From Tyranny to Sovereignty

*Transforming American Food Systems*

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**Part One: A Brief History of American Food**

Angela popped into the farm on a hot June morning, one of those early summer days when each plant radiates a sense of plumpness and promise. I was running around like a chicken with its head cut off––in my typical farm-working style––when she offered to lend a hand. I assigned her the not-so-miserable task of harvesting strawberries­, my go-to errand for new volunteers. We had a couple hundred plants exploding with berries and I sorely needed the help.

After a brief harvesting how-to, I ran to the shed to organize equipment for an incoming field trip. By the time I returned she had picked the field completely clean. In a decade of farming I had not seen someone move through a berry field with half that speed. Angela, it turns out, had spent the past ten years harvesting strawberries on some of the biggest berry farms in California. Asking her to harvest our humble garden was like asking Miles Davis if he could play *Mary Had a Little Lamb*.

After harvesting fruit for ten years, this was the first time that Angela had picked berries purely for her own consumption. We were a community-based donation farm and everybody was free to take home a portion of the produce that they helped harvest. Still, she sheepishly asked if she could take some berries home, with visible discomfort in her face. It dawned on me then that were reenacting the exact same power dynamics she experienced in her life as a farm worker. I, a white man, was the boss, and would determine exactly what she would receive for her labor.

For me and many others, food production symbolizes a reconnection to nature, a unique freedom of being, and an occasional taste of mother earth’s abundance. Even amidst its stresses–––and I have experienced my share of drought, pestilence, and arduous unceasing work hours––I had never considered that food could also be symbol of trauma. When Angela told me about her 7-day-a-week, 12-hour-a-day working schedule, and the crammed and shoddy housing her employer provided her, I could not believe my insensitivity at asking her to pick berries for me. I was left to wonder: what does it mean when food, which is so essential to culture, becomes corrupted, distorted, or deleted entirely? How do we transform a food system that is built on the scar tissue of countless exploited and abused laborers? Ultimately, any effort to advance a truly equitable food system must first reckon with the violent history of American agriculture.

*Original Sin*

Agriculture, as John T. Edge writes in *The Potlikker Papers, “*begat the original sin” of America: human slavery. Beyond the institutionalization of chattel slavery in agricultural production, White landowners also profited from the expertise of African slave farmers to improve their crop production and animal husbandry. After the Emancipation Proclamation African-American leaders determined that the key to true independence was land ownership. To that effect, General William Tecumseh Sherman issued Field Order #15, allowing freed people to cultivate large swaths of Georgia and South Carolina. Although Congress issued legislation guaranteeing “not more than 40 acres of land” to “every male citizen whether refugee or freedman”, President Andrew Johnson ultimately vetoed the bill. This moment, where the government was unwilling to guarantee the means for the economic self-sufficiency for African-American farmers, has consequences that resound to this day. [[1]](#footnote-1)

The institution of sharecropping, a form of debt slavery, continued to oppress Black agrarians post-emancipation. The enactment of Jim Crow laws ensued, effectively systematizing a process of dehumanization that unremittingly threatened the lives of African-Americans, particularly in rural areas where the threat of lynching was far more prevalent.[[2]](#footnote-2)

*A Resurgent Food Culture*

For African-Americans, and particularly for Black Southerners, the practice of agriculture continues to be fraught. The adverse effects of institutional racism have compounded over the generations to cripple the economic prospects for many of today’s Black farmers.[[3]](#footnote-3) At the same time, African-American food culture has proven to be incredibly versatile, serving as a form of cultural connection to Africa and as a kind of solidarity with enslaved ancestors.[[4]](#footnote-4)

For example, potlikker––the residual broth left over from cooking down greens––started as a food item of necessity for enslaved cooks and their families (as Edge notes, “the broth, not the greens, was nutrient rich”). Like many of the world’s most prized dishes, potlikker got its start as salvage food. Today it is showcased in fine dining restaurants and cooking magazines, completing its transformation from a food of oppression into a symbol of the enduring culture of Black Southerners. Edge argues that many now consider the dish foundational to Southern cuisine, which often serves as a proxy for American food culture writ large. Indeed, there is an increasing awareness around the fact that Black cooks are largely responsible for shaping many aspects of American cuisine as we know it.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The increasing recognition of the importance of African-American food culture, however, does little to improve the relationship between African-Americans and agriculture. Plantations were sites incredible physical and psychological violence, dotting the rural geography of the South with countless landmarks of horror. America’s history of chattel slavery will forever have an outsized impact on the Black agrarian imagination, defining its suspicions of government and its visions for self-sufficiency.

*Freedom Farms*

The life of the Civil Rights icon Fannie Lou Hamer characterizes the promise and peril interwoven in visions of Black agrarianism. Born in Mississippi in 1917 as the youngest of 20 children, Hamer began working in the cotton fields at 6 years old, and lived under the constant threat of sexual violence from white men in the field. As an adult, she was sterilized without her knowledge after going to the hospital for a minor surgery. In the early 1960s, she led multiple important Civil Rights initiatives, such as voter registration drives and acts of explicit desegregation, one of which resulted in her being arrested, jailed, and beaten.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Amidst a life of constant poverty and physical violence, Hamer envisioned rural communities where cooperative groups of Black farmers could grow their own food and achieve self-sufficiency. The Freedom Farms Cooperative, started in 1969, was the culmination of a lifetime of Civil Rights activism. Yet, where my experience of farming was the freedom *to* express myself, the liberty that Hamer sought in Freedom Farms was a freedom *from* harm. As Hamer put it, the goal of the project was “freedom from hunger, poverty, and homes that did not adequately protect needy families from the cold winds of Old Man Winter”.[[7]](#footnote-7) In this way, Freedom Farms was more than a utopian fantasy––it was a necessity. It was the only way that a rural African-American community could be truly safe.

Freedom Farms provided land to Black families who would not otherwise be able to afford it, and granted funds to families facing foreclosure. The source of the project’s funding was contentious. In addition to fundraising from private donors––Harry Belafonte was a crucial supporter––the project also relied on Federal Housing Administration (FHA) loans. Hamer strongly distrusted government funding at any level, and was never convinced that the government would be truly interested in the notion of an autonomous Black farming enclave.[[8]](#footnote-8)

She had every right to be skeptical. On top of the exclusionary and racist “red-lining” practices that the FHA employed by denying African-American families credit for home loans, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) restricted farm loans to Black communities throughout the latter half of the 20th century. In *Pigford v. Glickman*, African-American farmers won one of the biggest civil rights settlements in history in a class-action lawsuit brought against the USDA for racial discrimination in its allocation of assistance and farm loans.[[9]](#footnote-9)

In part owing to these discriminatory practices, the number of black farmers has dwindled tremendously over the course of the 20th century. In 1910, about 14% of all farmers were African-American, today that number is roughly 2% today.[[10]](#footnote-10) Without USDA assistance, many Black families were forced to give up their farms and their land, crushing their ability to pass on real estate to future generations. While the settlements in the *Pigford* case constituted a large sum––$1.25 billion in total––many Black farmers considered it too little, too late.[[11]](#footnote-11) [[12]](#footnote-12) After all, how does one account for the accumulated economic consequences of excluding Black families from the ability to own, develop, and pass on farmland? Hamer accepted government funding for Freedom Farms, but always knew that an autonomous Black farming enclave could never be truly self-sufficient if it was propped up by federal funding. She was right.

*Braceros: A New Pool of Cheap Labor*

While Black farmers have by and large been excluded from modern agriculture––only 3 percent of all farmworkers are African-American––food production continues to be a locus of oppression for other groups, specifically, migrant farm laborers from Mexico. The original Guest Worker, or *Bracero,* Program, stemmed from American farmers demands for labor during World War II. From its inception it set the tone for how Mexican farmworkers would be treated on American farms for rest of the century, and how many are still treated to this day.

In 1942, the governments of Mexico and the U.S. reached an agreement to allow Mexican laborers to work on American farms on temporary contracts, institutionalizing a pattern of migration that was already occurring. While the U.S. government promised guest workers decent housing, food, and a living wage, employers by and large placed Braceros in sub-par housing, fed them low-quality food, and forced them to work incredible hours in hot climates. With little to no oversight over this program, the government willfully ignored the plight of Braceros, ultimately normalizing their abuse.[[13]](#footnote-13)

The current manifestation of the Bracero program––the H2-A visa program––ties workers to single employers and exempts them from the same legal protections as American farmworkers. As a result, the power dynamics resemble that of a modern-day system of indentured servitude––but with no chance to earn citizenship. In 2013, The Southern Poverty Law Center published a report that catalogues a history of extreme abuses perpetrated by employers upon their guest workers, concluding that the H2-A program is “inherently abusive and unfair to both U.S. and foreign workers”. [[14]](#footnote-14)

The bottomless thirst for human labor to work the fertile soils of the United States has come at an incalculable cost. In order to effectively exploit human laborers, our agricultural system has systematically dehumanized them, in an effort to sustain efficient production and accumulate wealth for farm owners. The same forces of geographic and cultural isolation that enabled the limitless physical and psychological violence of African slaves are still present in the unjust treatment of migrant laborers to this day. A truly equitable food system in the United States must work to correct the historic injustices of American agriculture, and must at all times respect the dignity of the farm owner, farm worker, and food consumer alike.

**Part Two: Towards Food Sovereignty**

The concept of food sovereignty is a useful guide on the route towards food justice for historically marginalized communities. Food sovereignty begins by establishing the universal right to healthy, community-appropriate food for all income levels. The concept transcends the issue of access by promoting equity in local food systems, and advancing a community’s ability to create sustainable, equitable, profitable, and dignified relationships with the food they eat and the land that it comes from. In essence, communities should not only be given the resources they need to nourish themselves, but they should also have a say in how their local food system evolves as well as an ability profit from its growth.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Programs and policies that seek to advance food sovereignty could utilize the following levers:

1. Food-sector business and skills training programs
2. Low/no interest loans for local food-sector businesses, as well as for farmland purchases and farm business enterprises
3. Local food councils that serve as a conduit for Local Food Promotion Program (LFPP) funding
4. Programs specifically tailored to advancing food systems for communities of color who have been historically excluded from the advancement of the food industry

Much of this progress can be made through the vehicle of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), one of the largest anti-poverty programs in the country. In 2017, SNAP served over 40 million individuals with in-kind food benefits that valued over $60 billion.[[16]](#footnote-16) SNAP is a crucial policy lever to utilize in an effort to transform American food systems, firstly because of its immense scale and scope, and secondly because it provides a important pillar of support for ethnic and racial minorities in the U.S. (over 40% of SNAP participants are racial/ethnic minorities).[[17]](#footnote-17)

Proponents of SNAP highlight its’ ability to buffer the economy against economic downturns and tend to prize its administrative efficiency. In 2017, 93% of SNAP funds went directly to participants­­, the rest was spent in a mix of administrative costs and project funding. While the program’s efficiency is impressive, SNAP underinvests in its administrative capacity, particularly at the local level, hindering its ability to assist the individuals it aims to serve. In 2015, only 70% of eligible individuals from low-income families actually received SNAP benefits.[[18]](#footnote-18) That leaves over 17 million eligible participants who did not receive benefits. Bolstering the administrative capacity of SNAP––and distributing the funds across preexisting SNAP offices––could ensure that *all* low-income families receive the assistance they need.

*Government Funds for Community Organizing*

The boost in SNAP funding at the local level could also be used to create an essential new unit at SNAP offices: the SNAP community outreach team. The unit could bolster the overall goals of the program by determining local obstacles to SNAP adoption and working with local grocers and other food distributors to increase the availability of community-appropriate, nutritionally rich foods. Ideally, it should be composed of local community members with demonstrated community organizing abilities. The team should work with community-based organizations and food banks to disseminate information about SNAP eligibility, SNAP-ED nutritional education, and SNAP “double-up” programs that incentivize healthy eating.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Perhaps most importantly, SNAP community liaison units should be charged with the task of organizing Local Food Councils, often referred to as Food Policy Councils (FPC). FPCs are cross-sectoral community-based coalitions aimed at improving access to healthy food, the consumption of healthy food, and community economic development initiatives rooted in food-sector jobs and businesses.[[20]](#footnote-20) Members on the council may include: local government officials, leaders of community-based organizations, farmers, farm workers, business owners, faith leaders, food security professionals, agricultural extension personnel, academics, restaurateurs, teachers, and otherwise engaged community members. To augment the political power of the council, FPCs should include higher-level public officials, such as a city councilmember or a head of a county agency. Close ties to local government, strong leadership, and a commitment to policy engagement are three critical elements of an effective FPC.[[21]](#footnote-21)

Once convened, governments should support LFCs by providing meeting spaces, information, and direct compensation for the time of council members. However, it is important that LFCs maintain structural autonomy from the government in order to navigate the fine line between governmental goals and community interests. This distance enables FPCs to effectively advocate on behalf of its constituents for locally appropriate food policy changes, such as: minimum wage increases for farmworkers, expanding the amount of city-managed properties used for community garden and farming, community-appropriate nutrition incentive bills, or “good food” purchasing policies for local businesses.

Furthermore, LFCs should serve a conduit for USDA grant funding through the Local Food Promotion Program (LFPP). The LFPP is a USDA program that provides grant funds to launch, develop, and expand local and regional food business enterprises. Once organized, LFCs could serve as the organizing agent that requests proposals for community food initiatives, such as the creation of local food processing and distribution centers (food hubs)[[22]](#footnote-22), kitchen business incubators, farm-to-school supply chains, or economic development programs that advance food-sector needs specific to their community.

*Advancing Economic Self-Sufficiency through Food-Sector Development*

Communities of color, many of which have historically generated enormous profits for owners of agricultural enterprises, should have more than just a say in how their local food system gets developed. They should be afforded the ability to own, and benefit from, key elements of their food system such as grocery stores, restaurants, food processing, and food distribution and packaging businesses. FPCs should be tasked with the objective to develop food-sector training and businesses development programs in conjunction with local business development organizations, such as community development corporations (CDCs) or Business Improvement Districts (BIDs).

Crucially, any employment or business training courses should be taught be people who are of the community and speak the language of the community. Upon completion of an entrepreneurship course, the program should guide participants through the process of applying for food-sector specific funding programs. Any loan program formed to advance equitable food systems must not disqualify people who lack collateral or the credit history to qualify for traditional loans. Able entrepreneurs of color are too often excluded from opportunities to earn income based on their credit score, indirectly benefiting wealthier entrepreneurs who have inherited sufficient collateral.[[23]](#footnote-23)

The food sector is ripe for economic coordination between businesses and skill development programs, as agri-food is one segment of the economy that is clearly poised for continued growth and expansion.[[24]](#footnote-24) Furthermore, there is growing awareness of the potential for food-related jobs to provide a form of therapy for people recovering from drug addiction, and even serve as a crucial lifeline for the formerly incarcerated.[[25]](#footnote-25) Working in the restaurant industry is one of the few avenues that individuals with a criminal record have to achieve gainful employment, as background checks and formal educational experience are seldom required. While the restaurant industry has a reputation for engaging in excessive alcohol and substance abuse, kitchen training programs that prepare formerly incarcerated individuals for restaurant work have demonstrated successful outcomes for both restaurant businesses and the formerly incarcerated. In this way, food-sector training programs can be used as a tool to promote economic self-sufficiency, reduce recidivism, and redress some of the damages that the criminal justice system has levied against minority communities.

Furthermore, all communities should be granted the opportunity to grow their own food. Local FPCs may align with others in the region to cultivate a purview that spans across urban, suburban, and rural divides, ultimately guiding city and county efforts to acquire abandoned or blighted properties to be repurposed as sites for food production. Governments should create a land bank program for these urban, suburban, or rural sites that could be leased out or sold to eager food entrepreneurs, such as those successfully completing a business training program, or other organized community-based food producing entities. The creation of a revolving loan fund for the land leases and acquisition loans would allow the program to move at a pace that is consistent with its success.

*Conclusion*

The ingredient that links SNAP-funded community organizing efforts, food policy councils, food-sector employment and business programs, and community-led agricultural land banks, is an emphasis on local determinism. In order to redress the historic injustices of food production in the United States, diverse neighborhoods must be enabled to create food systems that suit their diverse needs. Only by honoring a community’s sovereignty in the process­––and advancing local ownership over many steps in the local food supply chain––can federal funding flow into a community in a way that is congruous with its specific needs and preferences.

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