughkeepsie School District.

Seeing Like A Food Justice Organization

One food justice organization in City of Poughkeepsie, Poughkeepsie Plenty, makes its primary goal, to “build a diverse movement for change to ensure the right for all residents of the City of Poughkeepsie to secure sufficient and nutritious food” (CREEO). Poughkeepsie Plenty’s Community Food Assessment, as I described in

introduction, seeks to understand some of the major problems facing City of Poughkeepsie residents' access to healthy food. According to Leonard Nevarez, Co-Author and Professor at Vassar College, it is meant for “city residents, civic organizations, local businesses, and elected officials” (CREEO). I will not explain or analyze the findings in this section as I have already done so in the introduction. Here, I will position this study in relation to existing food structures in Poughkeepsie, namely food justice organizations. As an active employee of Poughkeepsie Farm Project (which is involved with the other Poughkeepsie food justice organizations), I have personally seen this study referenced in two places. The first was at a fundraiser for Poughkeepsie Farm Project; the second was at a fundraiser for Dutchess Outreach. I mention this, because it demonstrates value of the study's analysis, to food justice organizations in Poughkeepsie. Organizations use the insights of the study as justification and motivation for their work.

James Scott's book *Seeing Like A State*, illuminates the consequences of similar justifications and motivations in state building projects. In this book, Scott uncovers the fatal flaws of state-initiated projects meant to “improve the human condition.” One of Scott's primary insights is that in order to uncover patterns about the condition of a large, heterogeneous group of surveyor, for example, must drastically reduce the number of variables in consideration. In deciding which variables to include and which to exclude, they must make value-laden decisions about what is most important. Once this decision is made, the state primarily recognizes value if it falls within this simplified grid of understanding. While this is not inherently detrimental to the project, it becomes problematic when state actors *equate* these measurements with subjects' agency. The

severity of this false equivalence is proportional to the inaccuracy of the measurements. In severe cases, subjects are, “managed” as though they have no agency – only statistical demographic characteristics. These abstractions also “have power to transform the facts they take note of” (Scott, 1997). In other words, those who use these abstractions (in this case, state technocrats) gain power over others. In Scott’s case studies, “the level of abstraction at which most projects were conceived was fatal” (Scott, 1997). The evaluative nature of Poughkeepsie Plenty’s Community Food Assessment makes it similarly susceptible to diminishing agency of its subjects.

While Poughkeepsie Plenty is not state-driven, the above analysis is nevertheless illuminating in several respects. To understand how City of Poughkeepsie residents are suffering food injustices, Poughkeepsie Plenty’s study focuses on food insecurity. As I mentioned in Chapter 1, “food insecurity” is a concept that requires categorization, measurement, and assessment. This study – by virtue of being a data-oriented research study – requires information that can be measured and standardized for all City of Poughkeepsie residents. Such standardization leaves out data that is not easy to collect, quantify, and standardize. Based on all accessible information, Poughkeepsie Plenty had to make decisions about how to collect, organize, and interpret data (for example, what factors to consider, how to phrase questions, and who to ask). On its own, this is not particularly damaging. However, it illustrates the severity of statistical abstraction in the analysis. If one is aware of the implications of this abstraction, there is a lower chance they will reduce individual agency. If however, one equates City of Poughkeepsie residents with these abstractions, then they are susceptible to treat residents as severely lacking agency.

When Poughkeepsie Farm Project, Dutchess Outreach, and other food justice organization in Poughkeepsie present these statistics to donors, they momentarily equate the statistics representing suffering with the actual suffering. If these statistics are the points of reference for their work, they are more likely to opt for solutions that address the statistics – rather than the recognize City of Poughkeepsie residents as agents. As demonstrated in chapter 2, they are more likely to opt for simple, technological fixes that produce positive statistics (Guthman, 2008). Citizens are treated more like than demographics and data points, rather than as agents. Furthermore, using or citing data without recognizing *that which data ignores* and *how the data was influenced* – can falsely assure people that they have a good understanding of the issue, and the best solution.

The point of all this is not to criticize Poughkeepsie Plenty for the way they carried out their study. Many people, including myself, have found this study very useful to deepen our understanding of the issues that the city is facing. Nevertheless food justice advocates realize that this study is an abstraction – a rough and impersonal snapshot of the lived experience of City of Poughkeepsie residents. They must not confuse the measurements of injustice with the injustice itself. If they do, they risk severely undermining the agency in their treatments of residents. They are in danger of improving the numbers reflected in the statistics, without necessarily improving the opportunities of those affected by food injustices. Food justice organizations can benefit greatly from the insights of Poughkeepsie Plenty’s study without undermining or suppressing residents’ agency. However, it requires that they use the statistics as guides prompting deeper inquiry into the lived experience and voices of suffering individuals.

Poughkeepsie Farm Project and the Value of Education

Poughkeepsie Farm Project is a non-profit organization working towards “a just and sustainable food system”. It consists of a fifteen-acre CSA and donation farm, as well as a team of educators, working to create positive experiences for City of Poughkeepsie youths and adults around healthy food. I will focus on this latter branch of Poughkeepsie Farm Project – the education team. I remind the reader, that I have been an intern for the education team for the past two years. My belonging to this organization has influenced my information, observations, and conclusions. Nevertheless, I would like to share the insights into food justice that I have had working there.

Poughkeepsie Farm Project educators work primarily with City of Poughkeepsie youth vis-à-vis the Poughkeepsie City School District (PCSD). They do work with other people, and through other channels, but I will focus on their interactions with PCSD youth. With these students, the education team leads: class field trips at the site of the actual farm, class garden visits at each of the four school gardens, and classroom cooking lessons. One of their long-term goals, for example, has been to lead these three visits with every second grader in City of Poughkeepsie.

Of course, it is extremely difficult to pinpoint the true value of these visits; nevertheless, with my two years of experience on the education team at Poughkeepsie Farm Project, I will attempt to describe the value of the education team’s relationship to PCSD. The education team provides children with the opportunity to forge a positive relationship with food. While “positive” is subjective, PFP lessons and staff prioritize goals such as being open to trying foods, eating a variety of foods, eating fruits and

vegetables, having a good body image, knowing how food is produced, and being grateful to food producers. Yet a positive relationship to food cannot be reduced to any one of these things. While it would be extremely difficult to categorize the worth of this work, it might be even harder to measure and categorize the variables that affect the outcome – for example teaching style, lesson plans, tools used, etc. There are simply too many variables. This type of work can, therefore, never fully be measured, quantified, and evaluated. And despite the lack of statistical justification, PFP continues such educational work.

However, a PFP-funded research study demonstrates the dangerous path that that the organization could take. The research study is designed to measure the impact of PFP programming on PCSD school district kids. The study consists of two parts: a written test/survey portion where the children are meant to demonstrate their growth; and a “kale test” measuring how much kale the kids consume at lunch on a particular day (kale is one common vegetable in PFP programming). Performed both on kids that have participated in PFP programming and kids that have not, the test is meant measure the positive effect of PFP programming.

As it stands right now, PFP education team’s work is, in some ways, heavily embedded into the community of food insecure elementary students. However, PFP’s relationship to residents of Poughkeepsie could turn from a community-focused social relationship into a self-interested economic relationship. It could begin to prefer outcomes that favor their self-serving desire: to have a measurable effect on kale intake in the lunchroom context. This measurable outcome is preferred – potentially even at the expense of actual positive relationships to food. This study temporarily equates eating a

certain amount of kale on a particular day, with a high quality relationship to food. In this equation, no other behavior that might indicate a positive relationship to food is considered. I am not arguing that anyone at PFP is actually equating eating kale once for lunch demonstrates high quality relationship to food. However, the question implicitly hanging over PFP educators after this study is *how do we get better results on the Kale test?* At times, this type of test literally determines the worth of their work. PFP does need to pass this type of test to prove their purpose as an organization to, for example, potential donors. There may be donors who will not invest unless the organization can prove its effectiveness. If PFP caters to these donors, they will subsequently treat City of Poughkeepsie residents as less agential.

Yet if food justice organizations attempt to measure their work, they also undermine the value of the less-measurable effects of their work. Food justice educators must – as much as possible – be attentive to the context of the students. Since the experts of each student’s context are the student, the student’s teacher, and the student’s caretakers, a step closer to food justice would be becoming more embedded with these communities. Then, residents could – as agents – more properly guide the expertise of PFP educators in a constructive direction.

Speak to Change: A Community Listening Session

United Way and the New York Department of Health encouraged residents of the City of Poughkeepsie to participate in focused discussions about community health at The New Hope Center. According to the event description, this discussion was meant to “bring the community together to discuss their needs to create a healthier Poughkeepsie”

0). Residents that attended were split into five groups, each consisting of about 10-12 residents. While these discussions were not explicitly about food justice, access to healthy food was one of the main topics of discussion. The following information was gathered from sitting in on one of the discussions, and supplemented with notes taken from each of the other four groups.

City of Poughkeepsie has a high proportion of low-income and non-white residents. As discussed in chapter two, scholarship on food injustices reveals that low-income and non-white residents have less economic power in market food spaces. But without listening to the voices of City of Poughkeepsie residents it is difficult to understand how they are actually experience food injustices.

Residents described how they navigate a number of difficulties in their daily lives: paying healthcare bills, electric bills, rent, mortgage, and basic necessities; needing to work longer hours, giving up sick days, and even taking on two jobs; difficulty finding childcare and ensuring the best for their children; the list could go on. Collective community-scale issues – such as low quality infrastructure, low quality schools, fewer employment opportunities, higher levels of crime, higher levels of police brutality, and low upward mobility – also are tied to low-income neighborhoods of color (Massay and Denton, 1993). The discussions made clear clear that many residents had a contextualized critique of issues like healthcare, institutional racism, poor infrastructure, class relationships, and food injustices. Thus, they had a good sense of the intersection of structural issues that their community faces – including, but not limited to food injustices. For example, residents made claims such as, “there’s a war on old people,” “its all about the dollar,” “pills are killing us rather than healing us,” “nobody is participating in the

community,” and “the rich get richer while the poor get poorer.” Notice that these criticisms are heavily critical of neo-liberal market structures. They charge institutions with economic greed and lack of social consciousness. Such claims while sometimes over-simplistic and lacking specificity, nevertheless serve as evidence of critical engagement with neo-liberal, social and political structures.

Despite lamenting these restraints, the community members had little trouble pointing to opportunities to make the most of their situation. For example, in response to food injustices, two residents in my group expressed having grown their own produce in a community garden; at least one other expressed interest in the idea of searching for a community plot. In response to economic security, the group presented a display of determination and tenacity in providing for themselves and their families. They described that they would not, for example take sick days off work because, “you need to get that day’s pay.” In response to health, one resident suggested that young people have the opportunity to take free karate classes. Several people also spoke of community-hiring programs that help people find decent paying jobs. Finally, some residents described how parents and schools could raise children to equip them with the necessary skills and values for their future. In sum, many residents suggested some sort of community-oriented solutions. Ultimately, they demonstrated a capacity to imagine and create many options for themselves and their communities. As such, in defiance of neo-liberalism, they demonstrated a willingness to make demands out of community interest, rather than just self-interest.

This Community Listening Session provided a space for community members to express their opinions, which otherwise have no apparent outlet. One way to

meaningfully increase food just options, as I argued in Chapter 3, is by creating embedded institutions that are responsive to the social and community-interested demands of City of Poughkeepsie residents. This listening session is certainly a positive step toward institutional “embeddedness” into marginalized Poughkeepsie communities. It works to validate the agency of City of Poughkeepsie residents.

There are, of course, limits to this success. The primary problem is that it is not clear how responsive the participating organizations will be to residents’ concerns. In my discussion group, one resident asked the moderator if their input could actually change healthcare policy. She could only say that it “might” affect policy decisions “indirectly.” After the discussion, I the moderator and I discussed the issue further. She was excited that I was there, explaining her belief that more people need to hear from suffering populations. However, she then commented that perhaps the most valuable part of the discussion was that it “makes them feel like their voices are being heard.” This demonstrates a lack of faith – even from a facilitator – in the responsiveness of the participating organizations to these communities.

Nevertheless, the organizers of this event must be commended for their explicitly attempt to recognize marginalized voices. The discussion helped nudge City of Poughkeepsie towards a more comprehensive vision of justice. Throughout the discussion, residents balanced many narratives at once. They demonstrated how their place in the food system is mediated by a much broader context of personal and collective commitments. Amidst these complex and interwoven narratives, this discussion illuminates the latent capacity City of Poughkeepsie residents have for critique of neo-liberal institutions. Residents also demonstrated their agency in taking advantage

of available options and make collective demands upon the food system. As such, their voices, if amplified by embedded institutions, present possibilities of moving beyond the neo-liberal structures that govern much of City of Poughkeepsie's food system.

Conclusion

The community listening discussion demonstrates that City of Poughkeepsie residents carry a latent power for justice. They are not motivated primarily by self-interest, economic understandings of food injustice – they express concern for the interest of the community. Furthermore, they demonstrate the willingness to create collective solutions, given the opportunity. All they need are institutions that are embedded into their community that will allow them to realize these community-oriented social concerns.

If food justice organizations want their work to be embedded into the lives of residents, then they will need to, as much as possible, work with residents to address food injustices in the context of residents daily lives. Instead of focusing primarily on quantitative data that demonstrates the issues that city of Poughkeepsie residents face, food justice proponents should strive primarily to be community-driven, or at least attentive to the demands of community members. Organizations must create meaningful social relationships with City of Poughkeepsie residents. If they do not, residents will be more likely to work with the organization out of self-interest, rather than collective interest. Conversely, residents that wish to participate in their food system – and simultaneously support more democratically controlled institutions – should participate in embedded spaces. They should act, not out of self-interest, but out of shared, community

interests. If City of Poughkeepsie citizens and activists can work together to create such functional embedded food spaces, they will be equipped to create a more just food system in City of Poughkeepsie.

Chapter 5 – Conclusion

Children that work with Poughkeepsie Farm Project reveal both the potential benefits and the potential dangers of food justice work. PFP's education team has the power – if they work with teachers and caretakers – to consistently improve the quality of students' relationship to healthy food. They also have the capacity – if they fail to understand the context and the greater importance of their work – to misunderstand the students' needs, and therefore provide solutions that are wholly inadequate (even potentially harmful). Educators at PFP are not the only ones with this power; anybody working towards food justice, scholar, activist, or organizer has power in their relationships and attitudes towards their subjects.

Race and class oppressions have created unjust food conditions by limiting the opportunities of these poor and non-white populations. Neo-liberal market solutions are not attentive to these economically disenfranchised poor communities of color because these communities hold little market power. Yet, some food scholars situate the individual (privileged) consumer as the lens through which they understand the problems of the food system. These analyses might be illuminating and productive in some regards; however, when it comes to structural critique, they tend to ignore such structural racism and classism. This becomes especially consequential when they propose solutions: their solutions are equally ignorant of the structural elements that they overlook. Individualistic neo-liberal ideology is not equipped to address community-oriented, structural problems. Food academics benefit from questioning the context of their analyses: it allows them to think beyond neo-liberal solutions and to take seriously participatory political solutions.

Some academics do not recognize the agency of their subjects. Instead, they tend to portray subjects as one-dimensional persons that are unilaterally shaped by structural food injustices. In their scholarship, for example, food justice scholars might rely further on potentially false solutions of people's lived experience. To ensure that they recognize agency, food academics should "center" the voices of suffering communities.

Embeddedness is a concept through which we can understand the connection between neo-liberal ideology and suppression of agency. As I have demonstrated, institutions that are not embedded into the affected community have primarily economic, profit-based and market-oriented solutions. They risk fracturing social alliances in promoting individualistic consumptive behavior. Furthermore, an institution that does not focus on embeddedness risks ignoring the variety of subject's beliefs, opinions, and demands. It does not recognize the need to provide mechanisms through which individuals can make demands. Embedded institutions respond to individuals' unique opinions about collective, social issues.

Poughkeepsie food justice organizations working toward community food development projects hold this power: to *unintentionally* promote inattentive and potentially harmful policies. Good intentions are not enough to ensure a positive outcome. If good intentions uncritically produce projects that do not engage the community or challenge neo-liberal structures, they might well be impose onto a population useless institutions with little embeddedness.

Academics and activists alike should follow Cornel West's advice: First, they must refuse the narratives of those in power and instead, give a voice to those in our society

who are suffering. Second, they must engage in structural analysis of institutions and practices that are meant to be serving a collective good.

Weaving Narratives into Agency

I end with an observation I made during the Speak to Change community listening session that I attended. As I have already mentioned, the residents that attended were able to balance several narratives at once. Each person had some form of structural analysis to contribute to the group; they urgently and seamlessly weaved between personal and community identities to illuminate a number of intersecting and overlapping structural issues. Nobody was stuck in a single all-encompassing narrative of the issues. Each person had a slightly different point of view. Based on their personal experience and their own understanding of structural forces, they worked together to determine possible responses.

I posit this as a more appropriate form for food justice discourse. Academics should develop an analytical framework that allows for many narratives of structural analyses. From there, they should develop the skill of using these many narratives to adequately interpret the complexity of lived circumstances. This will prevent a single, comprehensive view of reality from taking over, including neo-liberalism. Furthermore, analyses that include multiple narratives are much less liable to neglect agency of individuals. Ultimately, academics and organizers must recognize the humanity within their subjects: the ability to make complex decisions about their multi-layered environments. Perhaps more importantly, they must recognize the humanity within themselves: their inability to play God. They cannot presume to understand and manage

the full complexity of other humans. If academics and organizers can recognize this, they can work together with suffering citizens to create a more just world for us all.

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