

Dismantling Racism in Community Food Work

Rachel Slocum 15 October, 2004

This paper is intended as a means to help community food security organizations understand how racism shapes the food system. It suggests there is a need to incorporate anti-racism theory and practice into community food efforts. This paper is a work in progress. It will be influenced by independent research I am conducting concerning if and how community food organizations are shifting the balance of power through their work and engaging in anti-racist practice.

What is race?

*In the United States, race immediately evokes the grammars of purity and mixing, compounding and differentiating, segregating and bonding, lynching and marrying...An inherently dubious notion, race, like sex, is about the purity of lineage; the legitimacy of passage; and the drama of inheritance of bodies, property and stories...race...haunts us who call ourselves Americans.*¹

Race is given meaning by society; it does not have any basis in inherent biological or genetic characteristics. Though it is a construction created through societies' eyes, race is lived deeply and often painfully as a consequence of unequal relations of power that enable the construction of fundamental differences among us.² Race intersects with other differences that matter—class, gender, disability, sexuality and age. Privilege reproduces the unequal relations of power that shape lives differently depending on where one finds oneself along the axes of difference listed above. The meaning of race is time and place dependent, but in US history, racism has a fierce resilience affecting the educational and economic opportunity, political representation, health, income, wealth and social mobility of people of color.³

Because of the constructed nature of race, other terms have been sought to replace it. These terms indicate a process whereby people are classified as different in a negative sense. One term is racialization. Racialization is the process whereby dominant groups frame peoples' identities in terms of color in ways that reinforce the privilege of whites and create the multiple disadvantages that people of color face. Another term used to render visible the work of race is racism, white privilege or white supremacy. Race would not exist were it not for racism.

People are racialized in different ways depending on whether they are American Indigenous⁴, Asian, African, Latino/Hispanic or African-American. The experience of each varies by class and gender, among other markers of difference. Thus the oppression that different communities of color and people within them face is not the same, but it can all be described as racism. Communities of color, further, have unique histories and conditions that shape the racism they have confronted over time and therefore they experience the process of racialization differently. There is no homogenous community of color nor is there a community of color that does not have class inequality, homophobia and sexism in its midst.⁵

What is racism and white privilege?

The “US...is a chronically racist, sexist and homophobic society...”⁶

This document refers to institutional or structural racism rather than bigotry. It is important to dismantle the structural racism built into the nation’s past and present, its social norms, language and institutional policies, its built environment and spatial organization, its economic system and culture and its militarism against people of color both in the US and abroad. The reach and routine nature of racism⁷—its institutionalized form—is what this paper addresses.

Political theorist Cornel West famously noted, “[w]hiteness is a political category, parasitic on the construction of blackness.”⁸ Whiteness is the ideal against which ‘of color’ is measured. Whiteness needs something else to identify as ‘not white’ to claim its superiority. Whiteness has become the unaccountable, accepted norm. In other words, “[w]hiteness never has to speak its name, never has to acknowledge its role as an organizing principle in social and cultural relations.”⁹ It does not have to recognize its own culture.

White privilege is the basis of racism. It preserves the privileges whites enjoy and is accorded to all whites regardless of income or nationality. Whites often do not acknowledge this privilege, that is, they do not recognize the benefits “they receive simply from being white and that their actions, without malicious intent, may undermine the well being of people of color.”¹⁰ The disadvantages people of color experience are not merely indicative of their disadvantage but are actually evidence of the preferences afforded whites.¹¹ While much is made of internalized oppression and attendant bad behavior, less attention is directed to the fact of internalized superiority.¹²

White privilege is found in highly racialized societies that espouse racial equality but do not adopt measures in the interests of a racial equality that will abridge the privileges whites have.¹³ Because no malice is involved in these decisions, “whites exonerate themselves of racist tendencies” even while they admit that racism exists.¹⁴ However, all whites, because of the power and privilege that comes with whiteness, are racist.¹⁵ Racism becomes invisible when policies are discussed in ways that suggest they are neutral. Privilege is reinforced and racism denied through ‘color blind’ policies, melting pot theories, discourses of quotas and racial preference as well as the ideologies of individualism and neoliberalism. It is strengthened by erasing some histories. While affirmative action for people of color is held up as unfair, for instance, whites fail to see the benefits of the affirmative action program they (especially men) have long enjoyed.¹⁶ In each case, practices that reinforce white privilege are typically defended as fairly earned, “non racial”,¹⁷ or in the interests of the entire community.

How does racism shape the food system?

“...The whole white race is a monster who is always hungry and what he eats is land” Chiksika, elder brother of Tecumseh to Tecumseh, March 19, 1779¹⁸

Food systems are the result of historical processes that should be recognized in the organizational analyses of community food groups. One starting point is the theft of land through the combined weapons of genocide of American Indigenous Nations and illegitimate treaties that enriched the US as a nation and white settlers individually.¹⁹ Food insecurity through the loss of culturally important crops and cooking practices, the poisoning of fish stocks and the related diseases on reservations is linked to this history. Those who live on land that belongs to Native Nations live there through the privilege that extended first from being white and now from being American. The wealth of the nation was achieved through genocide and slavery within its own borders. The history of slavery and the years of struggle that continue in the wake of slavery should be recognized as intimately tied to white privilege and to those communities of color that experience food insecurity, do not own land, are politically disenfranchised and economically disadvantaged.

The systemic oppression that communities of color experience as a consequence of racism is a factor in food insecurity. Organizations intent on reducing food insecurity should consider the many ways in which racism reaches into the lives of people of color. Each community has a unique history, but there are often similarities that extend across the US. For instance, racism has played and continues to play a role in the segregation of people of color into certain parts of cities and in white flight to the suburbs.²⁰ Racism was instrumental in razing vibrant communities and leaving, in its wake, parking lots, corner liquor stores and below code housing.²¹ Racism plays a role in which communities local governments slated for urban renewal, the location of projects like roads, incinerators or convention centers and the flight of supermarkets, hospitals, jobs and revenue from low income neighborhoods of color. Racism has been supported by the decision-making institutions involved in these changes whether private corporations like banks or public institutions like the Federal Housing Administration.²²

Structural racism is visible in the low numbers of children of color who graduate high school and go on to college.²³ It figures in the fact that while Black and Latino children account for about one-third of all children in the United States, they make up more than three-fourths of children living in severely distressed neighborhoods.²⁴ It is evident in the excess deaths²⁵ and the significantly higher incarceration rates of men of color relative to whites.²⁶ It is visible in high rates of suicide and death among the colonized peoples who make up indigenous nations.²⁷ The teaching of history in schools that glorifies, implicitly, the genocide of Native Nations is the foundation with which native children grow up. The psychological burden of being racialized day in and day out is a fact of life for people of color.

The force of white/male privilege is seen today in the numbers of whites in positions of power in the nonprofit and funding communities and in the halls of government. It is evident in who occupies the worst paid and most dangerous jobs in our society. Decision making structures, whether coalitions or committees, formal or informal, that do not have a process to truly represent the concerns of communities of color will result in democratically arrived at decisions that reflect the dominant society. The culture of white organizations must actively recognize racism within and without if they are to confront their internalized superiority and recognize the ways that superiority acts. Without such anti-racist practice, these organizations will not get or keep people of color as staff, have people of color leadership, hear the voices of the

marginalized, amplify those divergent voices or know different ways of working. They will be able to continue to claim, 'we invited them, but they never came.'

The intersections of racism, class and gender are critical factors in the layers of disadvantage that people of color face. Racism, gender relations and class structure figure in the sanctioning of women of color on welfare when the fathers of babies are not on hand to sign birth certificates because they are in jail.²⁸ Racism's cumulative effect over time has been "the widespread disempowerment, disorganization and perpetuation of poverty" within communities of color.²⁹ Racism and poverty are intricately linked through the fact that people of color do not have control over the institutions and policies that directly affect their lives.³⁰ Gendered relations of power add another layer that make women of color uniquely oppressed. Gendered power contributes to the phenomenon of women and children constituting increasing numbers of households, lower salaries for the same work and thus greater economic and food insecurity. However, it may be easier for whites and white organizations to focus on class inequality rather than racism. Class inequality may be the most compelling analysis for white poverty, but it cannot explain the disproportionate number of people of color living in economic, physiological, psychological, social and political distress, nor other manifestations of white power.

The examples of the effect of structural racism are too numerous to adequately represent here. But data and analyses are available for community food organizations to consider should they decide it mattered to know.

Why should community food organizations address racism?

"...effective community change cannot happen unless those who would make change understand how race and racism function as a barrier to community, self-determination and self sufficiency."³¹

Knowledge of the consequences of structural racism discussed above would suggest a different approach to working with communities of color, designing programs, conducting research, shaping budgets, making decisions, and promoting community food systems. It would suggest a profound appraisal of how organizations are accountable to the people they 'serve' through food assistance or community gardening. It would suggest a different practice vis à vis those communities that involves enabling community members to build power and pride. It would mean that rather than being "on the table",³² low income people of color would be at the table, leading organizations or programs and playing a key role in shaping the policies and programs that affect their lives.

In the words of the Western States Center Dismantling Racism Project, "[r]acism is reflected in every institution and organization in the U.S.: social change groups are not exempt. The structures and cultures of community-based, grassroots groups reproduce the white privilege and racial oppression of the wider society. Whatever your social change mission, it is bound to fall short and to maintain the status quo as long as racism continues to flourish."³³

It is critical that organizations undertake an analysis of how racism, class structure and gendered relations of power intersect. Further, dismantling racism everywhere requires

exposing power differentials within categories of dominant and oppressed groups as well and understanding how power works in one's geographic location. An analysis of these processes in each food system is essential to understanding the diversity of ways they shape the lives of different groups. Community food organizations "need to support, develop and integrate more sophisticated analysis and practical tools for understanding and changing the web of institutional policies, practices and power structures that shape American communities."³⁴ It is also important that the theory and practice of anti-racism address the structural dimensions of racism rather than simply individual and inter-group relations. Further, this argument asks organizations not to stop at diversity or respect for cultural differences within organizations. Instead, it is an argument for shifting the balance of power such that the people who are most affected by racism, class inequality and gender discrimination (etc.) are central to the development of programs that address manifestations—such as food insecurity—of those deeper problems.

The following are compelling arguments for anti-racist practice in the pursuit of community food security.

- Racism, as it intersects with class and gender, makes people food insecure. White supremacy maintains this relationship. The relationship suggests the need to overcome white/class/gender privilege and "shift the balance of power."³⁵
- Racism needs to be explicitly recognized. "When [we] don't have the courage to speak [our] truths, [we] help hold oppression in place and get habituated to maintaining the system. Moderated language only confuses people about what [we are] trying to accomplish and allows [us] to not be accountable to those most in need of liberation, including [ourselves]."³⁶
- Racism has been central to the creation of the wealth and power of this nation and it continues to shape a society of sharp inequalities rooted in racism, class structure and gender discrimination. Recognizing this presents a challenge to "all of us to look at our work to see if the projects and policy solutions we are developing truly challenge the racist policies and practices which have been central to the development of the industrial food system."³⁷
- "If we are talking about building power and taking control of the food system but the vast majority of people looked to as leaders in the community food security movement are white, middle-class, highly educated folks, we need to ask 'WHO will take control?' and 'WHO is building power?'"³⁸
- The persistence, reach and pervasiveness of racism suggest that food system organizations need to "seek ways to build a food justice approach that puts people of color and low-income communities at the center of the work."³⁹
- The persistence of racism suggests the questions,

- “Do the solutions we are developing speak to the issues that low-income communities and communities of color have identified as crucial (i.e., living wage jobs, housing, child-care, supermarket development)?
- What are we doing to provide people with the resources and information they need to identify their own solutions?”⁴⁰
- “What kinds of ‘leadership’ are we trying to foster? Paid organizational staff members are the primary people accumulating knowledge, insight, skills, and personal recognition. While these individuals become personally more powerful and able to influence decision-makers, does this change power differential between low-income and middle-income communities? How are those leaders accountable to the low-income communities they are working in?”⁴¹
- “Racism is everyone’s problem, whether or not people of color are involved in your organization. Primarily white organizations can and should become anti-racist, even if their racial composition does not change ”⁴²
- If the concept of ‘community’ in community food systems is to have any meaning, organizations need to consider how interlocking processes⁴³ (racism, class, gender) shape the lives of people in communities. They might then consider whether community can exist with the significant disparities resulting from the intersection of racism, class structure and gender discrimination among other forms of institutionalized oppression. They might then think about orienting their work to dismantling those oppressions.

Anti-racist organizational assessment

“White experience becomes the unquestioned, assumed basis for examining what happens to all people. When white social justice activists use false universals and false analogies, they betray the depth of cultural racism and arrogance that plagues all white people in this country.”⁴⁴

What steps has your organization taken to shift the balance of power?

- Does your organization actively seek to move people of color and/or economically disadvantaged people into positions of leadership and decision making authority in your organization or in new organizations such that people are at the table, not on the table?
- Does your organization work in or promote alliances that bring people together across race, gender, class, ethnic, cultural, national etc. lines?
- Are you explicitly, formally and continually accountable to those people most affected by the problems your organization seeks to address in ways that ensure their voices are heard, amplified and respected and in ways that ensure your organization engages with the ideas and needs voiced?

The points below were taken from the RACE Program at the Western States Center, which in turn drew heavily on tools developed by Changeworks.⁴⁵ In no way is this a complete list of questions.

Who makes decisions in your organization?

- Does your organization have a goal to dismantle racism? Is this goal reflected in your decision-making process?
- Is there a shared analysis of who has decision-making power and who does not? Does everyone know how decisions are made?
- Is there a deliberate plan to develop the leadership of people of color staff members and to share decision-making authority?
- Is your organization accountable to people of color organizations and communities who are affected by but not part of the organization?

Anti-racist organizations develop the leadership of staff and members so that power can be shared in a meaningful and accountable way. In an anti-racist multi-racial organization, decision-making power is shared across race. A white anti-racist organization must create a decision-making process that is accountable to organizations and communities of color; this task is essential, complicated and requires constant attention.

Who has control and influence over financial resources?

- Who develops the budget? Who does the fundraising?
- When the budget or fundraising plan reflects work to be done in support of people of color communities, do these communities have input on where the money comes from and how it is going to be spent?
- Does your organization advocate with funders to support the work of people of color organizations directly?

In an anti-racist multi-racial organization the budget and fundraising plan are understood by people of color as well as white people at all levels of the organization. Budgeting and fundraising in a white anti-racist organization must ensure accountability.

What kind of education about racism and oppression is provided through the organization?

- Are people of color supported in seeking information around issues of internalized racist oppression and self-empowerment either within the organization or from outside the organization?

- Are white people supported in seeking information around issues of white privilege and supremacy either within the organization or from outside the organization?
- Are there regular trainings and discussions at the member, staff and board level about dismantling racism and accountability?

An anti-racist organization will provide training and encourage discussion about racism, white privilege, power and accountability with board, staff and members. People of color within an organization will have specific opportunities to understand and dismantle internalized racist oppression, while white people are charged with understanding and dismantling white privilege.

What is the culture of your organization?

- What are the values and norms, stated or unstated?
- Are people of color welcomed in the organization only in so far as they assimilate into the existing organizational culture?
- Is white culture treated as the norm? Do the art, holiday activities, and food reflect people of color cultures?
- Is discussion of racism and oppression normal and encouraged or seen to distract from 'the real work?' Do people in leadership positions participate in and support discussion of power and oppression issues?
- Are there people of color who consistently do not participate in meetings and discussion? If so, is there active reflection on why, and how to encourage more balanced participation?

These questions reveal whether the day-to-day experience of the organization reflects the lives and cultures of people of color. Groups committed to addressing racism and oppression must examine the ways that we communicate, the space in which we work, and the activities we share.

How does your organization work in alliance with people of color organizations?

- Does your organization provide support and resources for members, staff, and board members of color to develop leadership through working with organizations or campaigns led by people of color?
- Does your organization seek input and guidance from people of color organizations and community leaders of color in its strategic planning and decision-making?
- Does your organization advocate for the participation of people of color organizations when working in coalition with other groups?

- Does your organization provide support and resources for white members, staff, and board to develop as anti-racist white allies through working with organizations or campaigns led by people of color?

¹ Haraway, Donna (1997) *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium.FemaleMan@_Meets_OncoMouse™: feminism and technoscience*. Routledge, New York. 213.

² See for instance, Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. (1991) Cartographies of struggle: third world women and the politics of feminism in *Third world women and the politics of feminism*. Ann Russo and Lourdes Torres Chandra T. Mohanty. (Eds.). Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1-51.; Moraga, Cherríe and Gloria Anzaldúa. (1981) *This bridge called my back: writings by radical women of color*. Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, New York.; Collins, Patricia Hill. (1998) *Fighting words: African-American women, critical social theory, and the search for justice*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, MN.

³ See for instance Omi, Michael and Howard Winant. (1986) *Racial formation in the US*. Routledge, New York.; Page, Clarence. (1996) *Showing my color: impolite essays on race and identity*. HarperCollins, NY.; Moller, Stephanie. (2002) Supporting poor single mothers: gender and race in the US welfare state. *Gender and Society* 16, 465-484.; Kelley, R. (1990) *Hammer and hoe*. University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, NC.; hooks, bell. (1995) *Killing rage ending racism*. Henry Holt and Company, New York.; Holt, Thomas C. (2000) *The problem of race in the twenty-first century*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.; Gilmore, Ruth Wilson. (2002) Fatal couplings of power and difference: notes on racism and geography. *The Professional Geographer* 54, 15-24.; Bell, Derrick. (1992) *Faces at the bottom of the well: the permanence of racism*. BasicBooks, New York; Nevins, Joseph. (2002) *Operation Gatekeeper : the rise of the "illegal alien" and the making of the U.S.-Mexico boundary*. Routledge, New York.; Wilson, William Julius (1999) *The bridge over the racial divide: rising inequality and coalition politics*. University of California Press, Berkeley; Jennings, James (1994). *Blacks, Latinos, and Asians in urban America: status and prospects for politics and activism* Praeger, Westport, CT.

⁴ This term from Justin Schapp.

⁵ See Pulido, Laura (2002) Race, class and political activism: Black, Chicana/o and Japanese American activists in Southern California 1968-1978 *Antipode* 34(4): 762-788

⁶ West, Cornel. (1993a) *Prophetic reflections: notes on race and power in America*. Common Courage Press, Monroe, ME., 206.

⁷ Nash, Catherine. (2003) Cultural geography: anti-racist geographies. *Progress in Human Geography* 27, 637-648.

⁸ West, Cornel. (1993b) *Keeping faith: philosophy and race in America*. Routledge, New York, 20.

⁹ Lipsitz, G. (1995) The possessive investment in whiteness: racialized social democracy and the 'white' problem in American Studies *American Quarterly* 47:369-87, 369 cited in Pulido, Laura. (2000) Rethinking environmental racism: white privilege and urban development in Southern California *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 90(1):12-40, 13. See also Pence, Ellen. (1982) Racism--a white issue in *All the women are white, all the blacks are men but some of us are brave: black women's studies*. Patricia Bell Scott and Barbara Smith Gloria T. Hull. (Eds.). Feminist Press, Old Westbury NY, 45-47.

- ¹⁰ Pulido, 2000, 15.
- ¹¹ Wise, Tim (May 24, 2003) The mother of all racial preferences <http://www.zmag.org/sustainers/content/2003-05/24wise.cfm>
- ¹² People's Institute for Survival and Beyond, discussed in an anti-racist training sponsored by the Many and One Coalition, Lewiston, Maine, October 8-10, 2004
- ¹³ Pulido, 2000.
- ¹⁴ Ibid., 15
- ¹⁵ People's Institute Training, Lewiston, ME
- ¹⁶ Wise, 2003.
- ¹⁷ Collins, Patricia Hill. (2001) Like one of the family: race, ethnicity, and the paradox of US national identity *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 24, 3-28, 17
- ¹⁸ Eckert, Allan W. (1992) *A sorrow in our heart: the life of Tecumseh*. Bantam, New York.
- ¹⁹ See Deloria, Vine Jr. (1974) *Behind the trail of broken treaties: an indian declaration of independence*. Dell, New York.; Deloria, Vine Jr. and Clifford M. Lytle (1983). *American indians American justice*. University of Texas Press, Austin, TX.
- ²⁰ Massey, Douglas S. and Denton, Nancy A. (1993) *American apartheid: segregation and the making of the underclass*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.
- ²¹ Adams, Catherine. (2002) *Defending our place: protest on the Southside of Syracuse*. Syracuse University, Department of Geography, unpublished MA thesis.
- ²² Beauregard, Robert A. (1997) City planning and the post-war regime in Philadelphia in *Reconstructing urban regime theory*. Mickey Lauria. (Ed.). Sage, Thousand Oaks, 171-188.
- ²³ Marable, Manning (1994) Building coalitions among communities of color: beyond racial identity politics in James Jennings (Ed.) *Blacks Latinos and Asians in urban America: status and prospects for politics and activism* Praeger, Westport CT pp. 29-43.
- ²⁴ O'Hare, William and Mark Mather (2003) The growing number of kids in severely distressed neighborhoods: evidence from the 2000 Census. The Annie E. Casey Foundation and the Population Reference Bureau, Washington DC.
- ²⁵ Lane, Sandra D., (March 4, 2004) Structural violence, racism and health in Syracuse, Presentation at Syracuse University, Maxwell School, PARC's Conversation in Conflict Series.
- ²⁶ Gilmore, Ruth Wilson. (2002) Fatal couplings of power and difference: notes on racism and geography. *The Professional Geographer* 54, 15-24.
- ²⁷ Alexie, Sherman interview on NPR To the best of our knowledge March 27, 2004, Schapp, Justin, personal communication, January, 6, 2004
- ²⁸ Czerwinski, Maria., Sandra D. Lane, Rob Keefe, Martha Wojtowycz, Carla Liberatore and Don Cibula (2003) Missing fathers and incarceration: health impacts of structural violence *Social Justice: Anthropology, Peace and Human Rights* 4(3/4).
- ²⁹ Shapiro, Llana. 2002. *Training for racial equality and inclusion: a guide to selected programs*. Aspen Institute, Washington DC, 10
- ³⁰ Ibid.
- ³¹ People's Institute for Survival and Beyond cited in Shapiro 2002, 10.
- ³² <http://www.greenlining.org/academy/index.html>

³³ Western States Center, Dismantling Racism Project Assessing Organization Racism

³⁴ Shapiro 2002, 109

³⁵ Mascarenhas, Michelle L. (October 15, 2002). Post-Seattle questions about organizing. Post to comfood-l@listproc.tufts.edu.

³⁶ Hanna, Jim. (February 28, 2004). Post to the Outreach and Diversity Committee email list.

³⁷ Mascarenhas 2002

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² RACE program, Western States Center, Assessing Organizational Racism, in *Western States Center Views*, Winter, 2001, 14.

⁴³ Collins, Patricia Hill. (1990) *Toward an afrocentric feminist epistemology: black feminist thought*. Unwin Hyman, Cambridge.

⁴⁴ Challenging White Supremacy cited in Shapiro 2002, 75

⁴⁵ Permission granted for use of Assessing Organizational Racism from the Race Program, Western States Center, March 11, 2004 by Moira Bowman.
<http://www.westernstatescenter.org/index.html>

This document was written as part of my work with the Outreach and Diversity Committee of the Community Food Security Coalition. My analysis has been influenced and aided by Justin Schapp, a student at Syracuse University and a member of the Seneca Nation. I have also been blessed with the guidance and support of Jim Hanna, Meredith Taylor and Michelle Mascarenhas of the Outreach and Diversity Committee.