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Food Justice: What's Race Got to Do with It?

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The authors, both experienced activists, discuss the myriad ways in which race shapes the reality of people's lives, including the racialized outcomes of food production and consumption.

Race is the Rubicon we have never crossed in this country. Some claim that race is no longer a factor in the United States. We are "beyond racism." The opposite is actually the case. Everything in this country is touched by race, from where we live or choose to live, go to school or send our children to school, where we worship and with whom we go to the movies, or even walk at night. Nothing escapes race. Both our mental and our physical health in the United States are impacted by our racial status.

From field to fork, the production and consumption of food is racialized. An examination of food security, as determined both by the application of system-wide safety standards and the nutritional value of readily available food products, requires both an historical analysis and one that factors in the impact of the structural racism embedded within the food system.

Advocates in food justice have been compelled recently to pursue the impact of racism embedded within their efforts to promote more equitable community-driven food policies and

practices and as a crucial element of any environmental justice strategy. Because corporate America is an integral part of the nation's race construct and serves as a major component of structural racism in the United States, the food system must also be approached through the prism of race. The food system in the United States is controlled by corporate America. For example, one company owns 90 percent of the seed supply; three corporations process over 80 percent of U.S. beef; and three or four corporations in every region own most of the supermarkets and grocery stores. Corporate giants also dominate the development of public policies through the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Consumers and small growers, of any description, have little voice in this

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process, yet, as in most aspects of a race-constructed system, people of color have even less. Race and class inequities abound in this arrangement. Regulation, compliance, and enforcement practices reflect these racial power dynamics of corporate dominance.

Industrialized feeding products, genetically engineered crop varieties, and processed food add complications to the health status of poor people, particularly people of color, who as individuals lack the power to determine their own food and nutritional decisions. Poor people make up the majority of school lunch and fast-food consumers, yet they often lack transportation to get to a grocery store, even one that is not particularly whole-food oriented. The lack of choices within the food distribution system for the poor is dramatic. Food stamps, bridge cards, and the United States Department of Agriculture's Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program generate enormous profits for agribusiness and food distribution corporations. Even nonprofit institutions, rarely represented by poor people in their decision-making processes, add to the unjustness of the food system by directing grants and donations to programs that all-too-seldom take into consideration the self-identified needs and wishes of grassroots communities. This does not require or presume evil intent on well-meaning and necessary efforts to feed hungry people, yet cheap and calorie-laden foodstuffs are staples in feeding programs and food pantries across the country. The consequences for malnourished poor people have ripple effects: the reliance on the pharmaceutical industry to combat illness—hyperactivity in children, obesity, hormone imbalances—all result from consumption of low-quality, high-calorie, chemically laced foods.

But nothing is neutral or equitable when it comes to race. If you are of color in this country, you experience stress levels that affect how long and well you live. Your health, both physical and mental, on the job, in the neighborhood, and at home, is negatively affected by what Professor Derald Wing Sue refers to as "daily doses of micro-aggressions" (2010). It has been said that "racism can make your blood boil." It is not just what you

eat but where you eat it and under what circumstances. To be “of color” in the United States means that the racial environment in which you live and work makes you more susceptible to certain life-threatening situations. It creates stress and undermines resistance. In such communities, police too often operate as a social control mechanism, and racial profiling is employed as a primary operational tactic. The food distribution system works differently in communities of color. Even if a chain grocery store happens to be there, the quality of food seems poorer than in other parts of town; the varieties of foods are fewer. Whole Foods is not likely to open a store in your neighborhood; farmers markets are somewhere else. Foods preferred by people of color are often unavailable or overpriced.

Where we buy our food, what we eat, where we eat it, and the quality and quantity of our choices are impacted by the racial demographics of a given locale. That this is true in low-income communities has long been known. But race is not just about poor people. Racism is embedded in the societal arrangement and affects us all, whatever our “race” happens to be.

Take New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Six years after floods ravished a large section of New Orleans referred to as “New Orleans East,” full recovery is still a long way away. New Orleans East is home to 73,000, mostly African American, residents. By itself it would constitute the fourth largest city in the State of Louisiana. But it is not populated by poor people. New Orleans East is a prime address whose residents average annual incomes between \$50,000 and \$100,000. The area is comprised of upwardly mobile, young professionals. Many occupy positions in government, health care, and business. But in its entirety, New Orleans East has no large grocery store. There is no Kroger or Safeway or AP or (local) Winn Dixie. Residents of “The East” must drive twenty miles—to suburbs of New Orleans—to buy groceries.

What gives here? It can’t be a shortfall in population needed to make a big chain store profitable. It can’t be buying power: African Americans as a group are some of the biggest consumers in the society. It can’t be class; these folks are decidedly middle class. What one is left with is race. The racial makeup of the area is either not “conducive” to big business investments *or* there are other plans for The East that have not yet been revealed.

Race is always on the table, if not on top of the table, then right under it. Or so it seems. In cities like Newark, Camden, East St. Louis, but also Memphis and Baltimore and parts of New York City like the Bronx and Brooklyn’s Bushwick section, large nationally known grocery stores are out of reach and frequently out of town. In 2007, Detroit—whose population is 85 percent African American—was designated as one of the nation’s “food deserts” when it lost Farmer Jack, the last of the six chains that had operated in the city (A&P, Kroger, Wrigley, Great Scott, and Chatham). Most food sales had shifted

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to the proliferating presence of fringe food retailers: drug stores, gas stations, liquor stores, party stores, convenience stores, dollar stores, and bakeries. In these urban “food deserts,” prices are higher and food is sold beyond the expiration date. A local Detroit group documented the practice of food nearing expiration being “recycled” from suburban food stores to stock the shelves of those located in the city.

This is a part of the structure of race in this country. To understand structural racism is to understand how race plays itself out in this country’s food systems. People of color are the prevailing laborers working on farms and in agriculture, processing food, serving food, and cleaning restaurants and kitchens. Low-paying jobs, jobs with higher safety hazards, and jobs with toxic environmental impacts are relegated, disproportionately, to people of color. Many bear the cost of expensive drugs to treat their conditions. Transportation is especially burdensome to poor people of color working in the food-service industries, since many jobs have moved to suburban communities. To understand the structure of race, we must follow the money, notice who benefits, and trace the unequal investments of time, labor, and finance in communities where people of color live. Corporate investments in neighborhoods populated by a majority of African Americans are especially hard to come by. This is the arrangement—even with food.

The dire consequences to public health are evidenced by the disparity in life expectancy for people of color and white. People of color and poor white people are disproportionately impacted by diabetes, obesity, hypertension, heart disease, work-related cancer, and stress. Yet, if you are white in this country, you tend to live longer and reside in neighborhoods where property values are appraised higher and the food distribution—both in its quality and quantity—is optimal. Residents in these communities do not have to worry as much or as predictably about contaminated land in the backyard garden, environmental toxins in the air from trash incinerators, or the foul smells from waste/sewage processing. Environmental racism as a concept is less likely to be a part of one’s everyday consciousness.

Detroit is a prime story about the interconnection between land, food, and race. For decades in Detroit, houses have been abandoned by whites moving to the suburbs; and absentee landlords default on property upkeep that has led to extreme rates of housing demolition, leaving vacant parcels and empty lots dotting the city landscape. Today in many instances land is being “claimed” by urban homesteaders and is being farmed by neighbors and community groups. Black residents, many drawing on their heritage in agriculture, have begun planting and harvesting fresh vegetables from their backyard community gardens. Some use their land to grow produce for sale, and food co-ops are a significant form of entrepreneurship in some areas.

As a contrast, the recent huge rise in bank foreclosures has opened a door to developers who envision a “New Detroit.” One that is less poor and less black. Detroit in such scenarios

once again mirrors New Orleans post Katrina. In both cities, as homes were destroyed and land value plummeted, speculators rushed in, claiming back land once or now abandoned, evicting those remaining residents (often African American) in the name of “right sizing.” In Detroit, large agribusinesses are being encouraged to buy cheap in order to reap big later. Detroit residents can’t get their homes back, and can’t get loans to start businesses because they are considered “poor investments.” The blame for the eroding tax base in the city is placed on the residents without considering extending the tax abatement to corporations as a reward for doing business with black folks.

Structural racism also rears its head in the struggle over “regionalization” that threatens to take away from Detroit citizens both land and the assets of the city such as control of water and sewage systems. Despite the “progressive” language surrounding this struggle, many of Detroit’s black leadership suspect that underlying it is the belief that something as important as water should not be controlled by black people.

For most of us, living and working within the confines of our particular racial group constitutes normality. Even as we are ever more a multiracial state, the vast majority of us are like ships passing in the night. We come close to each other, interact in commerce together, but are navigating separate channels. We rarely board the other’s vessel. Since to many white people, if not most, racism is invisible, whites participate in its perpetuation because we lack understanding of its history. A critical analysis of power and privilege that is needed to interrupt this structural arrangement is absent from our schools and institutions.

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Race is deeply embedded in the psyche of this nation. It always has been and today is no exception. The stereotypical regional splits of North and South, urban versus rural have no saliency within the larger context of systemic and structural racism. It is everywhere. It is present in every facet of American civic consciousness regardless of where we live in the United States. The fears associated with race rear their ugly heads in all kinds of places: at town meetings on health-care reform, on the front porch of an elite Harvard professor’s home, hourly on the Fox News cable channel, and in night court in any city or town across the country. Our southern border seethes with racial hostility. White talk-show hosts lose control of themselves on air and spew a fusillade of N-----, N----- over and over again. Scratch us even a little bit in this society and the deep-seated fears and suspicions of race well up in us time and again.

Race is a public policy issue within every aspect of the food system. These include production, distribution, acquisition, consumption, and disposal of food. It has been so since the nation’s founding. European immigrants seeking greater personal freedoms amid promises of land ownership, wealth accumulation, and participation in the body politic found a much different reality than Blacks or Indians, Asians and Mexicans. Race

would be used as the primary reason that “Indians” could be removed from their ancestral homes and shunted off to reservations and excluded from the nation’s social contract. These striking dichotomies created a nation fragmented by race categories that tore asunder ideals of equity and democracy. Some of the greatest visionaries of their age or any other age founded the United States of America. Names like Jefferson, Washington, and Franklin symbolize the democratic ideal and the potential of a people to self-govern. Yet Jefferson and Washington were slave owners. Land wrested out of the hands of the indigenous and Africans enslaved on the land formed the basis of their incredible wealth:

George Washington’s estimated net worth was \$525 million in today’s dollars. His Virginia plantation, Mount Vernon, consisted of five separate farms on eight thousand acres of farmland, run by over 300 slaves. His wife, Martha Washington, inherited significant property from her father. Washington made significantly more than subsequent presidents: his salary was two percent of the total United States Budget in 1789. (*The Atlantic* 2010)

Even Benjamin Franklin, himself not an owner of Africans, hoped for a country that would exclude Africans and “tawnys” altogether and become a nation of “lovely white.” This contradictory state of mind about race created a mental and moral disconnect that robbed both the persecuted and the persecutors of their humanity, what Gunnar Myrdal called in 1944 the “American Dilemma.” The psychologist Frances Cress Welsing claims *America is race*. She quotes her mentor, Neely Fuller, saying that “in America, if you do not understand racism, what it is and how it is manifested, then all that you *think* you understand will only tend to confuse you” (1991).

So what’s race got to do with it? How does history pervade the food system and continue to shape our current understandings and experiences? Until fairly recently, most people living in the United States lived in small towns and predominantly rural communities. We were primarily an agricultural people, tied very much to the land and what it produced. Millions upon millions of unplowed acres of land, fertile and bountiful in its produce and products, was what in large measure drove the westward march of the nation. But to reap this harvest of plenty others had to be uprooted and forced to march to places that were not their ancestral homes where their sense of self and pride as a people had been nourished. “Indians” had to be removed, by force when necessary. The United States became the greatest agricultural nation the world had ever seen, but at the expense of the indigenous. “Civilize the Indian” was a frequent cry from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries. “Make them farmers with a plot of land” like the rest of “true” Americans was heard in the halls of Congress. This notion failed, but progress must go ever forward. The Great Seal of the State of Minnesota depicts this: An Indian on horseback riding into the hori-

zon, soon to be invisible and gone, with a yeoman farmer at the plow with nothing but the future ahead of him.

The relationship of the food system to race conjures up all manner of images. Ownership of the systems of production was the foundation of great wealth, and white people owned everything by design. While not all white people were owners, all were held out the hope that one day they might be. When African Americans living in the Confederacy were emancipated from slavery during the Civil War, Sherman's suggestion of "forty acres and a mule" to all freed Africans was never made federal policy. As a result, black people were forced into peonage, with millions sharecropping on other people's land. Throughout our nation's history, migrant workers, black or Mexican, Filipino or Japanese, picked the fruits of the harvest, but rarely owned that which was produced by the sweat of their brow or the strength of their backs. Food was tied not just to sustenance, but to wealth and power. While poor whites also farmed other people's land, such was the promise of "white" that these same impoverished yeomen felt "maybe someday I will control my own land." The often unspoken caveat was always race. Do not side with the Indian or the Black or the Asian and the promise of "whiteness" might also be yours. Class would never trump race in the United States.

Throughout American history, food production and harvest would have ties to race. The New Deal of Franklin D. Roosevelt enacted "Social Security" as a means by which to guarantee to low-income and working-class Americans some financial comfort in their old age. But this was not true if you were in agricultural work as a "field hand," a "migrant worker," or a "sharecropper." Likewise, if one was employed as a domestic. Social Security did not pertain to those persons, largely of color, who worked the fields or cleaned houses for whites. The same was true of minimum wage legislation, welfare benefits, and even access to public housing.

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Black farmers were routinely refused loans from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) until a recent Supreme Court ruling demanded they receive compensation for years of racist policies that forced them off their land. Yet by the time the law was on their side most had lost their land. Indigenous people were relegated to controlled land masses known as reservations, yet the treaty rights to fish, hunt, and gather food protecting traditional ways continue to be violated. Indian nations are owed billions by the U.S. government for its actions over the centuries, but Indian nations have yet to be paid. Conversely, white farmers were subsidized to control crop growth, while Indians and black farmers faced rampant discrimination at all levels of the food system.

The Civil Rights sit-ins at Woolworth's counters across the South focused on who could eat where. Even after our nation passed laws forbidding racial discrimination in restaurants and other places of public accommodation, poverty dispro-

tionally impacted people of color. The McGovern Commission in 1971 found millions of Americans—both white and people of color—at risk of starvation. In response, free breakfast programs established by the Black Panther Party across the nation dramatized the plight of children who went to school hungry. Soup kitchens that began to dot the landscape of America in both small towns and big cities are now an accepted part of the societal order in the United States. Today, one in five children lives without adequate nutrition; in many communities of color, one-third of children go hungry.

The 2008 election of the nation's first African American president painted a striking and contradictory picture of America's core fears and attitudes on race. On the one hand, people of all races cheered in an emotional frenzy—a sort of political and national catharsis. For some, Obama's election demonstrated finally that the race demon that had haunted the nation since its beginnings had been exorcised. A shroud had been lifted from the body politic. Obama was the living embodiment of the American dream, proving that we are a nation where hard work and determination pay off and racial limits are no longer real. Racism was a relic of history. After all, the president is a black man.

For others, the election of a black president stirred long-submerged fears and rage over whose country *is* this United States. Gun sales spiked to unparalleled levels. Individual white people appeared with side arms and rifles at presidential events, claiming such actions are protected by the Constitution. Furious whites stormed discussions of health-care policies with blue veins popping and faces contorted in racialized frenzy. Similar behavior took over the national debate on immigration reform: laws were passed militarizing the southern U.S. border and mandating police officers to racially profile those who looked "suspicious." One political commentator claimed on national television that Barack Obama is a communist who hates white people (even his own mother, one must surmise). Parents in Texas prohibited their school district from participating in a webinar where the president of the United States urged students to stay in school and make good grades. At the start of the New Year in 2011, a Democratic congresswoman in Arizona was gunned down in broad daylight along with nineteen others, after she had received months of threats and acts of hate directed at her for her opposition to the state's harsh immigration laws and her pro-Obama stance on health care.

This is the ruse of race. On the one hand, we prize freedom and liberty and the notion that we are all one people. On the other hand, we are a people scarred by race for so many generations that the thought of equity across race lines brings out the worst in the American character.

So what's race got to do with it? Race is the founding structural reality of the United States. Every system that constitutes the national infrastructure, from education to law to health care to food production, was constructed by and for white people.

This national construct of race and its systemic dimensions still holds true today. The disparate racial outcomes produced by these systems in the twenty-first century are based on the built-in assumptions of the eighteenth-century racial state. Laws have not changed this basic understanding; legislation has not leveled the playing field. While the racial phobia that characterized prior generations is diminished, changes in personal attitudes have not shaken the sturdy pillars of this race-constructed nation.

Food production and distribution must be understood in the context of this country's racial construct. Most whites live in a state of denial about race or, conversely, think we know all about it. Yet the subject of race rarely comes up in our board rooms or staff meetings unless someone of color raises it. We assume a common "colorblind" understanding and approach. We rarely ask, "what's race got to do with it?" Even in public-policy debates or data research, the disproportionate racial impact is missed. Race comes up only when it is the "issue" under discussion. If the topic is not race, it is rarely mentioned. In contrast, people of color, especially blacks and Latinos, see race everywhere. There is no topic or arena where race is not a factor. While whites accuse blacks of "playing the race card," blacks and other people of color see race as "coloring" every card in the deck.

Addressing racism in the food system calls for new strategies and approaches based on a collective understanding of racism and its manifestations. Denial, silence, and tolerance in the face of racist policies and practices must be replaced by a sense of urgency to undo racism. White people need to challenge ourselves to feel this sense of urgency and stand in solidarity with people of color as anti-racists. Together we will be able to learn what racism looks like in the food system; we will be able to assess our behaviors and roles in perpetuating personal and structural racism; we will be able to take intentional and accountable action to combat all forms of racism.

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Dismantling structural racism requires that we honor the role and the contribution of people of color as farmers and workers in the food system. The intersection of race in all aspects of life requires us to transcend our silos and connect with one another across systems to build our capacity for dismantling racism. The enormity of media manipulation mis-educates, distorts our vision. We must create clear consistent anti-racist messages to counter subtle racist messages that reinforce structural racism.

To transform the race-constructed systems of our society requires first that we acknowledge them. To achieve food justice we must understand our racial history. Then, and only then, can we begin an honest conversation that always includes the question, "What's race got to do with it?" Once race is on the table, we can build a multiracial movement to ensure equity and justice for us all.

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