

# What does it mean to *do* food justice?

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## Abstract

'Food justice' and 'food sovereignty' have become key words in food movement scholarship and activism. In the case of 'food justice', it seems the word is often substituted for work associated with projects typical of the alternative or local food movement. We argue that it is important for scholars and practitioners to be clear on how food justice differs from other efforts to seek an equitable food system. In the interests of ensuring accountability to socially just research and action, as well as mounting a tenable response to the 'feed the world' paradigm that often sweeps aside concerns with justice as distractions from the 'real' issues, scholars and practitioners need to be more clear on what it means to *do* food justice. In exploring that question, we identify four nodes around which food justice organizing appears to occur: trauma/inequity, exchange, land, and labor. This article sets the stage for a second one that follows, *Notes on the practice of food justice in the U.S.*, where we discuss attempts to practice food justice.

**Key words:** food justice, food sovereignty, food movement, food security, alternative agri-food systems

## Résumé

La «Justice alimentaire» et «souveraineté alimentaire» sont devenus des mots clés dans les études universitaires et l'activisme de la nourriture et le système agroalimentaires. Dans le cas de «justice alimentaire», il semble que le mot est souvent substitué au travail associés aux projets typiques du mouvement alimentaire alternative. Nous soutenons qu'il est important pour les chercheurs et les praticiens soient claires sur la façon dont la justice alimentaire diffère des autres efforts pour trouver un système alimentaire équitable. Les chercheurs et praticiens doivent être plus clair sur ce que cela signifie de *faire* la justice alimentaire. Ils ont besoin pour assurer la responsabilité de la recherche et de l'action qui est socialement juste, ainsi que le montage d'une réponse tenable au paradigme « nourrir le monde » qui balaie souvent de côté la justice comme une distraction de problèmes «réels». En explorant cette question, nous identifions quatre nœuds autour desquels la justice alimentaire semble se produire: un traumatisme / inégalité, les échanges, la terre, et du travail. Cet article ouvre la voie à une seconde qui suit, *Notes sur la pratique de la justice alimentaire aux États-Unis*, où nous discutons de la pratique de la justice alimentaire.

**Mots clés:** justice alimentaire, la souveraineté alimentaire, le mouvement de la nourriture, la sécurité alimentaire, les systèmes agro- alimentaires alternatifs

## Resumen

"Justicia alimentaria" y "soberanía alimentaria" se han convertido en términos clave en el discurso académico y el activismo sobre el mundo alimentario. En el caso de la "justicia alimentaria" parece que la palabra a menudo se sustituye por el trabajo el trabajo asociado con proyectos típicos del movimiento alternativo o de alimentos locales. Arguimos que es importante que los académicos y activistas diferencien claramente la justicia alimentaria y los movimientos alimentarios que no usan los alimentos como forma de buscar un sistema alimentario equitativo. Con la finalidad de asegurar la responsabilidad y contabilidad de la investigación y la acción socialmente justas así como de desarrollar una respuesta sostenible al paradigma "alimentar al mundo"—un paradigma que a menudo deja de lado preocupaciones sobre la justicia y las

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distracciones de los problemas "reales"—los académicos y los activistas necesitan ser más precisos respecto a lo que supone la justicia alimentaria. Al explorar esta cuestión, identificamos cuatro nodos en torno a los cuales parece que tiene lugar la organización de la justicia alimentaria: trauma/desigualdad, intercambio, tierra, y trabajo. Este artículo introduce el tema que se desarrolla en el que le sigue, *Notes on the practice of food justice in the U.S.*, en el cual discutimos diversos intentos de practicar justicia alimentaria.

**Palabras clave:** justicia alimentaria, soberanía alimentaria, movimiento alimentario, seguridad alimentaria, sistemas alternativos agro-alimentarios.

## 1. Introduction

The North American food movement is increasingly using the term 'food justice', which joins its radical sister from the global South 'food sovereignty', in a discourse that aims to distinguish between an industrial food system and a more equitable, ecologically viable alternative.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, scholars have begun using the term 'food justice' liberally, yet often without alerting readers as to what criteria they are using to name their object of study as 'food justice.' But what makes an actual food project serve food justice? We see a great deal of playing fast and loose with what is called food justice, little analysis of what it takes to *do* it, and a conflation of more mainstream food movements with efforts to promote food justice. With this article, we aim to provide a clearer understanding of what constitutes food justice practice. For us, as well as for many scholars and food justice advocates, food justice means transformative change at four key points of intervention: trauma/inequity, exchange, land, and labor (see section 5). More successful food interventions use processes that enable people to effect systemic change while dealing with power relations across relevant scales. We call for a more rigorous body of scholarship on food justice, and increased accountability in food activism. We suggest this as a research agenda as well as offering suggestions for actual practice in a companion article that follows this one, *Notes on the practice of food justice in the U.S.* (Slocum and Cadieux 2015).

We have each conducted ten years of ethnographic and survey research at a number of sites and scales in the urban and rural upper Midwest and Northeast U.S., Canada, France, and Aotearoa New Zealand (Cadieux 2005, 2008, 2011a, 2011b, 2012a, 2012b, 2013a, 2013b; Cadieux, Gold, and Pesch 2010; Gowan and Slocum 2014; Slocum 2006; 2007; 2008). These are important places from which to consider food justice (and food sovereignty) given the disproportionate impact exerted by corporate agri-food regimes in the global north (McMichael 2006a, 2006b). These research sites are characterized by a range of different modes of resistance to dominant agri-food regimes, and different types of success and failure in this resistance (*cf.* Larner and Le Heron 2002). Our research finds that while people may be using a framework of justice or sovereignty, many struggle to put these ideals into practice. At the same time, this has provided us with insights as to how organizations might move closer to these principles. As many have argued, the process of transformation in the U.S. and food movements elsewhere is best served by working from an analysis of structural inequality, sharing power, and identifying the conditions that enable and inhibit the translation of food justice ideals into action.

Our approach is guided by a feminist, antiracist, and anti-colonial commitment to work along with, not merely report on, marginalized people and non-academics, respecting their knowledge practices and decentering the cultural authority of academic knowledge (see also Finn and Jacobson 2003, 2008; Lake and Zitcer 2012; Seanhk-Ka and Axtell 2007; Wakefield 2007). We strive to conduct scholarship that contributes rigor to advocacy and to be accountable in our scholarship practices to the communities with which we work. Modeling these ethics, we share the tools and knowledge systems of our discipline with members of the food movement as well as learn from their perspectives. Though this is a difficult endeavor, we try to build conditions enabling the co-development of our questions, research processes, and analyses with the people amongst whom we conduct research. It makes sense then, according to this ethics, to simultaneously address scholars and practitioners and to do so by publishing in an open access journal.

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout this article we use 'food movement' (also known as the 'dominant food movement', Alkon and Agyeman 2011) and 'alternative food networks' (AFNs) interchangeably. The latter has been the convention in agri-food studies (Beus and Dunlap 1990; Kremen, Iles, and Bacon 2012). These terms refer to a constellation of individuals, NGOs, alliances, initiatives, companies, and government entities arranged in affiliations of different intensities and scales to support food security and sustainable farming (Levkoe 2006).

With global food insecurity recognized as one of the most pressing issues of the 21st century, we situate our argument within the current debate over achieving that security through increased production *or* through systemic change. For us, true food security is impossible without social justice being understood as one of the necessary starting points for analyses of, and solutions to, food insecurity. Many voices from agri-food science and corporations claim that increased production through technological change is a solution to food insecurity (BASF Agro 2010; Foley 2011; Foley *et al.* 2011; John Deere 2012; Monsanto 2009; Patel 2011). The new Green Revolution refrain of "doubling food to feed 9 billion by 2050" appears consistently in popular and scholarly work to argue that the need is too urgent to afford justice-oriented responses (see, for example, almost all the presentations at the [2014 World Food Prize dialogues](#)). This techno-corporate position is countered by a diverse group of scholars, activists, NGOs, and farmers who point to increasing evidence that smaller scale and ecologically-oriented farming has had better outcomes for both societies and environments and is also able to 'feed the world' (Holt Giménez 2014; Kremen, Iles, and Bacon 2012; Lappé 2010; McMichael 2008), especially if granted the social and state support currently reserved for mainstream production agriculture in the global north (Carpenter 2013; De Schutter 2011a; De Schutter 2011b; De Schutter and Vanloqueren 2011; IAASTD 2009a, 2009b; Liebman *et al.* 2013). Clarity over what constitutes food justice could promote more rigorous and transparent scholarship necessary to provide unassailable evidence against the capture of value across the food system by corporate agri-food science and business.

This article provides a brief discussion of how food justice and food sovereignty have been defined in the literature (Section 2). Section 3 documents the increasing use of the term food justice by the dominant or mainstream alternative food movement. Having raised some concerns about what happens when 'food justice' becomes synonymous with alternative food practice, we suggest treading softly along the defining lines of this ideal. Using Anna Tsing's notion of 'engaged universals' helps to justify our argument (Section 4). We conclude with suggested criteria for food justice (Section 5). There, we introduce the points around which food justice organizing seems to cohere: trauma and inequity, exchange, land, and labor. The article following this one considers in more detail how food justice practice might address trauma and inequity (Slocum and Cadieux 2015).

## 2. Diagramming the lineage of food justice and food sovereignty

Food justice and food sovereignty aim to institutionalize equity in and control over the food system.<sup>3</sup> *Food justice* represents "a transformation of the current food system, including but not limited to eliminating disparities and inequities" (Gottlieb and Joshi 2010: ix). *Food sovereignty* is "the right of peoples and governments to choose the way food is produced and consumed in order to respect our livelihoods, as well as the policies that support this choice" (LaVia Campesina 2009: 57). Both advocate greater control over food production and consumption by people who have been marginalized by mainstream agri-food regimes. The goal of greater control tends to be associated with less dependency on capital-intensive inputs, greater attention to social and environmental contexts, and the creation of supply networks that contribute to systemic wellbeing, rather than those that merely extract value. In principle, control and consumption criteria both seek to undermine exploitative social and economic hierarchies and emphasize equitable access to 'good' food. Equity in *both* the decision making process and the distribution of resources are key demands (see Allen 2008, 2010; Alkon and Agyeman 2011a; Anderson and Bellows 2012; Alkon and Norgaard 2009; Bellows and Hamm 2003; De Schutter 2011b, 2011c; Holt Giménez 2009; McMichael 2006a, 2006b; Patel 2005; Saldívar-Tanaka and Kransy 2004; White 2010). The discourses associated with each draw on analyses of the gathering storm of finance capitalism, environments threatened by climate change and accumulation, and rising inequality (Clapp and Martin 2011).

Perhaps because of these similar analyses, food justice and food sovereignty are being used interchangeably. Oxfam International seeks food justice in light of the recent spikes in global food prices that disproportionately affect the world's poor (Bailey 2011), while former President Sarkozy's Minister of

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<sup>3</sup> We acknowledge current debate over the utility of 'food system' as a concept (Bell and Stull 2014). This debate calls into question the ontological status of coherent 'systems' in the messy domain of food production, provisioning, etc. We agree that the notion of 'food systems' should be critically explored, much like food justice. For the purposes of this article, however, we find the term useful to indicate the complex assemblages and paths through which food moves, and also to highlight the relational issues involved in the social organization of food.

Agriculture in France invoked food justice in a speech about protecting France's small farmers (Okello 2009). Equiterre, a Canadian alternative food organization and the Detroit Food Justice Task Force use both food justice and food sovereignty as if they were synonymous (Detroit Food Justice nd; Equiterre 2012). Haroon Akram-Lodhi (2013) deploys food justice in his discussion of the work of La Via Campesina, the organization most closely associated with the global struggle for food sovereignty. Suggesting that these concepts are *not* the same, indigenous rights advocates argue that food sovereignty in tribal communities is the precondition necessary to achieve food justice.

Mobilizing around social justice has been a constant but not a dominant feature of the U.S. food change landscape, often practiced to a greater extent by those with more to gain from its promotion. Scholars have argued that while organizing in the agri-food domain initially used a social justice lens, the new alternative food networks eschewed these visions to appeal instead to consumer buying and lifestyle habits (Allen *et al.* 1991; Allen *et al.* 2003; Allen and Guthman 2006; Allen and Kovach 2000; Allen and Sachs 1992; Clancy 1994, 1997; Cadieux 2005, 2012b, 2013a; Smirl 2011). Organized some time before food work became a 'movement', earlier examples of food justice praxis in the U.S. would include the work of Food not Bombs (see Wilson 2013), the Black Panthers Breakfast Program of the 1960s, the Delano Grape Strike and Boycott led by César Chavez in the mid 1960s, policy analysis from the NGO Food First in the mid 1970s, and farmer organizing against foreclosure in the 1980s. In more recent years, we have learned of groups unknown to national or statewide food movement umbrella organizations who have used food as a tool to achieve justice or address sovereignty in domains reaching beyond the food system itself (Mares and Peña 2011). These groups have used food to launch critiques of institutionalized oppression, to struggle for significant change in relations of power, and to answer a need when no acceptable help was forthcoming (for examples see Alkon 2007; Barraclough 2009; Green, Green, and Kleiner 2011; Heynen 2009; Harrison 2008a; McClintock 2008; McCutcheon 2009; Mitchell 1996; Morales 2011; Norgaard, Reed, and Van Horn 2011; Reid 2003; Slocum 2006; Trauger 2004).

These converging and diverging definitions, as well as a history of seeking justice through food, led us to try to visualize this complexity. Figures 1-5 diagram the lineage of food justice and food sovereignty using the ideal of food security as the entry point, because for many, it precedes other demands (see Scott 2013).<sup>4</sup> However, we note that work done under the auspices of food security has often reproduced the socially inequitable conditions and relations it nominally seeks to address (Cadieux and Blumberg 2014; FSNL 2014; Holt Giménez 2009). A search for the origin story of these terms inevitably misses the contested complexity of their history (Edelman 2013). Thus our intent is not to suggest that the top left and right approaches in the diagram below *led* to food sovereignty and food justice. Instead, the diagram suggests how the limitations of technocratic and middle-class consumer-oriented approaches to food issues have contributed to calls to address inequitable distribution of resources and uneven power relations, two staples of food advocacy addressing social justice (Ozer 2013).

Figure 1 lays out the structure of the diagrams that follow. We begin with the dominant premises of two perspectives on food insecurity (not enough food, and not enough access), moving to actions and analyses associated with each. The vertical center of the diagram shown in the following figures traces the concerns that are raised in response to these premises and the limits of common responses to food concerns, while the right and left columns outline some specifics of the limits identified with them. Critiques of both perspectives have emerged, leading to more radical arguments underlying food justice and food sovereignty. We outline the different characteristics associated with the development of these movements, and finish the linked series of diagrams with the proposal that they have similar nodes around which organizing coalesces.

A perspective emerging from the physical and social sciences – and widely accepted by the public – states that the problem of food insecurity is due to a lack of food (Figure 2, left). Explanations vary but often 'over' population is said to be at the root of the problem, with inefficient food production and delivery mechanisms playing a role as well. From this explanation, a series of actions emerge including population control, technological changes to enable greater food production, and programs to create more efficient production and nutrition delivery methods. On the right, a constellation of NGOs, state entities, and

<sup>4</sup> Figures were created with [Visual Understanding Environment](#) software based on authors' review of literature and fieldwork, particularly within community, policy, and scholarly institutions debating approaches to food security. See Appendix for an integrated view of the diagram.

academics in nutrition, public health, and public policy propose a fundamental observation, that food insecurity is a condition arising from the *inaccessibility* of healthy food. Many alternative food networks have defined the problem of access as the consequence of state-supported agribusiness practices that are ruinous to smaller scale farming (for example, credit regimes, and subsidies that encourage concentration of wealth and power in the hands of wealthier producers, input suppliers, or processors). As a solution, AFNs and public health professionals alike often propose changing how people eat, through taxation, education, and farmers' markets that create alternative pathways from producer to consumer. Their analysis locates responsibility for unhealthy eating and weight gain in individuals or in environments that provide fast food, but not good food.

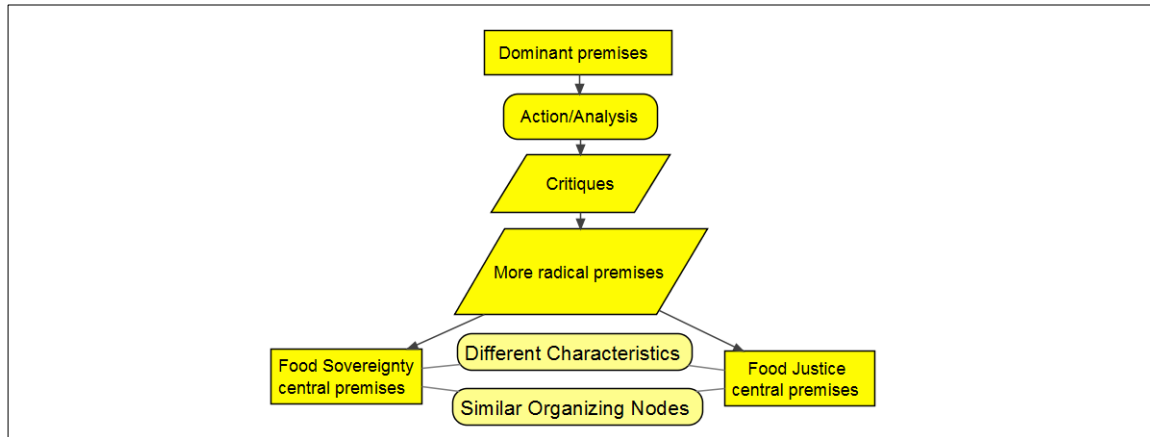


Figure 1: Overview of the structure of the series of diagrams to follow, illustrating the concept of food justice.

Food justice and food sovereignty tend to be loosely associated with different groups, scales of action, and concerns (Figures 4 and 5). The global movement for food sovereignty prioritizes the rights of small-scale and indigenous farmers to access productive resources, while food justice has been associated more with urban activists and U.S. contexts. Conceived in response to the dominant narrative of food security deployed by international institutions such as the FAO, and popularized through the work of the global subsistence farmer network La Via Campesina (LVC), food sovereignty takes aim at the neoliberal agri-food regime at the global scale, citing its negative local effects (Food First 2010; Holt-Giménez and Shattuck 2011). Rather than promote better access to sufficient food in a global food system that continues to undermine smaller-scale producers, food sovereignty advocates want to be able to define their own agri-food systems, recognizing that change at scales beyond the local is necessary (Figures 3, 4, and 5). Instead of reforming the World Trade Organization, LVC wants agriculture completely removed from its remit, and food de-commodified (Mares and Peña 2011): without this change, LVC argues, there can be no food security. Yet in the hands of some U.S. organizations, sovereignty becomes myopically local (Fairbairn 2012).

Unsurprisingly, food justice in the U.S. is also firmly and explicitly committed to the local, particularly to urban areas in the global north (on rural food justice, see McEntee 2011). For some scholars and practitioners, racial inequality is a central concern for food justice, while food sovereignty is more oriented toward self determination, global uneven development, and ecological degradation (Soul Fire Farm nd). Discourses of ownership, empowerment, and control figure prominently in the food justice literature (Figure 4; GFJI nd; Norgaard, Reed, and Van Horn 2011). Groups organized by and for people of color indicate a desire for business skills, equitable livelihoods, and for those most marginalized by the current food system to take a leadership role in providing food for their own communities (Alkon and Agyeman 2011a; McCutcheon 2009). This desire for business skills (GFJI nd), ownership, and self reliance or even separatism in communities of color comes after a long history of dispossession.

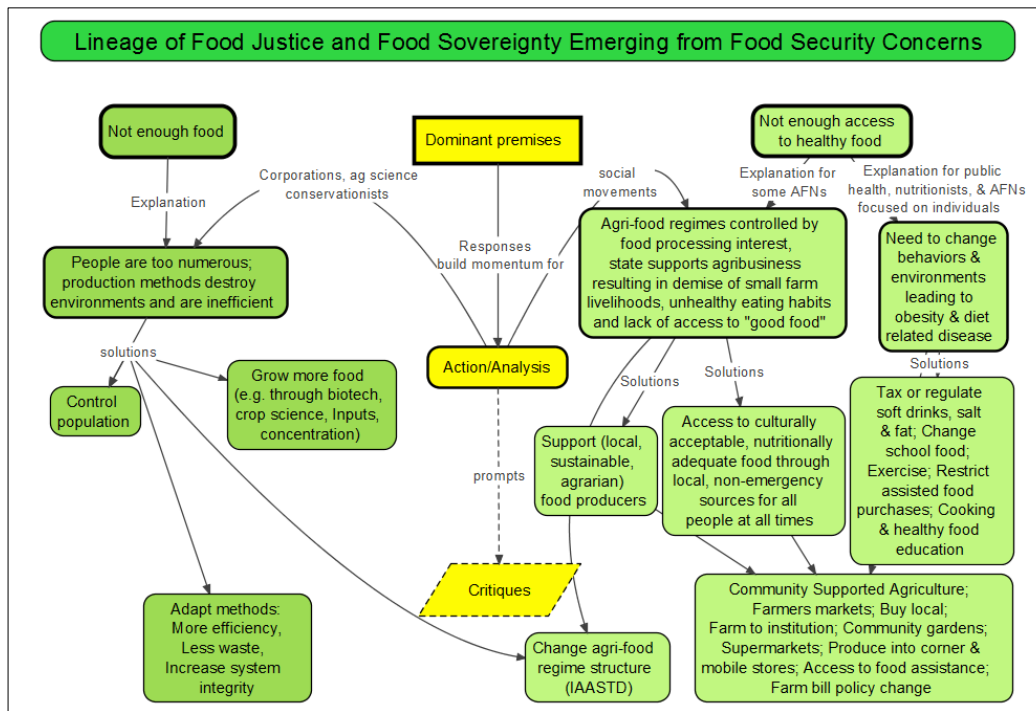


Figure 2: Lineage of food justice and food sovereignty emerging from common framings of food security concerns.

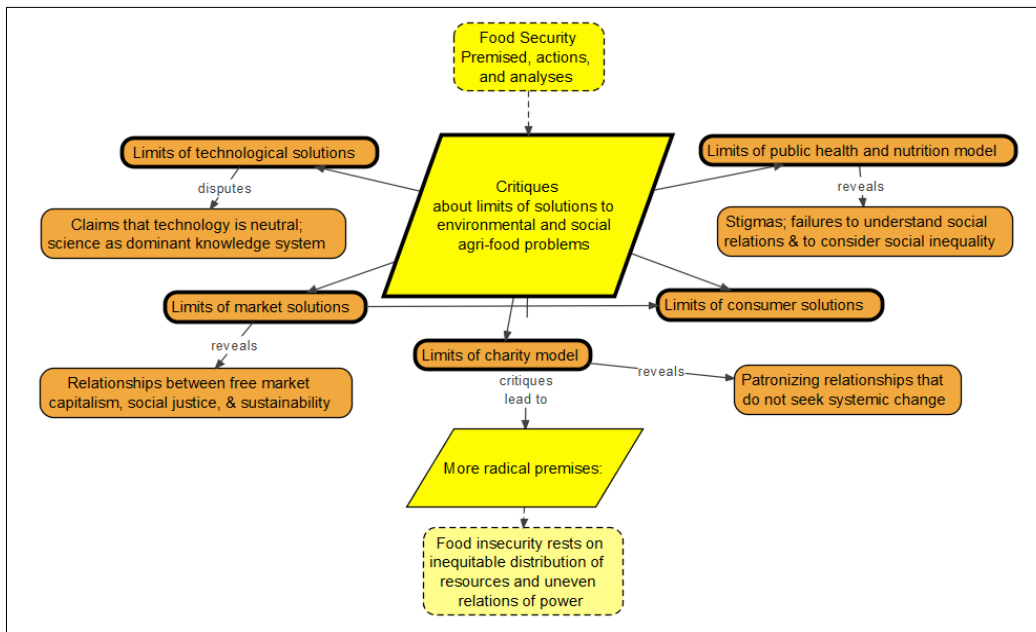


Figure 3: The critiques of both perspectives diagrammed above are the basis for new, more radical premises that food insecurity arises from inequitable distribution of resources and uneven relations of power. These limits of common approaches to food problems also show many of the dynamics that hinder the ability to practice justice in food work.



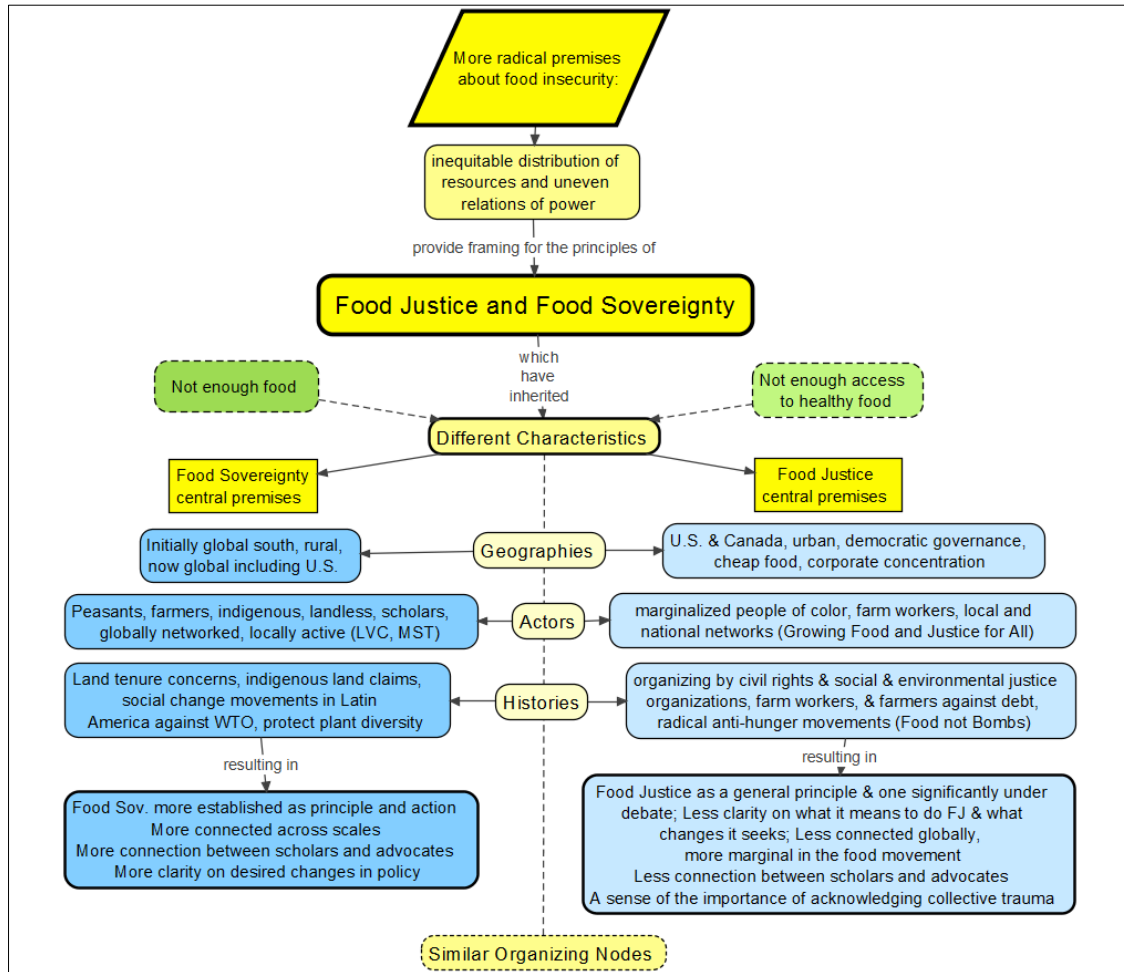


Figure 4: Here we outline characteristics of food justice and food sovereignty in terms of their geographies, actors, and histories. Although food justice and food sovereignty did not emerge directly from either strand of food security concerns, we place food sovereignty in proximity to the premises, actions, and critiques related to the idea of 'not enough food' because this discourse tends to play out around food *production*, while food justice tends to be more associated with food consumption and access, although the growing role of urban agriculture in food justice movements helps connect these domains.

Present day food justice and food sovereignty typically have an oppositional relationship to the state. They are suspicious of the possibility for co-optation and appropriation that comes with state-NGO engagements and often organize outside the space of the state. In the global south, LVC has gained legitimacy by rejecting a relationship with the state because in many cases it has served its citizens so poorly. For many indigenous groups in the U.S. and other global north countries, the term (food) sovereignty connotes a desire for autonomy vis-à-vis the state. In contrast, alternative food networks in the U.S. appear to have a more optimistic view of the state, seeing government public health, agri-food, and environmental programs as useful to the goal of food security. If one central feature of the food movement has been its whiteness, it is not surprising that those with privilege would view the state as an ally or at least as capable of supporting sustainable food systems.

Food justice and food sovereignty map onto to institutionalized divides that the food movement has struggled to bridge (APA 2011; Aubrun, Brown, and Grady 2005; Campbell and Dixon 2009; Friedmann 2009; Schiff 2007). These divisions are kept alive in new scholarship that discusses developments in each field (Figure 5; Holt Giménez 2013). Thus not only do we need evidence of how food sovereignty and food justice work in practice, but also in concert. In the service of "bridg[ing] the rural-urban and North-South divides in the food movement" scholarship might consider "urban agriculture, food justice in marginalized communities, action being taken around land access and rents, and land grabs" (Ibid).

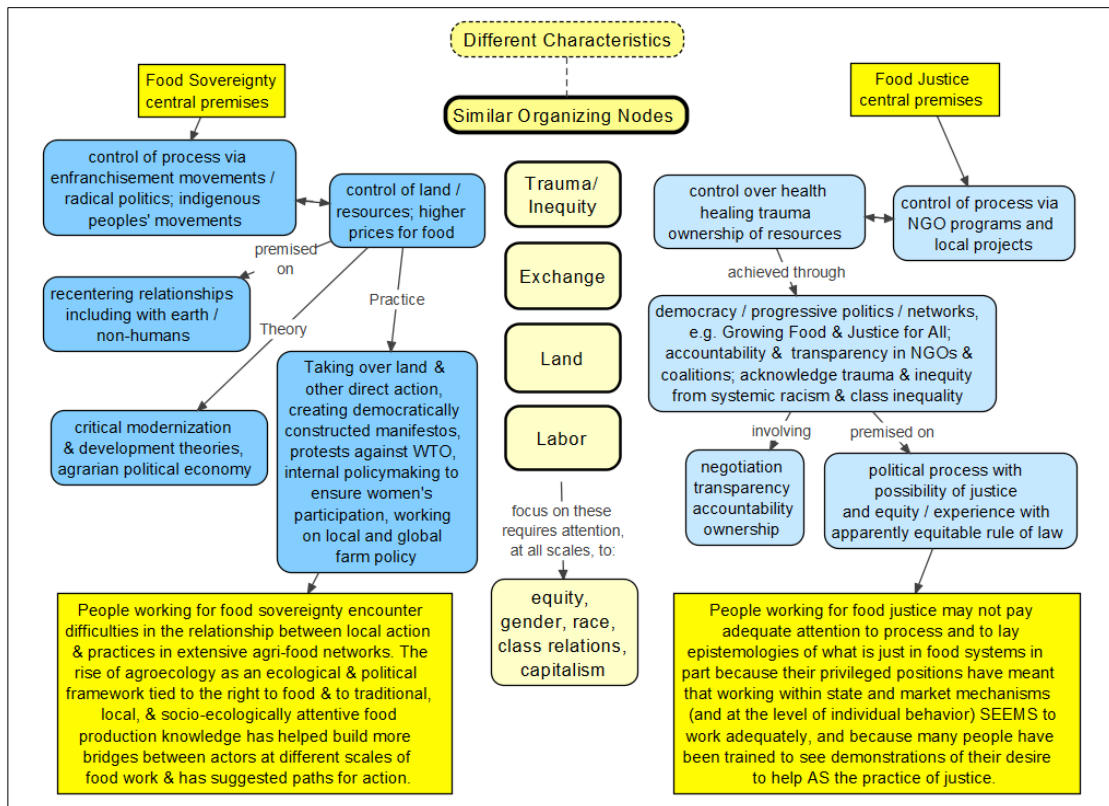


Figure 5: The bottom part of the diagram differentiates between some qualities of food justice and food sovereignty as we have encountered them being used in practice around the nodes of trauma/inequity, exchange, land, and labor.

### 3. What does it mean to *do* food justice?

As we argued above, long established and more recently organized alternative food networks in the U.S. and Canada are using the term food justice to frame their work, with increasing frequency. It seems to us that organizations are applying these terms to what we have known as typical food movement programming (anti-obesity education, growing vegetables, value-added production, immigrant farmer programs, 'buy local' campaigns, farmers' markets). For instance, established New York-based NGO Just Food's 'Food justice' webpage discusses progress on buying locally and urges people to join a CSA. In so doing, they apply a consumer demand-oriented strategy long central to the food movement (Just Food nd). While we know Just Food's programmatic work is not limited to what its food justice web page indicates, the point is that the term is being associated with ideas and practices already established within the food movement. The Food Project (in Massachusetts) hosts Food for Thought and Action workshops that now address "food systems, food justice, and healthy eating" (FoodProject nd). However, the youth they work with continue to be engaged in the same projects for which the organization was known before food justice became part of the discourse.



Ordinances exempting local farmers from licensing requirements have been framed by Maine town members as promoting food sovereignty, but they sound very much like arguments we once heard in support of what were then being called 'local, sustainable food systems' (Gumpert 2011; and see also Kurtz, Retberg, and Preston 2013; Shuman 2000).<sup>5</sup> The National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition's webpage for Community Food Projects funding opportunities cites examples of grants including "community food assessments [...], GIS analysis, food sovereignty study, and farm-to-institution exploration" (NSAC 2014). In this case, the term 'food sovereignty' is nestled among other familiar projects.

Giving established food movement actors the benefit of the doubt, we imagine that increased use of these terms is the result of a re-thinking of what food system change is seeking (e.g. Bittman 2014; and Margil *et al.* 2014 for letters in response). No doubt scholar and activist critiques were acknowledged by some. Newer coalitions like [Growing Food and Justice for All](#), an online network hosted by Wisconsin-based Growing Power, *did* arise from criticisms that the dominant, established groups had *not* been addressing social justice through food. The new generation of food activists has been reading critical scholarship on the food movement and food systems, which probably makes them more interested in the notion of food justice. For instance, Heather Framback, statewide food systems coordinator at the Community Alliance with Family Farmers in California and a panelist for a Climate One program was asked her favorite thinker. She said:

One of my favorite thinkers is definitely Julie Guthman....she really challenges the sort of conventional notions of thinking not just about how food is moved but also about ecology and how it translates into our own bodies, and about capitalism and about the interconnections of things....one of my favorite arguments of hers is that it's great to start and go to farmers markets and do urban farming, but don't get too caught up in creating an alternative system because you leave the people who are most harmed by [...] the conventional food system behind. Starting a farm doesn't do anything for farm workers, for instance. Starting a farmers market doesn't change the family farmers who are too big to sell at the farmers market but may be too small to sell to a Safeway. So being conscious that in creating alternatives, don't forget to do the hard, really, really hard long work of reforming and lifting the people who are most harmed in the conventional system (Climate One 2014).

Scholarly and activist critiques were also being made at the same time that some organizations were supporting people and mentoring them for leadership positions, those that were receptive to structural analyses of the segregated food movement (e.g. [Real Food Challenge](#)). As willingness to deal with critiques increases, more people are able to hear and give voice to the importance of social justice in agri-food activism. Organizations like the Real Food Challenge made the association between 'real' food and fairly paid workers, not just locally sourced vegetables, which is the more typical association. As the concepts of food justice and food sovereignty circulated, their increasing use made them viable, meaningful, and useful, particularly when compared to other common descriptors.<sup>6</sup> Both serve to enable more connectivity across the diverse interests of the food movement. For many, these words probably reflect more accurately the aspirations of those involved. But it is also possible that adoption of the idea of food justice may be a ploy by organizations to obtain greater legitimacy in the eyes of funders, other organizations, or even from their popular base (if they have one). What remains given this expanding use of the term is for organizations and scholars to show, more consistently, how their work falling under the heading 'food justice' actually furthers justice.

Because there are instances in which organizations have appropriated the term, this last point is critical. Second Harvest, an NGO that collects food donated primarily by the major food processors and distributes to food banks across the U.S., now invokes food justice as part of its mission. Its web page on the

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<sup>5</sup> Referring to a struggle between an unlicensed raw milk vendor and the state in Bluehills Maine, the head of Food for Maine's Future said, "...we've gotten them out of our bedrooms and our voting booths, "... [now we need to get the state] "out of our kitchens" (Bidgood 2014).

<sup>6</sup> For instance, 'food systems', which is opaque, complex-sounding, and brings baggage of command and control science, or 'food security', which, in the institutional dining domains where the Real Food Challenge works, is often conflated with food safety and anti-terrorism food defense.

subject claims, "Yes, hunger is here, but so is the solution. The opposite of poverty isn't wealth. The opposite of poverty is justice. Be a part of the solution by joining the Food Justice Movement" (Second Harvest nd). According to this NGO, food justice is achieved through donations of money and peanut butter. In other words, the practice of food justice is charity. This strategy has been critiqued for the way it undermines efforts to address the structural causes of hunger (FSNNL 2014; Minkoff-Zern 2012; Poppendieck 1999; Poppendieck 2013; Riches 1999; Sen 1981; Warshawsky 2010). Although a food bank may have good reason for using the term food justice (see Henderson 2004), and appropriation is not *necessarily* undesirable, in the case of Second Harvest, we wonder whether lipstick in the shade of justice is being put on the pig of charity.<sup>7</sup>

The recent undercutting of fair trade standards in the U.S. (Howard and Jaffee 2013; Jaffee and Howard 2010) points to the urgency of negotiating definitions that promote accountability. In order to persuade firms like Nestlé to participate in fair trade production and certification, the meaning of the term was weakened. Certification no longer commits those enrolled to a yearly increase in the percentage of production they certify as fair, and it now covers plantation and contract labor operations. This dramatic broadening of the definition contributed to schisms in the fair trade advocacy community (e.g. Fair Trade USA's resignation from Fairtrade International, which broke previously associated labeling associations into different entities) (Lyon 2014). In addition to the current problems of the Fair Trade certification program, the EurepGAP program sets rules for fair labor certification that in practice encourage farmers toward informal labor arrangements (Rosin *et al.* 2013). Such an emptying of the signifier 'fair' reinforces, for those already committed to justice issues, the sense that justice is unverifiable, and, for those who have not yet noticed that food justice is important, the invisibility of fairness as an issue related to food. This and the previous example suggest the need for reflexive engagement with projects of definition. Explanations of a concept like justice (or fairness) are an important tool in helping people to notice and negotiate what happens along food chains (*cf.* Cash *et al.* 2003). Further, the meanings of such terms needs to be workable for users, but they also must be equal to the task of holding organizations accountable to vigorous standards. Who benefits from the use of a term, or its hollowing out, is a question that must be asked.

Articulating what constitutes food justice would be a step toward preventing NGOs and public health entities from allowing symptoms like obesity to act as surrogate descriptors for much more complex socio-ecological dynamics. We see this tendency to use iconic proxies as contributing to the increased vulnerability of food improvement efforts. For instance, to garner funding, fresh food financing initiatives must demonstrate that they address obesity. Even as people are beginning to see the impacts of fresh produce financing on food system dynamics associated with food justice—such as access and jobs (see the work of The Food Project in Massachusetts or [Wholesome Wave](#) active in more than half of the U.S. states)—funding has been significantly reduced, partly because these projects had been legitimized so centrally by the justifications of obesity reduction (see the research and then negative coverage of these programs; Cummins, Flint, and Matthews 2014; Rao 2014; Ritger 2014).

Because a suggestion of justice (the right to good food for all) is implicit in many food movement efforts, it is not surprising that advocates seek language that articulates their aspirations with ever-greater strength and clarity. But though achieving social equity<sup>8</sup> has been *desired* by some AFN activists, many have conflated 'more local' with 'more just.' In other words, scholars observe that many food movement actions operate under the assumption that the relationships involved in shorter supply chains will ensure better social relations, whether they do or not (Anderson 2008; Born and Purcell 2006; DuPuis, Harrison, and Goodman 2011).<sup>9</sup> Indeed, one of the central themes of critical scholarship on the food movement has been precisely that

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<sup>7</sup> As Henderson (2004) explains, this donation system also buttresses existing retail models—with their stark display of redundant surplus and simultaneous construction of scarcity—through tax write-offs associated with food nearing expiry and with the cash to support food banking systems.

<sup>8</sup> 'Equity' acknowledges the fact that some groups in society have not had the same access to opportunities and resources; from this basis, it asks for fair distribution and fair procedures.

<sup>9</sup> 'Local' is an imagined place that remains optimistically central to the food movement despite at least twenty years of critique. AFNs have focused their work on localizing the food system with refutable notions like food miles, suspect ideals of community (Joseph 2002), and nostalgic visions of past food systems. In principle, food justice recognizes the need to address how social relations manifest in specific ways in particular contexts, their systemic reach around the world, and the relationship between these. However, practitioners continue to privilege the local and define food justice using an uncritical understanding of community. For instance, Hank Herrera argues, "[f]ood justice work is the incredibly

these networks have tended to disavow and distance themselves from labor rights and inequality (Allen 2003), or to assume that their intentions would lead to more equitable outcomes without committing the resources necessary to achieve such outcomes. Instead, AFNs have often sought to 'bring good food to others' as a mode of redemptive action rather than to seek local and global justice by analyzing and acting upon structural inequalities. Thus, the food movement has tended to project idyllic social relations and contributed to problematic patterns of exploitation, domination, and dependency (Alkon and Agyeman 2011b; Allen 2008; Allen 2010; Allen *et al.* 2003; Allen and Guthman 2006; Allen and Wilson 2008; Anderson 1999; DuPuis, Goodman, and Harrison 2006; Freidburg 2003; Goodman 2003; Guthman 2003, 2004, 2008a, 2008b, 2008c; Goodman and Goodman 2007; Goodman, Maye, and Holloway 2010; Hinrichs 2010; Hinrichs and Kremer 2002; Howard and Jaffee 2013; Jaffee and Howard 2010; Mooney 1988; Mooney and Majka 1995; Mutersbaugh 2005; Slocum 2006, 2007). Time and again we find the same gaps between ideal and practice in efforts to change the food system. Thus it seems reasonable to wonder what has changed by the introduction of 'food justice' as an explicit goal. Apart from the new label, in many instances the answer to this question might be "not much."

Like the examples of NGO discourse above, many scholars now seem to use food justice to refer to what was previously called 'community food activism', 'alternative food', or 'sustainable food and farming' (see e.g. Kremen, Iles, and Bacon 2012). For instance, Yuki Kato (2013) calls typical AFN work (a farmers' market and garden) 'food justice' without saying how the project actually promotes justice. Scholarship in and after the important books *Cultivating food justice* (Alkon and Agyeman 2011) and *Food justice* (Gottlieb and Joshi 2010) discusses various gardening and marketing schemes in marginalized communities of color as if it were enough to pair nonwhite groups with the food movement's familiar spaces of change. Often no explanation is provided as to why these are instances of food justice.

Adding to the confusion, some critique food justice activism for being captured by the same old forms of neoliberalism (i.e. a focus on consumer subjectivity, devolved action, and market mechanisms) that AFNs were accused of accepting in their work (Alkon and Mares 2012; Rosin *et al.* 2013). For example, Julie Guthman argues:

...the more radical food justice movement (at least in rhetoric) addresses the [food] access problem but for the most part steers clear of labor and to some extent income issues [...] Precisely because social movement possibilities are so constrained by neoliberal logics of the market, many dedicated activists barely see other ways forward besides educating people to the qualities of food and bringing good food to low-income people in acts of charity or through nonprofit subsidies and in the name of health and empowerment (Guthman 2011: 194).

We are left wondering, what is the "more radical food justice movement" and how does it differ from the dominant food movement?

To sum up, food justice principles are gaining recognition across diverse publics: NGOs, state-community partners (e.g. Multnomah County 2013), activists, and researchers. Still, it is not clear whether established and more recent food movement actors that conceptualize their work as food justice, are doing anything truly different. Research thus far offers little clarity on this point.

Yet clarity and rigor are important because while food justice becomes an ever more popular moniker, we continue to learn of organizations that do *not* embody what scholars, activists, and policymakers have identified as socially just ways of working toward equitable food systems. Reports of food policy councils from around the U.S. suggest that white imaginaries prevail, making African American and Latino people show up in the food system only through reference to pathological conditions (e.g. obesity, diabetes) (see Henson 2013). Serving on the food policy council in Birmingham, Alabama, the sole black representative is 'authorized' only to speak about deficiencies in the black population (obesity, unemployment) rather than about white privilege and institutionalized racism (Ibid.). Familiar exclusions resulting from where and when meetings are held continue (e.g. holding a food policy council meeting in the middle of the day at City Hall).

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difficult work of building new local healthy food systems, not opposing the global food industry" (Herrera, cited in Holt-Giménez and Wang 2011: 88).

The Los Angeles, CA food policy council consists of white and Asian middle and upper middle class men, while volunteers in work groups are primarily white women with the preponderance gravitating toward the urban agriculture subgroup (DeRuiter 2014). Our experience working with food movement actors points to the need to determine what constitutes food justice and what it looks like in practice.

#### 4. Engaging justice

For some, the very idea of defining food justice is anathema because it amounts to policing the term and limiting whose knowledge becomes part of its definition.<sup>10</sup> Others argue that what it means must be a local decision, or one that comes from groups seen as having the authenticity, by dint of their situated knowledge, to speak on the subject of justice. We struggle with this reaction because justice must stand for something in practice, or else it runs the risk of standing for anything, and potentially nothing (see also Allen 2010, 305). Without a sense of what it means and how it is done, food justice will be difficult to pursue. At the same time, the trouble with the application of a universal ideal like justice is that what it means and how it is sought is a process involving many situated perspectives from which people experience, evaluate, and act upon uneven relations of power and their unequal consequences. In short, a universal notion of justice could erase this ideal's contingent and contested reality. These ideas have been debated for some time (see Benhabib 2000; Benhabib *et al.* 1995; Brown 2000; Calhoun 1995; Collins 1998; Fraser 1989, 1997, 2001).<sup>11</sup>

Rather than dismiss universals, students of social change recognize that these ideals are indispensable to progressive social movements. Observing environmentalist and indigenous efforts against global capital interests in Indonesian forests, Anna Tsing (2004) proposed that universal ideals like environmental protection and human rights became "engaged" in the fraught process where quite different people tried to collaborate. Becoming engaged, universals are deployed for particular purposes in place rather than remaining transcendent with their definition and application captured elsewhere. For example, groups assert human rights to organize against violations of those rights, as well as to provide a domain for negotiation between groups who hold radically different values. Ideals like rights, justice, and sovereignty move around the world, becoming meaningful as people make sense of them from their own social and physical locations (Pratt 2004; Tsing 2004). Universals create new, dynamic spaces wherever they come to rest (see Escobar 2001; Massey 2002).<sup>12</sup>

Following Tsing's approach of "see[ing] how universals are used" (2004: 9), we suggest it is important to show how food justice and food sovereignty become engaged through the situated knowledge of those involved in their use (Haraway 1988). In the U.S., for instance, given the emphasis of alternative food networks on consumer-driven solutions to the ills of food systems, food sovereignty has often been reframed away from producers and toward consumers (Fairbairn 2012). The recent coordination of U.S. food sovereignty efforts via organizations focused on producer support, such as the National Family Farm Coalition and Grassroots International, may be starting to shift this slightly, as some U.S. farmers engage with global food sovereignty concerns (Ozer 2013). For indigenous groups in the U.S. and around the world, food sovereignty has resonated closely with their claims to land and with their struggles for self-determination.

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<sup>10</sup> See Seanhk-Ka and Axtell (2007) for their version of the work it takes for people from "an academic system that held itself to be objective, somehow outside of culture" to understand and participate in the practices and functions of community, not just invocations of the *idea* of community. They present learning practices salient to our work in Minnesota, providing guidance on how to retrain academics to share intellectual authority, for example in the exercise of 'definition.' Following their lead, we want to make explicit that we are not attempting definitional work to 'authoritatively' re-validate what has already been done in other spheres. Recognizing that multiple and competing definitions will resonate with and be useful in different cultural contexts, we are advocating rigorous development of research practices and relationships that help people negotiate frameworks for making and evaluating claims about food justice work.

<sup>11</sup> Some seek to validate food justice by building on the Rawlsian justice tradition (see Yordy and Desjardins in review).

<sup>12</sup> Articulation of food justice characteristics could be analyzed in terms of the rise of a culture of auditing. It is beyond the scope of this article to analyze the relationship between the progressive capture of markets by audit culture and the very different 'bottom up' maintenance of accountability that we are advocating. However, we note that our use of food justice criteria as 'engaged universals' reflects the influence of scholars like Gregg Hetherington (2011), Hugh Campbell and colleagues (Rosin *et al.* 2013), and Colin Crouch (2011). Their work highlights the need to pay attention to and to *change* the function of the monitoring and assessment methodologies that have become a common tool of neoliberal development rhetoric. This reinforces our call for attention to feminist, antiracist, and anti-colonial research, evaluation, and social organization practices.

Food sovereignty's engagement in place, or its local resonance depends on whether the more urgent desire is the security to gain a livelihood through farming, or having enough food, rather than the independence that sovereignty suggests (Boyer 2010; Li 2009, 2011, 2014). Tania Li (2014) finds that some near-subsistence Indonesian farmers made the decision to switch to commodity cocoa production because it provided them with a much more certain livelihood and, importantly, cash. She points out that this complicates assumptions about food sovereignty being organized around subsistence farming, and shows how these views rely on unacknowledged elements of food sovereignty politics, such as state transfers, labor migration, and remittances. Contrary to accounts claiming Bolivians can no longer afford to eat quinoa (Chenopodium quinoa) because middle class Americans are eating so much of it (Bland 2012), commodifying this pseudocereal may be a desired and workable approach for some producers (Barron 2013; see also Bear Witness Pictures forthcoming). The one-size-fits-all approach to de-commodification in food sovereignty discourse derives from its origin in Latin American and European contexts where state support and migrant labor may be essential to enable it. By attending to the specificity of the context where a plurality of ideas of how to imagine and practice food justice and food sovereignty often coexist, we suggest scholars and practitioners clarify what these imaginaries and practices look like in order to move beyond over-general declarations about ending oppression.

Social change is an "imperfect politics" in which "the emphasis is not on creating an ideal [...] model of society and then working for society to meet that standard, but on articulating open, continuous, reflexive processes" that enable differently situated groups to pursue social change (Dupuis and Goodman 2005: 361). Replete with "unintended consequences, ironies, and contradictions", social change comes as a consequence of productive disagreement (Ibid.). For this reason, we do not advocate comparing practice to an established set of indicators or to best practices against which food movement organizations will always fall short. The theoretical implication of imperfect politics and engaged universals suggests a continuum of food movement practice rather than sharp distinctions between those doing food justice and others who are not (see Holt-Giménez and Wang 2011). This continuum is awkward, with many actors clustering in a region of the distribution characterized by claiming to do food justice without actually having changed what they do and how they do it. Others will have understood and applied those critiques of AFNs we have discussed, but they face barriers difficult to overcome that we outline in our second article (Slocum and Cadieux 2015). Studying their practice, as we suggest is necessary, provides not a thumbs-up or -down conclusion, but an analysis of how transformative food work *gets stuck* and what might enable it to move toward socially just food systems.

## 5. Characteristics of food justice

Like many food movement scholars, we have ideas about what transformative food politics should, or could look like (Figure 6). From our research and an analysis of the literature, we would expect that food justice practices would seek ways to intervene against structural inequalities. Specifically, there are four areas around which organizing toward food justice and food sovereignty seems to occur:

- 1) acknowledging and confronting historical, collective social trauma and persistent race, gender, and class inequalities;
- 2) designing exchange mechanisms that build communal reliance and control;
- 3) creating innovative ways to control, use, share, own, manage and *conceive of* land, and ecologies in general, that place them outside the speculative market and the rationale of extraction; and
- 4) pursuing labor relations that guarantee a minimum income and are neither alienating nor dependent on (unpaid) social reproduction by women.

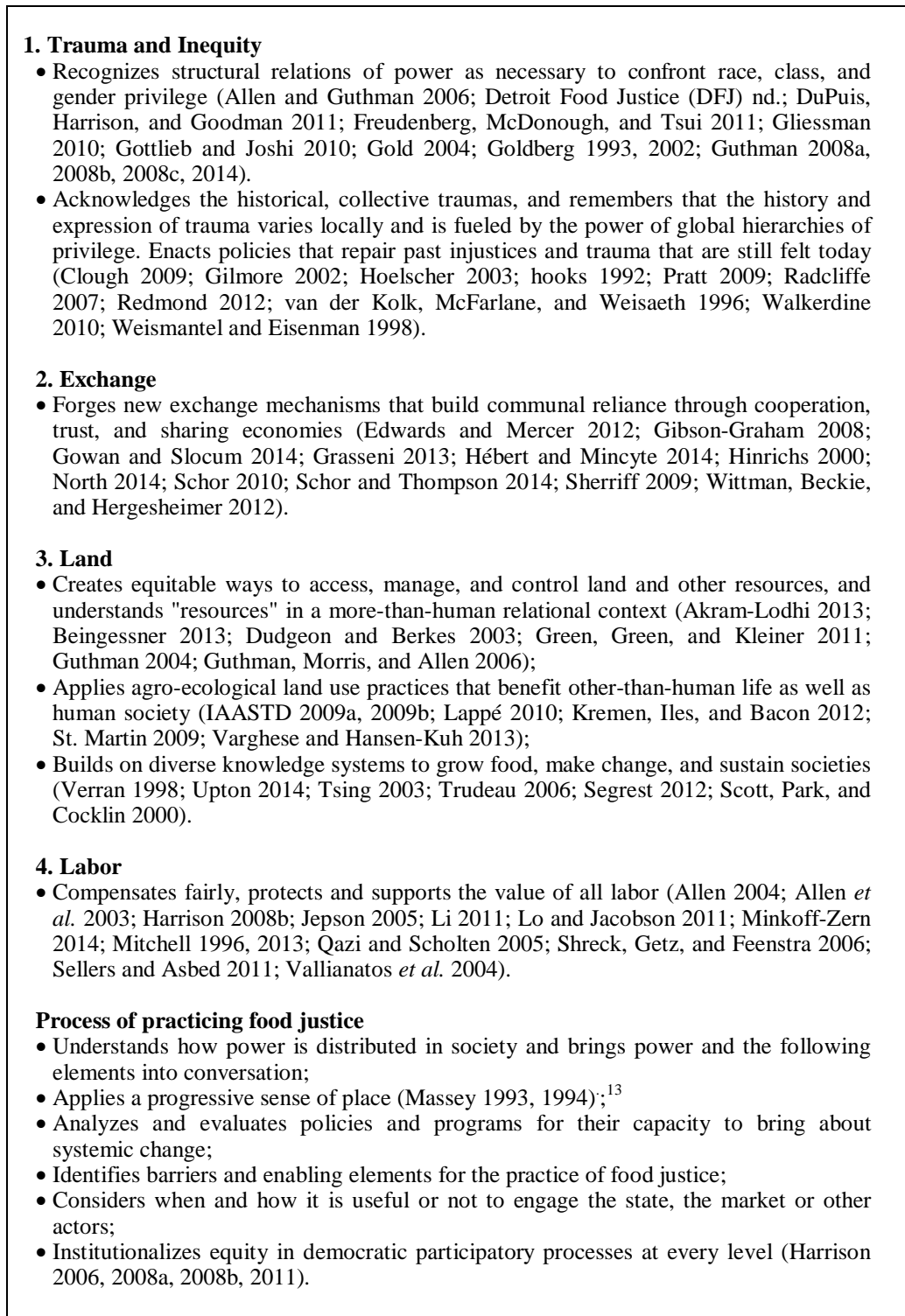


Figure 6: Food justice organizing nodes and practices.

<sup>13</sup> Massey argued that every place is a process created out of changing and uneven relations of power, connecting that space with other places. Place and community are not coterminous and all communities are marked by social hierarchies that are continually contested. This sense of place is progressive, rather than reactionary or defensive because it grapples with the implications of these dynamic social relations across scales.



These points of intervention have been proposed by scholars for many years, and also emerged at the Food + Justice = Democracy conference held in Minneapolis in 2013.<sup>14</sup> Our categories in Figure 6 sketch out what might be included in food justice work, and they also underline the interdependence of food justice and food sovereignty principles.

## 6. Conclusions

This article derives from our own experience in seeing much greater use of the concept of 'food justice' by scholars and practitioners, without concomitant attention to what it means to put food justice into practice. We suggest there is a need to specify what enables food justice to succeed, beyond the favored pursuits of the food movement (for example communal gardens, worm bins, or farmers' markets). After all, as political ecologists regularly point out, not every (garden) project seeks social justice; it depends who's doing it and how, where it is, how it is connected to other places, and why it is the chosen action. There are many reasons to actively characterize what constitutes food justice and what it looks like in action. **First**, there are stark inequities that need to be undone, yet many well-meaning staples of the food movement do not serve that aim. Instead, these typical projects may greenwash or fairwash, serving to conceal and reproduce inequality. Indeed, some food movement actions serve to shore up some of the most damaging justifications of inequality coming from a neoliberal ethos (Martin and Andr e 2014). It will be difficult to build a transformative food movement if food justice becomes another empty signifier on food packaging (as we have seen with 'trans fat free' and 'cruelty free' false advertising, Winders 2006). If food justice means *anything*, it may stand for nothing—or, worse, serve to undermine the credibility and rigor of substantive food justice practices. **Second**, clarity about what it means to create socially just food systems is necessary to counter some strong forces—including publicly legible arguments for 'feeding the world's population' via export-oriented agribusiness, the dominant food system's increasing commercial concentration, and the continued marginality of alternative food networks. Supporting people who have legitimacy in their communities to investigate and evaluate what makes food justice efforts successful can help us further understand how food justice works, and it can institutionalize support for it. It can also push against the dominant research infrastructure that decrees that food issues are too urgent to afford attention to the political ecology of food justice, or to the scholarship pursuing it.

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<sup>14</sup> Convened by a broad organizing committee including members from both local and national organizations such as Centro Campesino, the Women's Environmental Institute, Dream of Wild Health, the Indigenous Environment Network, Center for New Community, and the Coalition of Immolakee Workers and led by LaDonna Redmond on behalf of the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, conference organizers and participants elaborated 21 principles under the themes of: historical trauma; local foods, community development and public investment; food sovereignty; land; labor and immigration; and toxic-free and climate just food systems (IATP 2013). Despite continued negotiation over the integration of the forty-nine principles gathered under these six categories, no synthesis document has yet been forged, and the tensions encountered in the negotiating process seem indicative of the challenge of identifying clearly what food justice means to the people attempting to operationalize it, and who has the legitimacy to institutionalize this meaning. To read more about the principles see: <http://www.iatp.org/issue/justice/food-justice> and for the organizing committee, see: [http://www.iatp.org/files/2012\\_09\\_21\\_SteeringCommittee\\_web.pdf](http://www.iatp.org/files/2012_09_21_SteeringCommittee_web.pdf).

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Appendix 1: Lineage of food justice and food sovereignty emerging from food security concerns.

