



Making Spaces Something Like Freedom: Black Feminist Praxis In The Re/Imagining Of A Just Food System

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Abstract

Over the past twenty years, scholarly work on food justice movements has increasingly focused on racism in the food system, documenting how the unequal distribution of food, the systematic disenfranchisement of Black farmers, and the ongoing legacies of residential segregation in planning affect the local food system. In some cases, the work specifically highlights contributions of Black growers and activists (White 2018; Sbicca 2018; Alkon and Guthman 2017). This scholarship has done much to demonstrate the extent to which racial justice is integral to many food justice and sovereignty movements. What has been less explored, however, is the extent to which Black women lead these movements. More specifically, we ask what are the political commitments that compel the way they lead movements, engage the earth and growing, and offer care work within their networks. In this essay, we first explore how Black women use Black feminism as a political and personal framework for their food justice efforts, particularly in terms of their leadership, relationship building, and stewardship of the earth. Additionally, we draw from Christina Sharpe's notion of an ethic of care that emerges when attempting to make spaces of freedom, in which "care" is defined as "shared risk" (2016:131), to offer theoretical and methodological observations of how Black feminist thought and practice help us to re/see and re/imagine more equitable food systems.

Keywords

Agriculture, food systems, food justice, Black feminism

Introduction

“There is a pervasive idea in the sustainable food movement that simply returning to a food system of the past would right all that is wrong in the food world. However, history does not show that there has ever been a time when our food system was fair or just. Reflecting through my eyes, the eyes of an African-American woman, I see a system that from the earliest days of the founding of America was built on the annihilation of Native Americans and enslavement of Africans.” - Ladonna Redmond

In 2009, LaDonna Redmond wrote an essay for *The Nation* from which the above quotation comes. In it, she outlined what many at the time failed to see or acknowledge: that food production, distribution, and consumption are not simply a matter of where to grow and how to get people to consume healthier foods. Instead, food is a barometer through which we can measure the failures of the U.S. as a nation state that has long profited from the land and free labor of Indigenous and Black people. For some, especially many in the sustainable food movement, this was eye opening. What LaDonna Redmond suggested was that “knowing your farmer” and “voting with your fork,” strategies that became slogans for alternative food movements, would not adequately address or resolve widespread food inequities. Addressing these issues requires reckoning with the roots which lie in a racial calculus that made possible the theft of land from Indigenous people to create a nation-state that enslaved Black people, exploited Black people’s labor through sharecropping, and continued the work of dispossession through United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) policies and procedures engineered to disenfranchise (Daniel 2013; Grim 1995; Davy, Pennick, Horne, and McCurdy 2017). These historical conditions in part contribute to the present situation. What so often gets framed as an issue of “access” is much more complicated. Food is a site of power and struggle (Patel 2012). Under the guise of a market economy that is neither race neutral nor interested in meeting people’s basic needs, Black neighborhoods (regardless of income) are more likely than their white counterparts to lack less access to grocery stores and good quality food (Reese 2019; White 2018; White 2011).

In response to food inequities in the U.S., a robust though sometimes fragmented food justice movement has emerged. This movement, or what could be argued is a set of related movements that range from reformist approaches to radical redistribution of resources (Holt-Giménez 2011), grew out of a larger movement for environmental justice and seeks to address the disparities and harm within food systems through urban and peri-urban agriculture, building alternative production and distribution systems, policy reforms, and local and national organizing on behalf of Black farmers, land stewards, and communities (Alkon and Agyeman 2011; Alkon and Guthman 2017). Academic literature on these movements has varied — focusing on both the processes and outcomes as well as the barriers that food justice organizations face (White 2011; Reynolds and Cohen 2016; Sbicca 2018; Alkon and Guthman 2017). Black women leaders and Black feminist praxis have guided much of this work, though there has been little exploration of how Black feminist leadership manifests within food justice movements.

Black feminism springs from a genealogy that is too long and complex to account for in this essay. We take up Jennifer Nash’s capacious definition of Black feminism to account for the nuances within Black feminist leadership:

I treat black feminism as a varied project with theoretical, political, activist, intellectual, erotic, ethical, and creative dimensions; black feminism is multiple, myriad, shifting, and

unfolding. To speak of it in the singular is always to reduce its complexity, to neglect its internal debates and its rich and varied approaches to questions of black women's personhood. I treat the word "black" in front of "feminism" not as a marker of identity but as a political category, and I understand a "black feminist" approach to be one that centers analyses of racialized sexism and homophobia, and that foregrounds black women as intellectual producers, as creative agents, as political subjects, and as "freedom dreamers" even as the content and contours of those dreams vary (Nash 2018, 5).

In this essay, we examine Black feminist leadership in food justice movements. In the first section, we lay out what we see as central tenets of a Black feminist praxis and intervention in food justice. Drawing from Christina Sharpe's notion of an ethic of care that emerges when attempting to make spaces of freedom, in which "care" is a form of "shared risk" (Sharpe 2016, 131), we explore how Black women build Black feminist practices through critiques of patriarchy and capitalism, the development of relational leadership, responsible stewardship of the earth, and reciprocal caregiving. In doing so, these leaders use food justice as one avenue to reimagine a more just world. Lastly, we turn to the organizing origins and reflections from the National Black Food and Justice Alliance to engage Black feminist freedom dreams and food justice possibilities.

Care as a Black Feminist Framework

In 1967 long-time activist Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer founded Freedom Farms Cooperative in Sunflower County, Mississippi. Started as an antipoverty strategy, Freedom Farms Cooperative combined self-reliance and collective work to respond to the deplorable material conditions of some of the poorest Black residents in the country. It was also a mechanism through which Black women organized around the immediate and long-term needs of their families and communities. As Monica White describes, when the National Council for Negro Women donated fifty female pigs toward the start of a pig bank, it was the women who built a barn for them (White 2018; see also McCutcheon 2019).¹ It is unlikely that these women called themselves feminist or formally organized themselves around gender politics that placed Black women's leadership at the center. However, following the dynamic leadership of Mrs. Hamer these unnamed women became concerned with a fundamental question that united them in a holistic vision: who is going to feed our communities?

It is not unusual that these women were concerned with food and nourishment, since they prepared and often produced the food they ate. Historically, women have been associated with domesticity and home spaces (Allen and Sachs 2007), though the distinctions between "home" and "public" spaces are complicated for Black women because of threats of violence, being seen and treated as ungendered laborers, and the need for multiple income streams to support a single household, which often required Black women to be in white women's homes more than their own (Hartman 2007; Sharpe 2009; Williams-Forson 2006). When Mrs. Hamer founded Freedom Farms Cooperative and these women offered their labor, excitement, and care to the work of building a local, self-determining economy at which food was the center, they furthered the ancestral work that we continue:

¹ACME is committed to interrogating multiple forms of oppression—including those forms that result from human use and exploitation of animals. During the review process we were asked questions about how the pigs were treated, and those are questions that we do not have answers to. Though it is beyond the scope of this article both in terms of content and historical context, we want to acknowledge here that Freedom Farms Collective's visions for liberation were intimately connected to and in part reliant on the labor and sacrifice of the female pigs collected. This is a connection that is worthy of exploration—in the context of interrogating both speciesism *and* anti-Blackness that often renders Black women as ungendered and unworthy of protection. For a recent exploration of the connections between (anti)Blackness and animality, see Zakiyyah Iman Jackson's *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiracist World*. For examinations of connections between veganism, speciesism, anti-Blackness, gender, and creating ethical foodscapes, see A. Breeze Harper's body of work, which includes her long-time blog, www.sistahvegan.com.

the work of making spaces something like freedom; spaces in which Black people can and do exist outside of and beyond subjection and abjection (Sharpe 2016).

Black women's presence alone does not define a Black feminist praxis. Not all Black women identify as feminists, even when they are the subject of feminist inquiry or critique. Rather, we see Black feminisms in the vein articulated by Hortense Spillers as "a repertoire of concepts, practices, and alignments, [that] is progressive in outlook and dedicated to the view that sustainable life systems must be available to everyone; it also stands up for the survival of this planet, which pits it against the kleptocratic darkness that now engulfs us. If we're going to reach a different place — and it is difficult these days to be hopeful, I would acknowledge — then black feminist ideas and ideals might be one of the lights leading us there."²

If Black feminisms are lights that help us imagine new ways of being and relating, then how we think about and enact care is the energy that animates those lights. In their introductory essay to a special issue on care, Hi'ilei Hobart and Tamara Kneese define radical care as "a set of vital but underappreciated strategies for enduring precarious worlds" (Hobart and Kneese 2020, 2). Carefully laying out a genealogy of care in both academic and activist lineages, Hobart and Kneese stress that while care is most often associated with a feeling, it has meaning and application well beyond that of a feeling for others. They write, "theorized as an affective connective tissue between an inner self and an outer world, care constitutes a feeling with, rather than a feeling for, others. When mobilized, it offers visceral, material, and emotional heft to acts of preservation that span a breadth of localities: selves, communities, and social worlds" (Hobart and Kneese 2020, 2). This understanding of care does not preclude the possibility of interpersonal feelings of attachment to another being. Rather, it broadens the scope to think of care as organized and often collective responses to structural inequities.

Within her framework of the wake and wake work, Christina Sharpe insists that "thinking needs care ('all thought is Black thought') and that thinking and care need to stay in the wake" (Sharpe 2016, 5). In this context, "the wake" is both a metaphorical and material formulation of the outer world that Hobart and Kneese suggest; and the work of care is the work of survival and communal re/imagination. Sharpe continues,

Living as I have argued we do in the wake of slavery, in spaces where we were never meant to survive, or have been punished for surviving and for daring to claim or make spaces of something like freedom, we yet reimagine and transform spaces for and practices of an ethics of care (as in repair, maintenance, and attention, an ethics of seeing, and of being in the wake as consciousness; as a way of remembering and observance that started with the door of no return, continued in the hold of the ship, and on the shore (2016, 130-131).

In food justice, Black feminist practices are at the heart of many of these reimaginings and transformations. This notion of "care" problematizes mainstream thinking about Black being and interrupts the violence enacted by the state and its attending actors. In other words, here we consider care as practices that do not seek to extend suffering (Sharpe 2016, 5, 130-32). In food justice, as in other spaces where liberation is centered, we respond to Derrais Carter's call to "create spaces, platforms, environments, partnerships, theories, methods, and art that witness our freedom in their very creation" (Carter 2018, 41). The practices at the center of Black feminist food justice leadership are "living experiments in freedom" (Carter 2018, 39).

According to patriarchal norms, care work is expected from women and is rooted in

² "The Scholarly Journey of Hortense Spillers." BrandeisNow, February 1, 2019. <http://www.brandeis.edu/now/2019/february/hortense-sillers-ga.html>

domination. In the context of Black feminist food work however, care takes on different meanings. Rooted in multiple forms of nourishment, Black feminist food work presumes that if our care starts with and among Black women, then it will extend to others. Given that Black women's physical and emotional pain is not always taken seriously by physicians (Hoffman et al. 2016), that we are not fairly compensated for our work despite our qualifications (Mandel and Semyonov 2016), and that our life expectancy is less than white women (Geronimus 1992; Geronimus, Hicken, Keene, and Bound 2006), care as a central component of Black feminist food politics offers a direct affront to white supremacist patriarchy.

Taking Black women's leadership in food justice seriously extends beyond issues of representation. In a western orientation in which one's being is presumed to be fragmented and individualized, a Black feminist approach to food justice seeks to rejoin or heal these fractures through care-based practices that recognize multiple layers of interconnectedness: between past, present, and futures; between the spiritual and physical realms of the human experience; and between us and the land. It is through this commitment to interconnectedness that a care-based system rooted in Black feminist values counters the extractive, patriarchal labour expectations that seek to predetermine the care work that we can and should do. A Black feminist praxis is an expressed and intentional divestment from patriarchy, which also entails divestment from destructive patterns of domination that extend to the land and all that inhabit it. Black feminism is Black liberation *and also* eco-justice — an understanding that our liberation is inextricably linked to the earth. We see this expression in the many ways our foremothers and ancestral practices teach us to pay homage to our ancestors in addition to honouring our connection to the earth.

Black Feminists at Work on the Ground: The National Black Food and Justice Alliance

“As food justice activists and organizers, we have to make the connection between food justice and a whole host of issues that food, land, and the exploitation of black bodies intersect with in highly sophisticated and systematic ways each and every day. We must be unapologetic in charging the current food system in its engagement in modern day lynchings that mirror Jim Crow policies, and posturing that marginalizes Black communities from any semblance of food sovereignty, self-determination, and land.” – Beatriz Beckford, co-founder NBFJA

“Care as shared risk” is not a theoretical construct absent of application. Instead, we understand it to be an overarching, aspirational, and relational framework that has and can be employed in a variety of organizational structures. In this section, we turn to the National Black Food and Justice Alliance (NBFJA or the Alliance) to reflect on some of the ways care gets framed and deployed beyond narrow gender stereotypes associated with care work. The 2016 launch of the Alliance—a coalition of Black leaders, farms, and organizations invested in fighting state violence and building alternate systems of power that centre Black dignity, nourishment, agency and self-determination via food and land justice—began with two radical Black feminists, Dara Cooper and Beatriz Beckford. With foundations in the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement (MXGM)³, gender and racial justice organizing, as well as various food justice formations, Cooper and Beckford saw an opportunity to explicitly build a food justice movement in which Black feminist principles would be central to furthering Black liberation. An intentional and expressed commitment to gender-based equity and justice from the organizers of a formation is noteworthy. Patriarchy instructs us to position cisgendered, heterosexual men as charismatic leaders, architects, and strategists of movements while women are relegated to second class positions or made to be invisible. Therefore, having two radical

³ To learn more about Malcolm X Grassroots Movement, see: <https://freethelandmxgm.org/>.

Black feminists as the founding architects, theorists, strategists, and primary founding spokespersons as the Alliance set out to build radical food, economic and social structures rooted in care is significant. Seeing the possibilities of this Black feminist-led food justice work, Malik Yakini, executive director of the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network and a prominent food movement leader, joined as a third co-founder.

The founders understood they needed to deliberately resist, dismantle, and unlearn white supremacy and patriarchy to build a food system that was rooted in care rather than exploitation. Thus, the ideological background and affiliations of the organizers are important to note. Taking a revolutionary orientation toward food justice meant a critique of anti-blackness, racial capitalism, patriarchy, and white supremacy. It also meant theorizing and positioning Black people as being able to self-determine the means to sustain and nourish our communities. When the Alliance was founded, the goal was to bring Black people together to define a collective path towards liberation. As revolutionary Black feminists, the cofounders were not interested in integrating into or reinforcing U.S. empire, which has never seen nor respected Black humanity or autonomy. Instead, we aim to fortify our communities, boldly fight against the current system, and create systems that are essential to our means to be truly self-determining.

NBFJA's objectives are to bring together Black leaders and to unearth the possibilities of radical Black organizing and leadership in the food movement for the greater purpose of Black liberation. Organizers have focused on building an intentional foundation and agreements rooted in practices that challenge white supremacy, patriarchy, and racial capitalism. These include an ongoing practice of collective democratic governance, political education, and what we call "creating togetherness" and kinship care. Here, Black feminist praxis looks like caring for the political development of members; curating safe and creative spaces for members to bring their whole selves; creating tighter networks (including mutual aid) to protect and invest in the well-being of members; and ongoing experimentation with the many forms that collective decision-making, governance, and agency can take. For example, this in part means experimenting with collective stewardship and redistribution of millions of dollars to Black food and land projects throughout the country. Such action requires an ongoing practice around democratic decision making and resource sharing. Our Black feminist praxis also looks like actively deconstructing false divisions while building intergenerational wisdom (the founding leadership team members ranged from 18 - 70 years of age) rooted in the experiences, analysis, expertise, and valuable work in urban and rural areas and municipalities.

NBFJA members participate in ongoing economic examinations and experimentations rooted in collective care via what we call "self-determining food economies." These are economies rooted in community care and resilience with the aim of increasing agency among Black people in local food systems. Through self-determining food economies, we do the aspirational work of divesting from the destructive, corporate-controlled industrial agricultural system and invest in designing economies that are rooted in nourishment and care for the earth, our communities, and each other. This work is inspired by the local food systems work of the Black Oaks Center for Sustainable Renewable Living (an off-grid 40-acre eco-campus in Pembroke, Illinois led by Dr. Jifunza Wright, who studied with the late holistic healer, Dr. Alvenia Fulton) and Fred Carter, who teaches Black communities to be self-sufficient and resilient through sustainable energy, food, building/housing and our relationships. Another inspiration--the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network, which runs a seven-acre urban farm where they grow over 30 different varieties of fruits, vegetables and herbs; offer a "Food Warriors" youth food justice program; and recently launched the Detroit "People's Co-op" and community food commons. These systems include shared Black leadership among various parts of the food system (and beyond), the creation of cooperative economies, and a

deepened sense of interconnectedness that confronts individualism and competition in direct ways.

Along the same lines, our land justice work provides another example of experimentation with divestment in patriarchy. Initiated by member organizations, the Southeastern African American Farmers Organic Network (SAAFON) and Land Loss Prevention Project (LLPP), this work initially began in response to the urgent lack of land and spaces stewarded by Black people in which organizers can train and meet. While our work focuses on the protection of Black farmers and their land from rapid and often violent land loss, we have invested in a politic of non-extraction, a commitment to removing land from the speculative market, and an explicit rejection of the commodification and private ownership of land. Instead, our focus is to preserve land and move our communities towards collective, community-controlled processes that reshape our relationship to each other and to the earth.

Our final Black feminist reflection on NBFJA is that many of its members and organizers have been influenced by the many radical Black feminists who shape the movement to abolish prisons as we know them. Members frequently engage in discussions examining what an abolitionist framework looks like with the U.S. industrial food system. The contemporary food system serves as the “last plantation”⁴ and many NBFJA organizers argue that the work to end slavery will only be achieved through the abolishment of the prison industrial complex *and* the abolition of the U.S. industrial food system. Abolition requires a complete destruction of carceral institutions alongside the promotion of expansive imaginations to create more just institutions. NBFJA members are working to do just that, looking beyond carceral and destructive food systems to new imaginaries of freedom, nourishment, sustainability and affirmations of Black dignity and humanity.

The difficult work of developing systems to nourish Black communities in the most dignified, considerate, healthy, and sustainable ways possible is the practice of Black feminist food futures work. While land justice and cooperative economics have long been an essential part of Black community work (Nembhard 2014), here we examine the practical influence of Black feminism via NBFJA. Through an ethic of care grounded in experiments in how to govern and create structures that are not rooted in extraction and exploitation, the Alliance offers insight into how Black-led food movements provide strategic paths forward within a larger movement for Black liberation.

Conclusion

In this essay, we outlined Black women’s leadership, cooperative economics, and care rooted in a pursuit of Black liberation as key tenets of Black feminist praxis in food justice movements. We cite Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer’s work as an early, documented example of how, in the context of racism, patriarchy, and the continued failures of the state, Black women co-created the cooperative mechanisms needed to provide nourishment for malnourished southerners, (White 2018; Dickinson 2019). Freedom Farms Cooperative faced many of the same problems that current movements face, including funding crises, racist backlash, and the ever-present threat of corporatization. However, Freedom Farms Cooperative is part of a longer tradition of Black radical imagination that fuels past and present freedom movements (Kelley 2002). We acknowledge, however, that Black feminism is

⁴ “The Last Plantation” is what many activists labelled the USDA, particularly during the era of Black farmer activism that resulted in the Pigford vs. Glickman settlement against USDA for racial discrimination against Black farmers. Here we apply this term to the entire contemporary industrial food system.

capacious and shows up in food justice organizing and praxis in ways that are not outlined here. We also acknowledge that this article focuses on U.S. food justice work, though Black feminist leadership in food movements is global in scope.⁵ Our goal is not to preclude the possibility of other examples or forms of Black feminist leadership but to highlight a gap in the literature on food justice and open up possibilities for additional research and writing in this area.

The work of Black feminists in the food justice world is broad and deep — from the Black women leading the Black Farmers Urban Growers Conference, one of the largest conferences for Black urban growers and farmers, to the award winning leadership of Leah Penniman and Soul Fire Farm, to Shirley Sherrod’s stewardship of the Southwest Georgia Project, to decades of urgent legal strategizing under the leadership of Savi Horne at Land Loss Prevention Project, to investing in sustainable alternatives via Southeastern African American Farmers Organic Network, and the significant body of trainings and field of “Afroecology” developed primarily by Black feminist farmers via Black Dirt Farm Collective. What is clear from these initiatives is that Black women’s leadership and resistance around food systems is robust.

Like the work of Black feminists in the food system and beyond, this essay is aspirational. While we believe that care is a necessary and capacious framework for doing food justice work, “care” is also laden with racialized, gendered expectations that render Black women leaders as caretakers while at the same time reproducing them as the targets of violence and harm. In the crosshairs of white supremacy and patriarchy, Black feminists are often doing the work of institution building while also huddling together outside the spotlight to offer advice, affirmation, and tangible support to recover from violence and aggression aimed at them. Sometimes, this violence and aggression arises simultaneously from outside *and* within Black food movement spaces. The challenges to Black feminist leadership are many and yet we believe it to be potentially transformative for how we see, think, and imagine new (food) worlds.

In writing this essay, we call on the names of our foremothers in food work: Fannie Lou Hamer, Vertamae Grosvenor, Edna Lewis, Dr. Alvenia Fulton, Wangari Maathai, Cynthia Hayes, Dorothy Wise, our own grandmothers, and the many unnamed women who planted, harvested, and fed communities. We looked to the work of our peers and mentors for inspiration in the current moment: Monica White, Leah Penniman, Savi Horne, Melbah Smith, Alice Parrish, LaDonna Redmond, Aleya Frasier, Kirtrina Baxter, Dean Jackson, Brenda Thompson-Duchene, Chef Nadine Nelson, Psyche Williams-Forson, Kimberly Nettles-Barcelón, Rafia Zafar, Francia Marquez, Charo Minas Rojas, Priscilla McCutcheon, Erika Allen, Karen Washington, Alsie Parks, Shirley Sherrod, Sthandiwe Yeni, Darnella Burkett, Estelle Apperwhite, Lindsay Lunsford, Desiree Lewis, Donna Andrews, Tiffany Washington, and many others who we cannot name. The work we draw from and do provides a vision for relating and being that we try to operationalize on a daily basis. While still a work in progress, this vision is—as Hortense Spillers suggests—a light; perhaps the most hopeful guide we have.

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⁵ One such example is the “Critical Food Studies: Transdisciplinary Humanities Approaches” project led by Desiree Lewis at the University of Western Cape. Infused with Black feminist practices, the project bridges fields in the humanities while partnership with communities outside the university.

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