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Food Justice Scholar-Activism and Activist-Scholarship: Working Beyond Dichotomies to Deepen Social Justice Praxis

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Interest in food justice, as both an activist goal and a field of academic scholarship, has expanded tremendously over the past twenty years. There are many definitions of food justice, as well as debates about both who should define it, and the extent to which the semantics surrounding activism for social justice in the food system are of priority for on-the-ground work. (See Alkon and Agyeman, 2011; Gottlieb and Fisher, 1996; Gottlieb and Joshi, 2010; Bradley and Herrera, 2015; Hislop, 2014; Herrera cited in Alkon, 2016; Reynolds and Cohen, 2016; Sbicca 2018). At a fundamental level, many actors engaged in thinking about, and undertaking actions for food justice share a concern for uprooting oppression, with

a focus on dismantling uneven power dynamics in the food system, from community- to global scales.

Food justice work is one of many areas of focus among scholars in geography and related disciplines who practice civic engagement within a context of increased demand for, and simultaneous need to justify this work within a variety of institutional structures (Barcus and Trudeau 2018). Such scholarship may be framed through various research traditions within the social sciences, including participatory action research (PAR), community-based participatory research (CBPR), and community geography. Food access and growing food, for instance, are part of the landscape of a community and can be part of participatory action mapping projects (Robinson, et al. 2016; Block et al. 2018). Nonetheless, like other academic research, academic research on food justice can perpetuate inequities in terms of power, funding, and/or other forms of capital (Reynolds and Cohen 2016; Porter and Wechsler 2018). In the end, such projects may not always contribute significantly to the goals of community-based food justice work, possibly running counter-current to the social justice theories that underlie both the analysis and the actions. While the food justice movement is not unique in encountering these tensions, the co-evolution of food justice activism and scholarship over the past two decades makes it important to examine the intersection of theory and practice in the field in terms of how civically-engaged, action-oriented research might be improved.

As discussed by Slocum (2006); Guthman (2011); and others, there has been dominance of white people and white culture in of many organizations claiming to do food justice work in racial minority communities in the United States. Yet, a broad diversity of people and groups actually engage in, and lead food justice work throughout the world, and have done so historically (Mares and Peña 2011; Block et al. 2012; Reynolds and Cohen 2016; White 2017; Reese 2018). Many such actors, often referred to as *activists*, represent communities that bear the brunt of the social, economic, and ecological injustices in the food system. Many are people of color, members of indigenous communities, and/or those with low incomes challenging the dominant system and creating alternatives. Their work may involve community organizing, policy advocacy, movement building, farming, or other actions. They may engage in critical pedagogy, public speaking, or writing books, to name a few examples. (See e.g., Penniman 2018; Williams and Holt-Giménez 2017; Redmond 2013.)

Meanwhile, many academics, often referred to as *scholars*, have been eager to support community-based food justice efforts. (See Guthman 2008.) They may see themselves as scholar-activists engaged in what Frances Fox Piven has discussed as "politically relevant scholarship" – e.g., academic writing, publishing op-eds, or giving public testimony (Piven, 2010, p. 807) —as well as activities such as board membership or hosting community meetings. Those professionally situated in academic institutions often are also part of community-based food justice groups.

As the points above suggest, community-based and academic activist activities focused on creating a more equitable food system may be grounded in very different everyday realities, but they regularly intersect. Community-based activists often write about their work or about food justice themes (such as the grounding of food system inequities in structural oppression or processes of neoliberalization) for public media and in peer-reviewed journals. Many academics participate in on-the-ground initiatives. And, some academic- and community-based food justice activists struggle and write *together* to accomplish specific objectives. Their work in the "field," whether literal or metaphorical, is undergirded by critical analyses of the often-asymmetrical sociopolitical dynamics that shape our world.

However, despite common analyses of injustice—and the often-common activities in which those working to advance food justice may engage – much existing academic writing about the intersection of food justice scholarship and activism focuses on how academics may support community-based initiatives, suggesting that one can only be classified as *either* a community-based activist *or* a scholar. (See, for example, Alkon and Guthman 2017; Cadieux and Slocum 2015; Guthman 2008; McEwen 2013; Mabachi and Kimminau 2012.) Yet, for many individuals working at the intersections of academic and community-based work, the lines between food justice scholarship and activism are often blurry (Bradley et al. 2018; Chatterton 2008; Wakefield 2007). Further, in addition to scholarly and activist *practices*, the *labels* of activist and of scholar always intersect with identities including class, race, gender, sexuality, immigration status, age, and educational attainment; And, we may take on different types of activism or scholarship to address a particular situation. As Laura Pulido (2008) has highlighted, there is a diversity of ways to engage in each, and these often shift over one's lifetime. We believe that moving beyond these dichotomies can help to strengthen food justice work.

In this themed section we juxtapose the terms "activist-scholar" and "scholar-activist" to underscore the intersecting and different positionalities of people involved in the food justice movement. While we do not draw a solid line between these identities, we loosely define *activist-scholars* as individuals who see themselves first and foremost as academics or researchers whose work is activist by commitment (i.e., aimed at contributing to social and political change), and *scholar-activists* as those who see themselves first and foremost as social change-makers who also engage in scholarly activities (such as research or expository/explanative writing) as a part of this work.

Of course, there are reasons that the activist/scholar dichotomy, whether real or perceived, exists. These include a hegemonic vision of institutional or academic expertise as superior, rather than potentially complimentary to that based on lived experience; and the predominance of academic authors in scholarly (e.g., peer-reviewed) journals. If scholars are identified as those who create knowledge in institutional settings and disseminate it through academic publishing, this leaves little place for community-based activists to share the identity of scholar. The environmental justice movement has long integrated activism and scholarship, and

has actively placed value on experience-based knowledge, along with academic knowledge, in confronting environmental inequities. (See, for example, Taylor 2011). We believe that there is room for growth within the food justice world.

Lack of writing in peer-reviewed journals about this aspect of food justice activist-scholarship, in particular, may itself stem from a tendency among academics to shy away from doing community-based or action research (even more so from publishing about it) because it is often seen as less theoretical, and therefore perilous for untenured faculty whose continuation in the academy hinges on publishing peer-reviewed, theoretical work. It also tends to be time-consuming, with large amounts of time devoted to building trust between the research partners, which can be incongruent with academic tenure and career models. Notwithstanding the structural challenges with these dynamics (see e.g., Autonomous Geographies Collective 2010), the presumption that participatory- or activist research is devoid of theory, and therefore not relevant to academic publishing venues, is unfounded. Activist work is often grounded in distinct and well-articulated theories (Heynen and Rhodes 2012). There are rich and diverse histories in this realm (Torre et al. 2012; Autonomous Geographies Collective 2010), and renewed interest in their meanings for the field of critical geography (Barcus and Trudeau 2018; Darly and McClintock 2017).

Recently, journals with a focus on food systems or agriculture have begun addressing this narrowness by encouraging contributions by a more broad scope of authors (through, for example, the "Grassroots Voices" submission category in *The Journal of Peasant Studies,* or the *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*'s emphasis on bridging academic and practitioner interests). Still, although there are now many academic journals and books that analyze or describe on-the-ground food justice initiatives, there is a dearth of writing about how *academics* bring the food justice- (or social justice-) theories on which they rely for their analyses into scholarly practice.

The three guest-editors of this themed section draw insight from the above, and other existing perspectives on activist-scholarship and critical food geography (e.g., Piven 2010; Pulido 2008; Reynolds and Cohen 2016), along with examples of academic-community collaborations (e.g., Block et al. 2012; Bradley and Herrera 2015; Levkoe et al. 2016; Newtown Florist Club Writing Collective 2013, Porter et al. 2018). Our view is that stepping beyond the dichotomies described here can bring integrity to, and strengthen food justice work situated in academic settings, community settings, *or both*. We hope that in publishing analyses of food justice scholar-activist work situated within different intellectual traditions – or ways of knowing – we can contribute to longstanding dialogues about the importance of scholar-activism and activist-scholarship (such as work in feminist studies) as it applies to the food system at multiple scales. We do not naïvely suggest that writing about the intersections of food justice activism and scholarship will inherently change the inequitable power dynamics that those involved in the movement seek to address. Rather, we aim, through this intervention, to provide a venue for academic

publishing on the *praxis*, with an end-goal of strengthening work to create less oppressive, and more liberatory food systems.

This themed section is one outcome of discussions that—for the three guest editors— began at the American Association of Geographers (AAG) annual conference in Tampa, Florida in 2014 and have continued each year since then, including two sessions on agrifood justice scholar-activism and activist scholarship that we organized at the 2016 AAG conference in San Francisco, California. The latter of these sessions brought together scholar-activists and activist-scholars with some experience in food justice work to exchange ideas and strengthen a community of practice centered on these themes. In these working sessions, we asked a number of questions drawing from participants' previous engagements in food justice activism and research, such as: "Is social change research extractive?"; "What else can it be?"; "What are some successful examples of work that bridges the academic-activist divide?"; "What are the obligations, especially of scholars, to reflect on the synergies between theory and method in food justice research?" We drew inspiration from each others' work and left with new ideas about building working relationships, transparency, and balance of power in collaborative research, and - for those among us who teach- the politics of our pedagogies. The papers presented here are tangible outcomes of the 2016 sessions.

While the AAG is an international organization, the articles collected in this themed section are focused on the experiences of U.S.-based scholars and activists. As such, the specific situations of the authors discussed within the collection describe experiences that typify the U.S. context, in particular the growingly neoliberal American university setting in which community outreach is often justified through its possible monetization (in particular the grants it can bring in) rather than reflecting community service goals. This collection, while focused on different questions, also follows on a 2016 issue of Justice Spatiale/Spatial Justice examining food justice internationally, in a bi-lingual, critical geography venue (Hochedez and Le Gall 2016); and, subsequently, a 2017 ACME themed section on urban agriculture in Europe that called for a greater privileging of marginalized voices, including those of migrants and refugees, in critical geography scholarship examining food production in the neoliberal European city (Darly and McClintock 2017). That the U.S. focus of the current themed section represents scholar-activists and activist-scholars who participated in conference sessions at the 2016 AAG meetings further underscores the need for more work bringing together critical food geographers situated in Global South and Global North contexts, as well as those representing more diverse racial and cultural identities.

In this themed section

Because of the interdisciplinary nature of food justice work, there are several ontological and epistemological entry points to food justice activist scholarship and scholarly activism. Several of these are represented in the articles that follow. Croog et al. provide a concise review of activist scholarship, relying on Derickson and

Routledge's (2015) analysis of resourcing scholar activism as a central theme of their piece *Real World Food Justice and The Enigma of The Scholar Activist Label: A Reflection On Research Values*. Drawing from feminist and transdisciplinary frameworks, Croog et al. push back on the frequent presumption that action-oriented research is not scientific, and they place an emphasis on values. As four scholars in the formative or early stages of their careers, they note that their collective interest to take heed to Derickson and Routledge's 'unabashed call for young scholars to become scholar-activists' provided common ground for the four case studies discussed in the article. Croog et al. speak to the importance of resisting powerful stereotypes about the merits and rigor of activist scholarship. In doing so, they highlight the possibility of democratizing research at any point in an academic career.

In his article, *Privilege and Mistake Making in the Practice of Activist-Scholarship,* Weissman provides a self-reflexive analysis of his interactions, as a white, male professor leading a photovoice project, with youth who have experienced less racial and economic privilege than he has. Weissman uses a feminist research perspective to explore intersections of scholarship and empathy in food justice work by examining mistakes he made during a recent project. He asks how research might be designed so that youth propose both questions and method that are relevant and empathetic to their own views of what food justice is or should be. His article may be read as an effort to move past privilege naming that depends on static dichotomies and hierarchies and towards reading everyday, professional activities and behaviors as opportunities to challenge systemic racism.

Decolonizing approaches to research within Native American Studies privilege storytelling, intergenerational knowledge, and frameworks inclusive of spiritual practices (Smith 2002; Wilson 2008). Perhaps unintentionally, Herrera provides an important contribution to this research tradition. In his article *The Value and Meaning of Experience in Food System Learning Spaces: Reflections from the Activist and Traditional Community Perspectives*, Herrera, an Ohlone-Chicano-Mestizo man and elder draws on decades of diverse life experiences, including in academia, professional medicine, community activism, and farming. By exploring different ways of knowing, learning, and communicating, he demonstrates that epistemological differences between oral and academic traditions of sharing information map onto power differences present in activist-scholarship and scholarly-activism. He argues not that indigenous epistemologies should replace academically accepted ones, but that the former's tenets and methods be employed in activist scholarship.

Rogé also examines different ways of knowing, communicating, and engaging in participatory action research, as a white male working with indigenous farmers in Mexico. Through his reflective piece *Improvisatory Activist Scholarship: Dance Practice as Metaphor for Participatory Action Research* he explores contact improvisation as a metaphor for collaborative agroecological research, in terms of the trust, flexibility, and responsiveness that are needed in both. His article is itself

in ways an improvisation – considering participatory research in conversation with dance, and writing about agroecological research from the self-reflexive perspective of outside researcher.

In their piece *Documenting USDA Discrimination: Community-Partnered Research on Farm Policy and Land Justice,* Orozco et al. describe the motivations and outcomes of a master's degree practicum that is part of a collaboration among university faculty, students, and two rural/family-farm coalitions. Members of the two farm coalitions determined research questions, priorities, research design, and led in data analysis; students were tasked with gathering information about U.S. Black farmers' experiences of racial discrimination. The article explores the possibilities and limitations of conducting this type of research within a university setting. It highlights how the practice of community-based participatory action research can support community group goals—in this case, goals of countering Black land loss and discriminatory government practices that drive that loss, and the traumatic effects that ensue—and provides reflections on the successes, challenges, and impact of community-partnered research for community organizations and students.

Taken together, these articles explore perils and opportunities of scholar-activist and activist-scholar food justice work—within geography and without. While the papers vary from experimental (Rogé) and personal (Herrera; Weissman) to more traditional forms of academic analysis (Croog et al.; Orozco et al.), all emphasize the 'dance' of doing work that bridges divides; the need to continuously attend to positionality; and the fact that racism, sexism, and elitism do not disappear simply with good intentions. The articles also all focus on the importance of thinking about interpersonal relationships, in activism and scholarship. Mistakes, as all of the authors indicate, happen in the context of these relationships. These mistakes need not be inevitable, and, as the candor of authors in this collection suggest, they can be a resource not only for preventing deleterious outcomes, but for advancing justice.

Through this themed section, we (the guest editors) see an opportunity to expand these discussions beyond the practical and action-oriented aspects of some scholarship. In curating this collection of papers, we have sought to enrich a growing dialogue within the critical geography and food systems literature about how academics can contribute to community-based food justice initiatives—through, and in addition to, our scholarly work. We hope that this themed section also contributes to pushing back on the dichotomous concept of food justice 'activist'/'scholar' and the uneven power dynamics that we feel this false dichotomy can perpetuate. We chose ACME for this intervention because its aim and scope—and the fact that it is an open-access journal— are in line with these goals. We hope that sharing these perspectives can provide fodder for those interested in further integrating scholarship and activism into the work to create a more socially just food system, in one's own communities and beyond.

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