

What We Learned

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Upon the initial release of our report, *A Regional Imperative: The Case for Regional Food Systems*, in early 2022, we received criticism about the report’s “treatment of racism and racial equity” from the Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Working Group (NESAWG), the report’s original sponsor. While this criticism was unsettling to us and not accompanied by specific feedback, we acknowledged that we could have done more on the social justice aspects of regional food systems. Despite lengthy sections on social justice, references to oppressed communities, and suggested remedies throughout the text, our original report fell short in certain and important ways, and we wanted to strengthen it.

As a path forward, we worked with the Thomas A. Lyson Center for Civic Agriculture and Food Systems¹ to publish and promote the report as a “discussion version.” We solicited public feedback and convened a Discussion Team of four scholar-practitioners of diverse backgrounds, expertise, and experiences. They commented on the report’s language, errors, and omissions with respect to racism and racial inequity. Beyond these concrete corrections, the process of reflection and dialogue with our Discussion Team deepened our own exploration of how to treat racism, racial equity, and social justice in material such as our report. We share these reflections here, and this [link](#) to the final report.

While we, two elder white women, have fought for social justice for many decades in various arenas and strive to work in allyship with oppressed communities, we recognize how easy it is to take our whiteness for granted. It has been humbling to navigate our response to the negative reactions and to being publicly “called out” without feeling or appearing defensive. Certainly, the experience has increased our awareness about the impact of harm, regardless of its inadvertent or unintentional origins.

The topic of our report is regionalism and regional food systems. We want to better understand how oppression can or should be treated in studies like ours where the topic is multidimensional. In this context, “treatment” means the action or manner of dealing with a topic.² In our consideration of this question, we arrived at five treatment strategies: centering, intersecting, framing, infusing, and informing. We describe them here. There are other ways to treat oppression when it is one of

1. The Thomas A. Lyson Center for Civic Agriculture and Food Systems is a fiscally sponsored project of the Center for Transformative Action, a nonprofit affiliate of Cornell University. The Lyson Center also publishes the [Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development](#) (JAFSCD) and facilitates the [North American Food Systems Network](#) (NAFSN).

many parts of a broad and complex subject. It can be genuinely or gratuitously acknowledged or mentioned. It can be ignored. For white people for whom confronting racism and promoting equity is a core value, these approaches are not options. Following our discussion of the five treatment strategies, we share observations on the current “call-out culture,” and offer a few suggestions for addressing racism and other forms of inequity in studies of other topics.

Centering. When NESAWG criticized us for not “centering” the report on race, we wanted to understand what that meant. NESAWG does not have its own working definition of “centering race.”³ We learned from various sources that centering race and racial equity is envisioned in different ways. In the article “Centering Equity in Collective Impact,”⁴ the strategies for centering equity include grounding the work in data and context, and targeting solutions; focusing on systems change in addition to programs and services; shifting power and building equity leadership; and acting with community. Lina Houston,⁵ an attorney of color, addresses white people, offering “7 ways to support and center people of color,” including recognizing and checking your privilege; understanding your oppression; recognizing intent versus impact; educating yourself and your white friends; and collaborating and connecting with communities of color.

Many organizations publish racial equity statements in which they commit to centering racial equity by holding it as a core value, operating with it as a priority, and confronting structural racism in their work. To some groups (which may include NESAWG), centering means viewing topics and actions exclusively through a racial justice lens, solely or primarily based on the direct experience and analyses of persons and groups of color. To be clear, we believe that “white centering,” that is, the centering of white people and their values, norms, and feelings over others,⁶ has no place in the work of advancing social justice.

We believe that each of these centering orientations has merit and power. In our report, we center fighting oppression and advancing racial equity and, more broadly, social justice, as core values and central strategic priorities. That said, the report is not written through a racial justice lens; such a specific focus was beyond our scope and capacity, and would have been misguided and presumptuous without substantial direction, if not lead authorship, by partners of color. We hope that others will contribute racial equity analyses of regional food systems.

Intersecting. In food systems, multiple forces of oppression and marginalization are at work. As systems thinkers, we looked at how and where oppression and regional food systems intersect. These intersections are noted throughout the report. We point out the patterns and consequences of oppression on various groups and in certain settings *in the context of regional food systems*. We also point out that in some ways, regionalism in itself may not be an especially effective framework to address

2. Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). Treatment [definition 1b]. In Merriam-Webster.com dictionary. Retrieved August 15, 2022, from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/treatment>

3. Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Working Group. (2022). Online “conversation” (webinar). April 27, 2022.

4. Kania, J., Williams, J., Schmitz, P., Brady, S., Kramer, M., & Juster, J. S. (2022). Centering equity in collective impact. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Winter, 38–45.

<https://ncimpact.sog.unc.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/1111/2022/02/Centering-Equity-Collective-Impact-Winter-2022.pdf>

5. Houston, L. (2016, September 27). 7 Ways to support and center people of color. If/When/How. <https://www.ifwhenhow.org/7-ways-to-support-and-center-people-of-color/>

6. See Saad, L. F. (2020). Me and white supremacy: Combat racism, change the world, and become a good ancestor. Sourcebooks.

oppression and advance social justice. Nonetheless, we discuss many reasons and opportunities to be attentive to social justice at a regional scale. It seems to us that the intersections between oppression and a particular topic will vary depending on the topic, context, purpose, and audience. That said, authors and researchers should always be accountable to social justice values.

Legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw⁷ offered a more particular take when she coined the term “intersectionality” (now included in standard dictionaries). For her, intersectionality describes how systems of oppression overlap and how individuals’ multiple marginalized social identities interact and compound the impacts of oppression. This concept of the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender certainly applies within food systems. Intersectionality could appropriately pertain to how race, ethnicity, and gender are layered upon members of other marginalized—meaning distanced from power and resources—communities such as small farmers, farmworkers, and food-chain workers.

Framing. In our 2007 chapter⁸ on social change movements in food systems, we discuss framing as the process of describing social problems around shared meaning that can mobilize groups to action. Frames differ in their comprehensiveness. Master frames are most inclusive; they bring together various subissues and networks and provide a unifying message. (Note: The term “master frame” is embedded in sociology and social movement theory. We recognize that the word “master” may be offensive to some readers. Racial injustice is a highly mobilizing frame, in which the particular dynamics of the Black, brown and Indigenous experiences are subframes.

In food systems, a more comprehensive frame focusing on oppression can include marginalized groups such as immigrant and refugee farmers and consumers, farm and food workers, low-income rural and urban food shoppers, and agri-food business owners. In our report, social justice—meaning the fair distribution of social benefits and opportunities—is a master frame that includes the multiple marginalized, oppressed, and disadvantaged groups that we discuss in the report. This master frame’s power comes in part from its potential to point to structural concerns.

There are pros and cons to how issues are framed in material like this report. One challenge with a broad master frame is the fact or perception that attention to a particular issue or group is superficial or diluted. Certainly the history and experience of Black people in the U.S. is unparalleled and cannot be overstated. An advantage of a powerful master frame can be in strategic overlap and complementarity, resulting in greater strength, solidarity, and impact for change. Perhaps it merits emphasis that our overarching reason for advocating for stronger regional food systems is for their contributions to sustainability and social justice.

Infusing. In this context, infusing means to fill or imbue material to affect it substantially. Several academic institutions⁹ and nonprofit organizations have committed to “infusing” justice, equity, and diversity into their curricula and programming. This includes addressing how racial inequities are

7. Crenshaw, K. W. (2017). *On intersectionality: Essential writings*. The New Press.

8. Stevenson, G. W., Ruhf, K., Lezberg, S. & Clancy, K. (2007). Warrior, builder, and weaver work: Strategies for changing the food system. In C. C. Hinrichs & T. A. Lyson, (Eds.), *Remaking the North American food system: Strategies for sustainability* (pp. 33–62). University of Nebraska Press.

relevant to and addressed in related material, filling any gaps and inaccurate representations, and assuring that information is adequate and appropriately sourced. For us, it means to acknowledge the roots of contemporary inequities and to place analyses in their historic and multicultural contexts.

From the beginning of our writing, we worked to infuse the report, including our suggestions for action, with concerns of oppression and equity. At times the frame was specific to race; in other places social justice was the relevant master frame. Our Discussion Team helped us identify more places in the report to highlight the particular inequities faced by particular communities of color. There is always the challenge that the infusion is superficial or otherwise insubstantial, which raises questions such as what is adequate or optimal? How much emphasis? For what purposes and audiences? Who determines?

Informing. What sources are used to inform works such as this report? What information and review are appropriate, legitimate, sufficient? As white women, we acknowledge the boundaries of our lived experience. We are not persons of color, farmers, food workers, or people who have experienced food insecurity. Having researched, published, presented and collaborated on food systems, and more specifically regional food systems, for several decades, we have had experience in seeking a variety of reputable sources of information and opinion. We pursued the best available resource material and input about racial equity and social justice—data, research, articles, and lived and reported experience—under the given circumstances and placed them in as many places as made sense to us. We adhered to scholarly standards.

That said, the three years we researched and wrote this report were greatly affected by COVID-19, the Black Lives Matter movement, and unprecedented political turmoil. Understandably, many people were stretched beyond the usual pressures during that time. We did not obtain as much outside expertise, particularly from members of communities of color, as we diligently sought. We understand and accept that these limitations to our information-gathering and review processes caused harm and compromised the integrity of the report to some readers.

As with infusing, questions arise with the processes of informing and sources of information. Who are the authors? The partners? Are sources diverse? Appropriate? Reputable? How much input and review, and by whom? If one reviewer of color is not sufficient or credible, are four reviewers? Ten? What is the nature of the review process? How do researchers like us best access and present the lived experience of the constituents they seek to champion?

Calling Out or Calling In?

Several months after the report's initial release and feedback, we read several articles¹⁰ and a book by a woman of color that placed our personal experience in a larger context. Like others

9. See The University of Memphis. (2021). Social justice initiative: Eradicating racism and promoting social justice. Curriculum—Infusing diversity, equity, inclusion and social justice into existing courses/curriculum. <https://www.memphis.edu/justice/workgroups/files/report7.pdf>; and Champine, R. B. (2021, September 21). Faculty voice: Seven strategies to infuse diversity, equity, and inclusion into teaching. Division of Public Health, College of Human Medicine, Michigan State University. <https://publichealth.msu.edu/news-items/faculty-and-staff/418-faculty-voice-seven-strategies-to-infuse-diversity-equity-and-inclusion-into-teaching>

who observe the current “call-out” culture where people are publicly confronted, criticized and ostracized as toxic, adrienne maree brown¹¹ describes this phenomenon of public shamings and “knee-jerk collective punishment” as “elicit[ing] a consistent and negative energy” (p. 26). She laments how call-outs are being used to “humiliate people in the wake of ... conflicts and mistakes” (p. 41). She goes on to say, “What concerns me is how often it feels like this instant reaction is happening within the movement” (p. 43), where quick judgment and cancellation are supposed to make offenders “learn to be better,” rid the movement of “bad people,” and prove the bona fides of the accusers.

From our own experience, we agree with brown that “call-outs don’t work for addressing misunderstandings, issuing critiques or resolving contradiction” (p. 46). Like brown, Ahmad, and others, we agree that call-outs for egregious behavior or when other measures fail is sometimes appropriate, but that “call-ins” based on dialogue rather than public excoriating are more likely to move us all toward transformation. We agree with brown that as a movement, we are in “dangerous territory not aligned with a transformative justice when we mete out punishments ... with no time for the learning and unlearning necessary for authentic change” (p. 49).

We resonate with brown’s systems thinking: “How do I hold a systemic analysis and approach when each system I am critical of is peopled, in part, by the same flawed and complex individuals that I love? ... If I can see the ways I am perpetuating systemic oppressions, ... I start to have more humility as I see the messiness of the communities I am part of, the world I live in” (p. 68).

Being humiliated and ostracized for the shortcomings of our report left no space for the transformative work of asking, together with our accusers, what can we learn and how can we grow from this experience? How can we all do better at holding the complexity of the systems, situations, and relationships in which we co-exist? We feel fortunate to have colleagues who have shared and supported us in our journey, including our Discussion Team and report editors.

We deeply agree with brown that “movements need to grow and deepen ... to become the practice ground for what we are healing toward, co-creating. Movements are responsible for embodying what we are inviting our people into” (p. 57), for asking careful questions before leaping to judgment and shame. Like brown, we “feel like we are responsible for each other’s transformation” (p. 74). We hope these reflections make a contribution.

Good practices

What are some good practices for white people engaged in research, analyses, and other materials development in this time of greater racial awareness? For those seeking to advance equity and be, borrowing brown’s term, good “co-abolitionists” with people from oppressed communities, stumbling is inevitable. We appreciate the work of others who have similarly pondered this question. From our experience and reflection, we offer a few suggestions.

¹⁰ See, for example, Ahmad, A. (2015, March 2). A note on call-out culture. Briarpatch. <https://briarpatchmagazine.com/articles/view/a-note-on-call-out-culture>

¹¹ brown, a. m. (2020). We will not cancel us and other dreams of transformative justice. AK Press.

- Be clear about the purpose and scope of the material, and expectations. At times, blurring the lines between scholarship and activism can contribute to food justice work.¹²
- Be transparent about the authors' qualifications and limitations. Acknowledge the “ways that we are complicit in unjust systems and ways that we benefit from them.”¹³
- State upfront how oppression, equity, and social justice will be addressed in the material. Describe and justify the approach that may include one or more of the strategies described above.
- Everywhere it is appropriate in the material or project, lift up the historic and contemporary injustices, struggles, and successes experienced by communities of color and other oppressed groups, and at minimum, acknowledge root and systemic causes.
- Acknowledge the challenges presented by language. Terminology evolves, and certain terms and expressions may offend some readers but not others, even within like-minded groups. “Language and terminology ... are forever shifting and almost impossible to keep up with. In such a context, it is impossible not to fail at least some of the time” (Ahmad, 2015, para. 4).
- Prioritize diversity and inclusion in developing the material. Seek diverse and relevant information and partners, and explain the process used to obtain them. In our report, we drew directly from material, including policy and program recommendations, developed by individuals and groups of oppressed and marginalized communities.
- Employ universally accepted processes to advance knowledge and justice by inviting feedback, correction, additions, and further analyses. For example, we welcome others to comment on this report and to analyze regional food systems through the lenses of race, gender, class, capitalism, etc.
- Practice cultural humility in researching and presenting the material. Incorporate different ways of knowing and sources of knowledge.
- Include strong values statements about oppression and equity, regardless of the topic. Be willing to step up and take action.

We have learned a lot. We understand more clearly how to employ all methods to build knowledge, increase awareness, promote dialogue, and advocate for change toward a more resilient, sustainable, and just food system for all. We know that ally work is ongoing and that it requires reflection and humility. Our experience has reminded us how crucial—and fragile—trust is. Despite missteps, we need to be in this together, in all our stumbles, hurts, *and* achievements.

12 Reynolds, K., Block, D., & Bradley, K. (2018). Food justice scholar-activism and activist-scholarship. *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies*, 17(4), 988–998. <https://acme-journal.org/index.php/acme/article/view/1735>

13 Levkoe, C. Z. (2021). Scholars as allies in the struggle for food systems transformation. *Agriculture and Human Values*, 38, 611–614. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10460-021-10208-y>.