



# Making Mistakes in the Practice of Activist-Scholarship

**Evan Weissman**

Syracuse University  
eweissma@syr.edu

---

---

## Abstract

Simply stated, food justice emerges from an inherent critique of both the conventional food system and alternative food efforts as privileged and white. Food justice activist-scholarship aims to engage the critique through collaborative teaching and research that promotes social change. This work is often precarious, tied directly to questions of positionality. In this paper I discuss mistakes I have made in the practice of food justice activist-scholarship by drawing on examples from a photovoice project with youth.

## Keywords

Food justice; privilege; activist scholarship; photovoice

---

---

## Introduction

“Yuck,” said Anthony<sup>1</sup> to no one in particular on a hot July day as we stood sweating in the traditional red barn that served as a sort-of petting zoo at an agritourism-styled farm, “that cow pees where the milk comes from” (Fieldnotes, July 22, 2014).

---

<sup>1</sup> All names are pseudonyms.

The room erupted into laughter. I was presenting findings from a project that used photovoice to examine the perspectives of at-risk<sup>2</sup> youth of color on food (in)justice. The presentation was delivered to a diverse audience of faculty at my institution; a stipulated requirement for receiving a small research grant from my college. The presentation was deliberately subversive, as many of my colleagues do not embrace a politics of justice.

The quote above was deployed after an explicit critique of nutritionism, but before my use of Ta-Nehisi Coates<sup>3</sup> to call attention to white supremacy. That is to say, the room was in need of a light moment to break the tension. And it came with my quoting of a research participant, a young man, who became the butt of my joke. I was trying to explain how the youth I worked with during a food justice workshop had few opportunities to explore our county's many agritourism-type farm sites. During the presentation I was feigning shock that the youth never had an opportunity to visit one of these farms, a regular experience for many Central New Yorkers. I say feigning shock because going into the project I assumed many of the youth with whom I would work had not enjoyed the opportunity to go apple picking, or visit a pumpkin patch, or get lost in a corn maze. And, my project partners confirmed my suspicions. Thus, we agreed the farm trip would be a novel experience and would likely be enjoyed by the youth. And it truly was. The youth participants embraced the farm trip with exuberance, joy, and appreciation. And here I was poking fun at a youthful exclamation made in an unguarded moment of excitement and sincerity.

It was then, as the giggles in the room began to settle down, that I realized what I had done. Not only had I made my research participant the *object* of my humor, but – and this is difficult to admit – I had done so without being fully cognizant of how the joke would play.

After the presentation, I cried. I cried not because I was relieved the presentation was over, but because I had been so naïve, so careless, so fucking stupid . . . so unbearably white.

It was not just this failed attempt at humor that forced me to reevaluate my approach to activist-scholarship. It was the development of much broader critique of the project itself. As I was publically working my research project through standard academic presentations I was consistently challenged on core arguments I was attempting to articulate. That is, my efforts to intervene in tone-deaf

---

<sup>2</sup> I use the term “at-risk” with as appreciation of the ways in which the term is problematized (see for example: te Riele, 2006). Rather than use the term to marginalize or draw attention to personal shortcomings of the youth with who I worked, I use the term to signify the ways in which such youth are put “at risk” by broader social, political, and economic forces.

<sup>3</sup> “But my experience in this world has been that the people who believe themselves to be white are obsessed with the politics of personal exoneration” (Coates, 2015, 97).

approaches to food justice were themselves reproducing the sorts of work I intended to critique. Despite my best efforts and clear interests in questioning well-intended food efforts that focus on individualized policing of certain bodies (black and brown), my research was largely read by both youth participants and sympathetic colleagues as starting from similarly problematic positions. It was during this process of sharing and analyzing that I became acutely aware of the need to strengthen my approach to activist-scholarship to better embody my political commitments to (food) justice by appreciating the mistakes I make, and, more importantly, owning up to them and learning from them. Thusly, I follow Gillian Rose (1997) in that “[t]his is an article written from a sense of failure” (p. 305).

In this paper, I explore problems in my approach to activist-scholarship that emerged from a photovoice food justice project with youth. My experiences, and the learning opportunities that emerged, are explicitly tied to the mistakes I made and, more importantly, my becoming more aware of the various ways I (re)produce systemic racism through the research process thanks to on-going critiques by collaborators, participants, colleagues, and friends. This essay does not portend the answers; instead I explore questions of how to better embody food justice in the practice of activist-scholarship. The intention is not to pat myself on the back for raising such questions or entertain a sort of navel-gazing; instead I engage discussions of my missteps within one specific effort at activist-scholarship. I do so in an effort to better understand how to practice activist-scholarship, as making mistakes is commonplace in this work and my experiences are thus likely useful for both my own work moving forward and for others committed to activist-scholarship.

### **Positionality, Reflexivity, and the Limits of Privilege Checking**

Before proceeding further, I want to clarify who I am (following Roman-Alcala, 2015). I am a white, middle class, able-bodied, heterosexual man with a wife, three kids, and dog. In short, I am the embodiment of the stereotype of privilege and power *and* I am a reflection of the mainstream food movement. Beyond enjoying traditional race, class, and gender privileges, I am privileged to enjoy gainful employment with adequate pay and benefits. Moreover, my job allows me to do what I enjoy and provides me with a sense of fulfilment and purpose. I am privileged to be following my interests – working towards food justice – for a living. And I am privileged to enjoy the academic freedom to pursue community-engaged work and to integrate my political efforts with my professional identity.

I am privileged to work and live in my hometown, where I have deep personal and political commitments. Because I live and work in my hometown, the traditional line between my identities and positions as community member and scholar are blurred. To be sure, this dichotomy is widely critiqued (Hale, 2008; Reynolds and Cohen, 2016), yet nevertheless remains stubbornly entrenched as a

categorization: you are either town or gown. Moreover, the tensions between these identities have real material importance, especially in my community. The institution where I work is a costly private university with significant resources. The surrounding city is low-income and marked by deep inequality. Thus, I have access to the many privileges I embody along traditional lines of class, race, and gender, and I have privileged access to the resources of a private university and as a scholar I enjoy insider access to the “community.”

I do not take these privileges for granted.

I point this out as a way to call attention to my positionality, in recognition that “our life experiences and practices are deeply entangled with the ways we see the world” and this is central to how we work (Alkon and Agyeman, 2011). That is to say, our lived experiences, especially tied to race, class, and gender, shape our outlook/worldview. For me, my identity as a scholar and my experiences growing up in the community where I practice activist-scholarship are also instrumental in shaping my worldview. And it is an awareness of these privileges, with an appreciation of my positionality, that shape my commitments to working against structures of oppression by engaging in efforts towards social justice, using food as a tool for social change.

Although I recognize the importance of acknowledging my privileges and, in the now-famous words of Peggy McIntosh (1989), a need to continually unpack my invisible knapsack of white privilege, I see this sort of commonplace privilege checking is limited, at best. Understanding privilege provides opportunity to interrogate structural inequality, but the work done by privilege checking seems more an opportunity for folks to display their awareness, instead of working towards justice. As Phoebe Maltz Bovy (2014) notes: “A certain sort of self-deprecating privilege awareness has become, in effect, upper- or upper-middle-class good manners, maybe even a new form of noblesse oblige, reinforcing class divides.” The goal is to acknowledge awareness and gratitude rather than directly challenge structures of oppression. Privilege checking is important, especially when privileges go unrecognized, but we must also be prepared to give up privileges as a necessary step towards justice.

Privilege checking and calling out individuals favors a somewhat superficial identity politics over class analysis and a politics of justice. It is absolutely important that we recognize and highlight the many manifestations of oppression. But, as Sharon Smith (2014) argues, “This approach places its overriding emphasis on *who* is making a particular argument or accusation, rather than the *content* of that argument or accusation . . . It is easy to see how this approach can inhibit the free exchange of ideas – including necessary political debates – between and among those who are all committed to transforming society.”

Folks need to be held accountable and be called to task for failure to recognize injustices in ways that foster opportunity for learning, but we must also

work collectively towards social change. Bovy (2014) explains: “It’s not just that ‘privilege,’ when used as an accusation, silences. It’s also that it’s made cluelessness a greater crime than inequality. These ubiquitous expressions—‘check your privilege’ or ‘your privilege is showing’—ask the accused to own up to privilege, not to do anything about it.” Moving beyond privilege checking, we must work towards justice through the building of solidarity, achievable through collective efforts and the need for inclusiveness and tolerance for the mistakes of would-be allies.

And there’s the rub. It is precisely because of my identity, because of my privileges, that I make the mistakes I make. In turn, my participation in the food justice movement, that is, my commitment to social change, is in many ways hindered by my positionality, which precludes me from a visceral understanding of oppression.

To be sure, a visceral understanding of oppression is not a precondition for working towards social change. Indeed, research on mirror neurons – visuomotor neurons that act both during individual actions *and* when an individual observes another individual doing a similar act (Rizzolatti & Craighero 2004) – indicates that the brains of primates are primed for empathy (Preston & de Waal 2002). Thus, there is likely an inherent human tendency towards empathy which may work to advance solidarities.<sup>4</sup>

In their introduction to the “Forum on Emotions, Empathy, Ethics, and Engagement,” published in a recent volume of *GeoHumanities*, Leonora C. Angeles and Geraldine Pratt (2017) highlight the role of creative methodologies as strategies for producing knowledge and fostering solidarities through empathy. The articles in the forum explore the ways critical-creative transnational practices (re)frame empathy as complex, producing opportunities for solidarity in ways that disrupt and “blur the categories of activist and academic” (p. 275). Empathy emerges as “one of the many possible triggers and pathways to social change, without assuming that they provide a quick fix toward ethical practices or progressive social transformation” (Angeles & Pratt 2017: 276). Central to understanding the role of empathy in fostering social change are “reflexive and analytic assessments of critical-creative practices as contributions to democratizing research production and dissemination” (Angeles & Pratt 2017: 276). Critical analysis and reflexivity help expand understandings of empathy as working towards social change.

Over the last three decades, feminist geographers have advanced conceptualizations of reflexivity as vital for situating knowledge. As Nancy Hiemstra and Emily Billo (2016) note: “Since the early 1990s, feminist researchers

---

<sup>4</sup> I am especially grateful for an anonymous reviewer’s suggestion to explore scholarship on empathy.

in geography have engaged in deliberate processes of *reflexivity*, foregrounding critical self-reflection to think through the multiple ways in which various aspects of our identities and personal situations influence all aspects of our research” (p. 2). The process of reflexivity is – in the words of Linda Finlay (2002) – “full of muddy ambiguity” (p. 212). Researchers are expected to be mindful of themselves within the research process yet simultaneously center the research itself. This emphasis on reflexivity within feminist scholarship is marked by a recognition that, as Gillian Rose (1997) notes, scholars practicing reflexivity acknowledge the “difficulty of actually doing it” (p. 306). Notable concerns center on the inability to achieve complete transparency within research processes and the ways in which reflexivity might reproduce focus on individualized privileges and self-critique without system critique. These shortcomings notwithstanding, reflexivity continues to serve as a central concept to situating knowledge (Hiemstra & Billo 2016). And, within participatory methods, reflexivity offers a way out of these trappings when purposefully used to advance social change efforts.

In the introduction to their “Symposium on Feminist Participatory Research,” published in *Antipode*, Heather Farrow, Pamela Moss, and Barbara Shaw (1995) explain feminist participatory research as emerging from the “experience of researchers coming face to face with the politics of their research” (p. 71). The intent is to intervene in research by attending to unequal power relations within the research process and to facilitate research as tool for social change. To this end, Farrow, Moss, and Shaw (1995) suggest reflexivity plays a central role in feminist participatory research as it creates openings to recognize both shortcomings and opportunities to strengthen our work. As they conclude: “What needs to be brought out more clearly is a self-critique of our own participation in the research process through exercises of reflexivity” (p. 73). In this way, then, reflexivity within participatory research processes fosters opportunity to better understand the connections between researcher and social change efforts.

### **Activist-Scholarship and Food Justice**

Food justice emerges through the efforts of activists and academics to struggle against the food systems’ inherent inequalities *and* to pose a challenge to the dominant white, middle class “vote with your fork” narrative of the mainstream food movement. Food justice scholarship aims to understand the food justice movement and support food justice efforts through critical engagement (Alkon and Agyman, 2011; Reynolds and Cohen, 2016). That is, food justice is focused on understanding *and* challenging structural inequalities. Thus, a great deal of food justice research assumes the form of activist-scholarship that deliberately works towards justice. I position my work within this nexus of food justice activism and scholarship. More specifically, my current work – conducted in partnership with community partners – explores the question: How do communities respond to food system inequalities? The project I reflect on in this paper fits within this

framework, exploring the ways in which poor and working class youth of color understand food (in)justice and subsequently frame food justice efforts.

I do not necessarily adhere to a specific definition of participatory action research (PAR), but my activism and research (and teaching for that matter) cannot be separated from each other. As Kristin Reynolds and Nevin Cohen (2016) note, PAR is “a framework or approach rather than a method” that “envisions research as a tool to advance social change through having academic or professional researchers work[ing] with community members” (p. 127). Thus, the projects I engage are explicit in their goals of advancing social change. I work collaboratively with community partners and commit to ensuring the research is reciprocal.

There is nothing unique, per se, about this approach to scholarship. Indeed, Craig Calhoun (2008) notes in the foreword to *Engaging Contradictions: Theory, Politics, and Methods of Activist Scholarship*, a volume edited by Charles Hale: “Activist scholarship is as old as Machiavelli and Marx or indeed Aristotle. The social sciences developed partly in and through activist scholarship.” (p. xiii). Within contemporary scholarship, debates concerning the intersection of research and social change are well established within a variety of approaches, including feminist methodologies (Farrow, Moss, & Shaw 1995) and food scholarship (Reynolds & Cohen 2016), among others. Scholarship that is engaged, community-based, participatory, or activist (to name but a few of the frames) is focused on collaborative social change and is often also aimed at transforming the academy from within (Hale 2008). The project I reflect on here was positioned to intervene in food justice scholarship but emerged in ways that reflect the contradictions inherent in this work. As a scholar, I am embedded in the academy, a space of privilege in myriad forms (especially over knowledge production), characterized by apolitical fantasies of objectivity, and one that is only lukewarm to activist research. As Hale (2008) explains:

The research process in social sciences and the humanities is an inherently contradictory affair, at least for those who hold out for some connection, in the broadest sense, between this research and the social good. The scholarly endeavor embodies hierarchies and inequalities that we purport to oppose; there is a strong tendency for the knowledge we produce to be irrelevant, if not alienating, to the primary subjects of our research; even when this ‘liberating’ knowledge is publicly conveyed, through pedagogy or various public intellectual endeavors, all kinds of institutional patterns end up reinforcing the very inequities that the knowledge ostensibly contests. A large part of the richness of activist research comes precisely from humble, forthright engagement with these ethical-political contradictions of our work . . . The distinctive contribution of activist scholarship . . . is to enact an alternative way of doing research that attempts to contribute to the social good and to modestly advance the frontiers of knowledge, while training a bright

light of critical scrutiny on the inequities of university-based knowledge production and attempting to ameliorate these inequities through the research process itself (p. 23).

It is in this spirit that I interrogate my own approach to food justice activist-scholarship. I hope to engage with the ethical-political contradictions in my own work and advance understandings of food justice activist-scholarship.

### **Food Justice and Photovoice**

Food activists consistently espouse the need for system reform yet enacted interventions often focus on changing individual behaviors, especially among youth (Weissman, 2015a; 2015b). These efforts often include curriculum to teach youth about food production and nutrition, and much emphasis has been placed on hands-on learning opportunities, especially through cooking and gardening. Teaching kids about food, the argument goes, will teach them to make better *individual* choices as food consumers. To address this apparent paradox of a structural critique accompanied by attendant focus on individual change I ask: how can food interventions be designed and implemented so that youth define the problems and set the agenda for food justice efforts?

To answer this question, I engaged the participatory research method of photovoice and on-going participant observation with youth in Syracuse, New York. The project was designed to better appreciate how poor and working-class youth of color perceive food system inequalities and could more fully lead food justice work in our community. Photovoice, or participatory photography, is a method of community-engaged research whereby community members are provided with cameras to document issues of concern. Through the process, photographs are analyzed within focus groups that interpret the photographs through guided discussions aimed at understanding the differing experiences revealed by the images (Wang & Burris, 1997).

Caroline Wang and Mary Ann Burris (1997) developed photovoice as both a tool of empowerment and a participatory research method. Photovoice is grounded in the Freirean tradition of popular education (Freire, 2000; Horton & Freire, 1990), whereby knowledge production is democratized and grounded in the everyday lived experiences of community members.

The project was grounded in the lived experiences of youth within a low-income neighborhood in Syracuse. The City of Syracuse is in many ways a typical post-industrial city within the Northeastern United States. Syracuse has a population of approximately 145,000, with over 30% of all residents – and nearly 50% of all children – living in poverty.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Syracuse has the disgraceful

---

<sup>5</sup> See [www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov).



distinction of highest rates of concentrated poverty among Black and Latino communities in the entire United States (Jargowsky, 2015). Community groups and local researchers have documented pervasive food insecurity in Syracuse (Johnson & Mitchell, 2004). The target population for this project was youth residing within the poorest neighborhood in the City of Syracuse: the Near Westside. The project engaged 21 participants, all youth, ages 14-18, through an after school and summer program at a now-closed<sup>6</sup> public high school, where the four-year graduation rate hovered around 30% and over 80% of students qualify for free or reduced lunch.<sup>7</sup>

The youth enrolled in this project were recruited through partnership with the Youth Services division of the Center for Community Alternatives (CCA), an organization focused on promoting community-based alternatives to incarceration through advocacy, direct services, and policy. CCA conducts a summer youth program that includes cohorts of 25 youth in 6-week sessions of educational enrichment activities. The research was conducted during CCA Youth Service's 2014 summer session.

The youth were provided with digital cameras and participated in a photography workshop, led by a professional art instructor, whereby they were taught how to use provided cameras and learned how to properly construct photographs, including considerations such as framing, lighting, and composition. Participants then engaged in a discussion on the ethics of photography, including specification that photographs of individuals require written consent of identifiable individuals on forms that were provided. The youth were then introduced to the food system through experiential learning, including field trips to explore the food system and their food environment (including production, distribution, retail, and consumption). Finally, participants were asked to explore their everyday engagements with food through photography.

Findings from the photovoice process include two I explore here: (1) youth participants are critical of food system interventions that target them and (2) although interested in questions of food justice, the youth identify more immediate problems encountered in their everyday lives (Weissman, paper under review).

Notably, the youth I worked with are both cognizant and critical of enacted interventions as targeting some populations and not others. That is, there was extensive discussion of the realization that the participants in this research project were the same people often targeted for food system interventions that aim to shape individual behaviors. During a conversation of eating habits among youth one

---

<sup>6</sup> The Syracuse City School District was ordered by New York State in 2014 to close the school through phase-out because of poor performance and low graduation rates. The school was replaced by a new vocational-focused program within the same building.

<sup>7</sup> See: <https://data.nysed.gov/>

participant noted: “Why is everyone worried about us? I’ve been to [suburban neighborhood], white kids like McDonalds too” (Fieldnotes, July 17, 2014). This statement clearly illustrates the tenor of our discussion that explored public debates about dietary practices that seem to problematize the consumption habits of poor black kids without policing the eating habits of more affluent white suburbanites. This insight indicates a recognition of the ways in which food justice efforts might unwittingly (re)produce systems of inequality and engage in victimization. As well, the youth were highlighting my role in (re)producing the creation of racialized subjectivities (Omi and Winant, 1986). The project was not planned as an effort to critique my participants, but to instead learn from them. However, because of the social positions occupied by participants and researcher, the project reinforced, rather than disrupted, traditional positions of power. Despite my intentions, I became part of the “everyone” who was worried about black bodies and reinscribed racial subjectivities.

In addition to this critique differentiating populations targeted for intervention, youth participants continually pushed conversations *away* from food. Although there was clear interest in better understanding the food system and in the framework of food justice, youth identify more immediate problems encountered in their everyday lives: “We got too many problems to deal with. Food is just one thing” (Fieldnotes, August 21, 2014). Photographs taken during the photovoice process focused on many problems *not* related to food – especially poverty – and the youth often engaged in discussions that indicate other concerns and other forms of inequality. In spite of widespread analysis of structural inequalities that (re)produce food system disparities, food justice efforts and the scholarship that supports it remain focused on *food*, rather than structural problems such as systemic poverty or institutional racism that lie at the heart of food injustice (Guthman, 2008).

These two findings – the unwitting work of food justice to reinscribe racial subjectivities and the neglect of intersecting inequalities – suggest that activist-scholars might do more to engage in reflexive thinking on the impacts of enacted projects and better appreciate the multiple formations of inequalities in their effort to advance food justice. In addition to these specific research findings, my experience with this project produced more personal outcomes that reflect the mistakes I made and the ways in which learning from these mistakes will allow me to better engage in food justice efforts.

### **Making Mistakes and Doing Better**

Marcelo Felipe Garzo Montalvo (2015) asks that in advancing food justice we “focus on our everyday shared practices, on our collective actions, our common doings” (p. 127). This work, Montalvo (2015) notes, “can and will make us uncomfortable . . . This is the inner, personal, and interpersonal growth and working through fear (and other feelings we don’t like) that is necessary to shifting culture” (p. 128). In reflecting on this photovoice project I embrace Montalvo’s

(2015) call for focusing on the everyday in a way that makes me uncomfortable by highlighting some of the many mistakes I make in practicing activist-scholarship.

In doing this photovoice project I deliberately engaged in food justice efforts that align with modes of working articulated by both activists and academics. The project was predicated on solidarity, prioritized marginalized voices, contributed sweat equity, and directly challenged systematic racism (Montalvo, 2015; Sbicca, 2015; Slocum, Cadieux, and Blumberg, 2016). That is, I attempted to follow many of the best practices of food justice activist-scholarship. Yet I still made mistakes. And these were mistakes I could not avoid, *per se*, but mistakes made in my best efforts as someone committed to (food) justice. Many of these mistakes align with the methods and strategies Antonio Roman-Alcalá (2015) suggests are useful for antiracist food justice work. “I prefer not to blame anyone who has started on a path towards food justice activism,” Alcalá notes (2015), “simply because they are white. The important question is how they go about that activism” (p. 180).

Alcalá (2015) posits six ideas for being an antiracist food justice activist: (1) meet people where they are; (2) don’t ignore your own needs; (3) don’t work from assumptions; (4) prioritize leadership development; (5) be mindful of privilege within collaborations; and (6) acknowledge and celebrate “non-white” contributions. In many ways, Alcalá’s (2015) suggestions are straightforward. But as my own experience indicates, following them is not as simple as they first appear. With the exception of the second suggestion (the project focused on food to meet my needs and interests) I did not fully meet any of these basic ideas.

First and foremost, I entered the project with preconceived notions and thus did not adhere to notions #1, #3, and #5 above. In conceiving the project, I did not center my own privilege, failed to meet participants where they were coming from, and clearly worked from assumptions. My failure to recognize my privilege resulted in an inability to be aware of a need to meet people where they come from as the project started from a problematic place of assuming the youth would engage the project. In particular, it was presumptuous to think: (1) the youth would be excited to participate in a photography project and (2) the participants would be comfortable completing the project.

In fact, getting the youth to engage photography in a meaningful way was difficult. Participants were excited and attentive during the photography workshop, whereby they were instructed on camera use and the basics of photography (rule of thirds, lighting, etc.). But when it came time to actually go and take photos, the youth participants in the project were simply not that interested. As one youth remarked: the photography project was “not a big deal [as] we all [have] cameras on our phones” (Fieldnotes, August 21, 2014). More problematic was my assumption that the youth would be comfortable participating in the project, which included using digital cameras throughout their neighborhood. In fact, students voiced concerns about their safety and security while participating in the project.

They did not feel safe exploring the neighborhood through walking fieldtrips, were not comfortable taking photographs of people (other than each other and friends), and were concerned about the risks of simply having the camera as they might invite unwanted attention or theft. It was simple luck that the youth were engaged in the photography workshop, as I was operating from assumptions and decidedly not actively working to meet the youth where they were. However, I did consult with program partners who were able to advise on likely interest of youth in my project, but the project itself was conceived without direct input from the youth involved. Although I was able to be somewhat flexible in program delivery to include participant feedback, this input did not shape the overall focus of the project.

Directly linked to the shortcomings discussed above, my privileged assumptions that failed to meet people where they were directly linked to my focus on serving my personal interests; the project focused on food. Although I was able to follow Alcalá's (2015) suggestion that antiracist food justice activists don't ignore their own needs (#2 above), and I was privileged to prioritize my own needs as a scholar, these needs could have been made clearer to participants. Moreover, better recognition of my privilege, coupled with a better effort to transcend assumptions, would have likely resulted in stronger conclusions and thus I could have actually better met my own needs for the project, which were about producing scholarship that advanced understandings of food justice. As noted above when discussing project findings, a tangible outcome of the project is a clear recognition that the youth participants were more interested in intersecting inequalities than a focus on food. This realization is an outcome of the research project when it should have been my starting point.

Leadership development (#4 above) and celebrating the contributions of participants (#6) were both intentions of the photovoice project. Unfortunately, my interest in prioritizing the contributions of youth in shaping discussions of food justice and my intention of facilitating youth leadership development through critical consciousness was likely curtailed by my top-down didactic approach. This shortcoming is all the more evident as my project findings – the interest of youth as focused on intersecting inequalities – highlight the problematic starting point. Had the contributions of participants and leadership development been project starting points, the project itself would have taken an altogether different form.

Finally, I return to the mistakes noted at the beginning of this essay. In many instances although I *thought* I was fully aware of my privilege, especially in relation to the youth with whom I worked, I often engaged the youth and discussed the youth in problematic ways that belied this awareness. In addition to the ill-conceived joke about the young man who did not distinguish between a bull's penis and a cow's udder, I made a number of other problematic statements during my presentations of the project, which illustrated a lack of awareness and privilege. For example, in one presentation I made a passing remark about the youth's interest in

McMansions.<sup>8</sup> To make a long story short, I commented that during a farm excursion the youth were more interested in a neighboring housing development than the farm itself. When making this point, I was dismissive of both the houses themselves (McMansion is a derogatory term for a type of house that reflects middle-class white suburban dreams) and the youth's interest in them. My scoffing at both the houses and the youth's interests was a complete disregard of both my privilege (and privileged sensibilities) and the youth themselves. Even more problematic was the ways in which friends and colleagues interpreted the project – as me playing white savior – an interpretation clearly articulated by the youth themselves in the quote above: “Why is everyone worried about us?” (Fieldnotes, July 17, 2014).

Garrett Broad notes in *More Than Justice Food*: “I wanted to have a conversation that would speak of changing not only individual behaviors but also collective systems, one that would look to low-income communities and communities of color as *partners in change rather than problems to be solved*” (2016: 3, emphasis added). I did not achieve this shared goal. Despite intentions, my project reinscribed power inequities. The youth I hoped would be partners taught me that I approached them as problems to be solved. And, by focusing on food, I was framing their concerns for them. I did not advance food justice in ways envisioned.

And thus, I engage reflexivity as it creates space for new understanding of food justice to emerge by allowing me to see the problems with my approach, analysis, and presentations. In this way, the knowledge produced by youth research partners comes to the fore, and shifts my understandings of the research process, social change, and food justice.

Recognizing these mistakes, calling them out, and committing to doing better work as a food justice scholar-activist is predicated on a reflexive adoption of what Alexis Shotwell (2016) articulates as a “politics of responsibility.” What this means, in the words of Gary Kinsman (2005), is that “those of us in oppressing positions recognizing our own implication within and responsibility to actively challenge relations of oppression” (p. 52). A politics of responsibility opens space for us to make mistakes, recognize, and own these mistakes; it allows us to understand shifting roles within systems of oppression; and it provides opportunity to take responsibility for collective action towards social change.

In their essay “Why I’ve Started to Fear My Fellow Social Justice Activists,” Frances Lee (2017) expand the notion of politics of responsibility to one of responsibility and of imperfection. Lee (2017) notes:

---

<sup>8</sup> A McMansion is “a large modern house that is considered ostentatious and lacking in architectural integrity” (www.oxforddictionaries.com).

A politics of imperfection asks me to openly acknowledge the ways in which my family and I have benefited and continue to benefit from oppressive systems such as slavery, capitalism, and settler colonialism. This is an ongoing investigation into my own complicity . . . A politics of responsibility means that as I am complicit in harmful systems, I also possess full agency to do good. This allows me to commit to dismantling these systems and embracing centuries-long legacies of resistance. It means I am accountable in community spaces and do not destroy myself when others call me out on my errors. It means I practice a generosity of spirit and forgiveness towards myself and others. To do all this, I must publicly claim both imperfection and personal responsibility as an activist.

### Concluding Thoughts

It would be simple to say “mistakes happen” and move on from this project by internalizing my missteps and vowing to do better next time. But, as feminist scholars insist, it is important to practice reflexivity, and to understand critical self-reflection as influencing the research process (Moss, 2002; Rose, 1993; Katz, 1994). Moreover, food justice activist-scholarship might do well to take cues from established feminist methodological insights, insights made transparent by my mistakes.<sup>9</sup>

As previously noted, feminist scholars have long recognized the multiple ways in which knowledge is contextualized and positionality informs the research process. Feminist researchers explicitly link theoretical insights to unequal power relations with the stated goal of social change, including challenging common understanding of what constitutes knowledge. Feminist research approaches are diverse, and work to prioritize neglected voices. Feminist scholars center everyday lived experiences, and focus on the embodiment of power differentials. And, important for my own reflections here, feminist scholars push the concept of reflexivity toward considering “the constant risk that even feminist research can reinscribe hierarchy and exploit participants” (Hiemstra and Billo, 2016, 4; see also: Moss, 2002; Rose, 1993; Katz, 1994). Thus, we must all be mindful of the “implications of imbalances of power in relationships between researcher and researched” and engage “strategies for recognizing and mitigating these imbalances” (Hiemstra and Billo, 2016, 4).

---

<sup>9</sup> I thank my colleague Laura-Anne Minkoff-Zern for suggesting I return to the feminist literature to strengthen my attempts at activist-scholarship.

At the risk of being a double killjoy<sup>10</sup> (Parker 2016), I see it as important that we expose inequalities through critiques of mainstream institutions such as the good food movement *and* within progressive efforts such as food justice. And thus, it is important that I critique myself by highlighting inconsistencies in my intentions and enacted project.

It is important that I recognize privilege as it directly influences the ways in which projects are devised and implemented. The practice of privilege checking does little work advancing food justice. But through an understanding of the blinders of privilege, and the ways in which these blinders impede ways of knowing, better food justice projects might emerge. As a person of privilege and power I will make many mistakes. I take responsibility for these *and* practice reflexivity to learn from these mistakes. So too will I learn from existing models of activism, scholarship, and activist-scholarship. It is a move beyond privilege checking towards better food justice efforts enacted through the building of solidarities. As Rachel Slocum, Kirsten Valentine Cadieux, and Renata Blumberg (2016) recently argued:

[T]o create a more equitable food system, food justice would apply analyses that explicitly take power and equity into account, resulting in different processes of engagement with marginalized communities as well as a different focus of effort. It would, first, directly build on antiracist politics, not add it as an afterthought. Relatedly, it would work to create alliance on the basis of solidarity, a mode of action that is part of socio-spatially transformative practice.

In future work I will move beyond the dichotomy of activist and scholar, university and community en route to building solidarities. I am thinking of the ways in which the youth I worked with were acting as scholars and the ways in which I am of the community. And I will better appreciate multiple forms of knowledge production, recognizing, for example, the insights gleaned from listening to the youth critique my project for focusing both on *them* and on *food*. My work will build on anti-racist politics (and anti-capitalist, anti-patriarchy, and anti-imperialist), not as afterthought but as starting point. And I will explicitly confront power imbalances and inequities by practicing reflexivity and engaging the ethical-political contradictions of my work.

Those of us committed to (food) justice – especially folks such as myself who enjoy traditional privileges – need to better understand our shortcomings. We must all be willing to make mistakes in the pursuit of justice for the struggle entails nothing less. It is important that we accept this and then work to do better.

---

<sup>10</sup> A feminist killjoy exposes inequality and criticized for “killing joy”; the double killjoy likewise critiques progressive movements, projects, and institutions (Parker 2016).

## References

- Alkon, Alison Hope and Julian Agyman (eds.) 2011. *Cultivating Food Justice: Race, Class, and Sustainability*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Angeles, Leonora C. and Geraldine Pratt. 2017. Emphathy and entangled engagements: Critical-creative methodologies in transnational spaces. *GeoHumanities: Space, Place, and the Humanities* 3, 269-278.
- Bovy, Phoebe Maltz. 2014. Checking privilege checking. *The Atlantic*, May 7. <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2014/05/check-your-check-your-privilege/361898/>
- Broad, Garrett. 2016. *More Than Just Food: Food Justice and Community Change*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.
- Calhoun, Craig. 2008. "Forward," pp. xiii-xxv in C. Hale (ed). *Engaging Contradictions: Theory, Politics and Methods of Activist Scholarship*. Berkeley, CA: The University of California Press.
- Coates, Ta-Nehisi. 2015. *Between the World and Me*. New York: Spiegel & Grau.
- Coddington, Kate. 2016. Voice under scrutiny: Feminist methods, anticolonial responses, and new methodological tools. *The Professional Geographer* DOI: 10.1080/00330124.2016.1208512
- Farrow, Heather, Pamela Moss, and Barbara Shaw. 1995. Symposium on feminist participatory research. *Antipode* 27, 71-74. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-8330.1995.tb00262.x
- Finlay, Linda. 2002. Negotiating the swamp: the opportunity and challenge of reflexivity in research practice. *Qualitative Research* 2, 209-230.
- Freire, Paulo. 2000. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed, 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition*. New York: Coninum.
- Garzo Montalvo, Marcelo Felipe. 2015. To the American food justice movements: A critique that is also an offering. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development* 5, 125–129.
- Guthman, Julie. 2008. 'If they only knew': Color blindness and universalism in California alternative food institutions. *Professional Geographer* 60, 387-97.
- Hale, Charles (ed). 2008. *Engaging Contradictions: Theory, Politics and Methods of Activist Scholarship*. Berkeley, CA: The University of California Press.
- Hiemstra, Nancy and Emily Billo. 2016. Introduction to focus section: Feminist research and knowledge production in geography. *The Professional Geographer* DOI: 10.1080/00330124.2016.1208103
- Horton, Miles & Friere, Paulo. 1990. *We Make the Road by Walking: Conversations in Education and Social Change*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.



- Jargowski, Paul. 2015. Architecture of segregation: Civil unrest, the concentration or poverty, and public policy. *Report: Race and Inequality*. Washington DC: The Century Foundation (<https://tcf.org/content/report/architecture-of-segregation/>)
- Johnson, Dale & Mitchell, Don. 2004. Syracuse hunger project. *Syracuse Community Geography*.  
<http://www.communitygeography.org/index.php/projects/syracusehungerproject>, Accessed October 28, 2017.
- Katz, Cindi. 1994. Playing the field: Questions of fieldwork in geography. *The Professional Geographer* 46, 67-72.
- Kinsman, Gary. 2005. The politics of revolution: Learning from autonomist Marxism. *Upping the Anti: A Journal of Theory and Action* 1, 44-53.
- Lee, Frances. 2017. Why I've started to fear my fellow social justice activists. *YES! Magazine*,  
October. <http://www.yesmagazine.org/people-power/why-ive-started-to-fear-my-fellow-social-justice-activists-20171013>
- McIntosh, Peggy. 1989. White privilege: Unpacking the invisible knapsack. *Peace and Freedom*, July/August.
- Moss, Pamela. 2002. Taking on, thinking about, and doing feminist research in geography. In P. Moss (ed.), *Feminist Geography in Practice: Research and Methods*. Oxford, UK: Wiley Blackwell, pp 1-17.
- Omi, Michael and Howard Winant. 1986. *Racial Formation in the United States*. New York: Routledge.
- Parker, Brenda. 2016. The feminist geographer as killjoy: Excavating gendered urban power relations. *The Professional Geographer* DOI: 10.1080/00330124.2016.1208513
- Preston, Stephanie and Frans B.M. de Waal. 2002. Empathy: Its ultimate and proximate bases. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 25, 1-72.
- Reynolds, Kristin and Nevin Cohen. 2016. *Beyond the Kale: Urban Agriculture and Social Justice Activism in New York City*. Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press.
- Rizzolatti, Giacomo and Laila Craighero. 2004. The mirror-neuron system. *Annual Review of Neuroscience* 27, 169-192.
- Roman-Alcalá, Antonio. 2015. Concerning the unbearable whiteness of urban farming. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development* 5, 179-181.
- Rose, Damaris. 1993. On feminism, method and methods in human geography: An idiosyncratic overview. *Canadian Geographer* 37, 57-61.

- Rose, Gillian. 1997. Situating knowledges: positionality, reflexivities and other tactics. *Progress in Human Geography* 21, 305-320.
- Sbicca, Joshua. 2015. Solidarity and sweat equity: For reciprocal food justice research. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development* 5, 63-67.
- Slocum, Rachel, Kirsten Valentine Cadieux, and Renata Blumberg. 2016. Solidarity, space and race: Toward geographies of agri-food justice. *Justice Spatiale/Spatial Justice, special issue, Food Justice and Agriculture* 9 (January): <http://www.jssj.org/article/solidarite-espace-et-race-vers-des-geographies-de-la-justice-alimentaire/>
- Shotwell, Alexis. 2016. *Against Purity: Living Ethically in Compromised Times*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Smith, Sharon. 2014. The politics of privilege-checking. *Socialist Worker*, November 18. <https://socialistworker.org/2014/11/18/the-politics-of-privilege-checking>
- te Riele, Kitty. 2006. Youth 'at risk': Further marginalizing the marginalized? *Journal of Education Policy* 21, 129-145.
- Wang, Caroline & Burriss Mary Ann. 1997. Photovoice: Concept, methodology, and use for participatory needs assessment. *Health Education & Behavior* 24, 369-87. doi: 10.1177/109019819702400309
- Weissman, Evan. 2015a. Brooklyn's agrarian questions. *Renewable Agriculture and Food Systems* 30, 92-102.
- Weissman, Evan. 2015b. Entrepreneurial endeavors: (re)producing neoliberalization through urban agriculture youth programming in Brooklyn, New York. *Environmental Education Research* 21, 351-364.
- Weissman, Evan. Under review. Photovoice and youth perspectives on food justice. *Appetite*.