



Dismantling Racism in the Food System

Special multi-authored series on racism and liberation in the food system

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Decolonize Your Diet Notes Towards Decolonization

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“Guatemalan Kitchen” by Leonor Hurtado

The idea of cancer-fighting foods is not a new one—popular media is often dominated by the latest “food craze” to cure cancer, diabetes, Alzheimer’s, heart disease, and more. In the book *Decolonize Your Diet: Plant-based Mexican-American Recipes for Health and Healing*,¹ we talk about how our project was inspired by Luz’s recovery following a breast cancer diagnosis. This Backgrounder is a brief introduction to the *Decolonize Your Diet* project and its role in a much larger movement to reclaim traditional foodways as a form of resistance to ongoing colonization.

In the aftermath of Luz’s cancer diagnosis, food had become a very scary subject in our house; we worried that “eating the wrong food” might “bring the cancer back.” Through working with food, Luz came to regard meals not so much as a danger, but as a way to bring cancer-fighting foods into their body, an active opportunity to fight fear with food.

One resource we found helpful and studied thoroughly was Rebecca Katz's *The Cancer Fighting Kitchen*.² Still, as with many "health food" cookbooks we've encountered over the years, Katz's recipes did not necessarily resonate with our flavors of "home." Both Luz and I have grandparents who immigrated to Los Angeles from Sonora in the first half of the twentieth century. As we were growing up, the flavor profile of our grandparents' food shaped our definitions of food, comfort, and tradition.

So when we embarked on the project of "reclaiming" Mexican foods, we had a particular, historical idea of the way dishes should taste and what they should look like. We were raised in the Mexican/Mestizo paradigm, which simultaneously appropriates the identity of Native Mexican peoples while erasing living Native peoples and undermining their traditional ways of living. We were inspired by work in Native communities which seeks to reclaim heritage foods and ways of thinking about food as both cultural and physical survival.

We chose the phrase "Decolonize Your Diet" to describe our project in order to gesture toward the many people and groups who have been working on different parts of the larger decolonization of food movement. Choctaw scholar and novelist Devon Abbot Mihesuah had coined the term "decolonization" at least as early as 2003,³ and further developed the theme in her 2005 book *Recovering Our Ancestor's Gardens: Indigenous Recipes and Guide to Diet and Fitness*.⁴ Mihesuah critiqued the history of assault on Native people's foodways in the US and connected this assault to current epidemics of diabetes. Winona LaDuke explores the historical roots of Native peoples' diets in her work *All My Relations: Native Struggles for Land and Life* (1999), and in a much more extended form in *Recovering the Sacred: The Power of Claiming and Naming* (2005). The Native American Food movement has been about reclaiming the notion that food is medicine and that Native food traditions were selected, sometimes over thousands of years, with one criteria: the health of all the members of the community.

When we talk about reclaiming indigenous Mexican foods, some people misinterpret this to mean that we are arguing that people should eat only what their own ancestors ate – that genetically we are only suited to our own ancestral diet. Though there are others who make that claim, this is not our argument. Rather, we

argue that vast systems of white supremacy and colonial regimes of power and knowledge have led to an erasure and devaluation of the contributions of indigenous peoples and cultures. Directions to "eat healthy" commonly invoke the Mediterranean Diet, for example. The cultural effect is that, just as we were taught "Western Civilization" in our history class, we are taught the Greco-Roman diet in our food education, ignoring and erasing all other models.

Research has shown that when people embrace traditional diets of non-European peoples—such as Native Hawaiian, rural South African, Tohono O'odham, or Aboriginal Australian⁵—their health improves. Diseases such as diabetes have reached epidemic proportions in our communities. However, they were formerly held at bay by traditional foodways imbued with centuries of knowledge about combinations of ingredients, about seasonal eating, and about the best ways to prepare certain ingredients to maximize nutrition.

We would also draw attention to the fact that "traditions" are reified by modern states, and that "traditional diets" around the world are now centered around foods that originated in the Americas and thus first made their entrance on the global scene after 1492. Thus when we hear about "traditional" foods from Eastern Europe, from Southeast Asia, and from the Mediterranean being based around potatoes, chile, corn, and tomatoes, it's important to recognize that this was part of the colonization—exploiting the natural resources of the colonies (including peoples, their knowledge, and their foodways) and distributing their products to the colonial centers.

Instead of taking chocolate or berries or coffee or bananas out of one cultural context and placing it in another for profit, we should instead recognize and respect the cultural contexts that our foods come from: who ate them and why? What were traditional ways of preparing it? How were they supplemented or complemented by other foods? John Mohawk makes this point when he discusses a period in the 1960s:

When people were trying to get back to the land, *Mother Earth News* ran an article about how Iroquois Indians lived pretty much on corn and beans and squash.... A couple of people wrote to me and they said the following thing... 'We tried living on corn. We planted corn and all we ate was corn and beans

and we almost got sick doing that.’

So I wrote back to them, ‘What kind of corn and beans?’ Well, they were planting essentially the kind of corn and beans you could order at that time out of the seed catalogs. But the corn that you can thrive on is the high-lysine corn and the beans have to be dense. It is the combination of dense beans and high-lysine corn hulled by lye that produces all the amino acids you need to make protein. This has a remarkable quality: it can be turned into something that a baby can swallow. It will keep a baby alive when the mother’s milk goes dry. Try to find that with any other vegetable-based foods. With Iroquois Indians, when a mother’s milk went dry, they fed the baby a derivative of corn.⁶

Hundreds of years earlier, when corn was taken from the Americas and used as a food base in other European colonies, people became malnourished. The colonizers had not brought the indigenous preparation of “high lysine corn hulled by lye,” or *nixtamalization* along with the corn, so the food wasn’t as nutritious as it had been in its original cultural contexts.

Julio Valladolid Rivera discusses the Andean cultural practice of the intergrowing of different varieties and even different crops:

In the potato fields, varieties are planted together. During the flowering, it is possible to see different colors of flowers. That’s telling us that it is a mixture. If we see these different kinds and colors of flowers, it means there are different varieties. In the harvest, we find different kinds of potatoes. Some varieties are resistant to excess rain. Others are drought-resistant....there is always a mixture planted.⁷

Similarly, Aurora Levins Morales makes this point brilliantly in her book *Remedios: Stories of Earth and Iron from the History of Puertorriqueñas*,⁸ in which she frequently traces the route of foods. In her prose poem “Potatoes,” Levins Morales contrasts the potato as it was grown in the Andes with how it was transported through colonization to become the subsistence food for another colonized people, the Irish:

Papita de los Andes...You offer us the unknown, the multiple pathways, the different seasoning, the doorway to discovery, the unexpected bonus, the unqualified disaster, the privilege of making many

fruitful mistakes.

Only when this lesson is refused, when those who cultivate you reject the rainbow and repeat themselves endlessly, planting the same seed in the same ground, acre upon acre, season after season, does famine follow on your heels.⁹

Mohawk, Levins Morales, and Valladolid Rivera are demonstrating the need to re-indigenize food and to honor the generations of indigenous knowledge that went into its development – but were ignored when the foods became just another commodity in a global market.

*What is a legacy? It’s planting seeds in a garden you never get to see.*¹⁰

I am haunted by this phrase from Lin-Manuel Miranda’s award-winning musical, *Hamilton*.¹¹ Miranda’s words lead me to question further: What is a garden? A garden can be many different things to many different peoples. In Leslie Marmon Silko’s novel, *Gardens in the Dunes*,¹² gardens are a recurring theme. As readers, we see such a diversity of gardens that it’s hard to stretch the term to encompass all the different variations. In the US Southwest, we see the desert gardens of the Sand Lizard people, where two girls survive on their own, using the traditions taught by their grandmother:

The deep sand held precious moisture from runoff that nurtured the plants; along the sandstone cliffs above the dunes, dampness seeped out of cracks in the cliff. Amaranth grew profusely at the foot of the dunes. When there was nothing else to eat, there was amaranth; every morning and every night Sister Salt boiled up amaranth greens just like Grandma Fleet taught her. Later, as the amaranth went to seed, they took turns kneeling at the grinding stone, then Sister Salt made tortillas.¹³

These desert gardens contrast sharply with a garden on the East Coast, put together at phenomenal expense and comprised entirely of white and blue flowers that will be at its peak for one full moon party. That moonlight garden contrasts further with a thousand year-old stone garden in Tuscany, growing beds of black gladiolus and harboring pre-Roman sculptures in individual niches. Maybe all people grow gardens, but what they call gardens fulfill dramatically differ-

ent, even oppositional functions. Some gardens feed people, some amuse the rich, some recreate a different time or place. Fortunes are made and lost on orchids, on citron, on cuttings of rubber plants. Rainforests are torched to ensure the only flower that survives will be truly unique. Silko's novel reminds us we should always ask questions of gardens: whose homeland is now someone else's "garden" or "plantation?" Who has been removed from the land? Whose labor is forced? Whose wages are stolen? Whose crops are valued? Whose crops are outlawed?

Today, as we are re-connecting with food, it's important to go beyond easy romanticization. "Farm-to-Table" so easily erases the labor of many people of Color. And yet there are so many people working to change this. In one of their recent meals, People's Kitchen Collective along with Sariwa Fresh made the following statement:

This meal is a political act.

We cook to intervene in systems of white supremacy and capitalism. These are recipes of resilience, passed from generation to generation, and surviving migration, enslavement, and displacement.

This is not farm-to-table. This meal is farm-to-the-kitchen-to-the-table-to-the-streets.

We are here to feed rebellions and nourish revolutions. This meal is a culinary intervention to decolonize foodways.

Decolonizing our foodways is a much larger project than any one book and has a much longer history than current "trends" in food publishing might suggest. We continue to honor the many teachers and chefs and storytellers and cultural warriors who have continued this struggle through the generations.

Endnotes:

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10. Miranda, Lin-Manuel. *Hamilton: An American Musical*. Broadway: 2015.

11. Ibid.

12. Silko, Leslie Marmon. *Gardens in the Dunes*. New York: Scribner Paperback, 2000. Print.

13. Ibid.



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About this special series:

This Backgrounder is the seventh in a multi-authored series on “Dismantling Racism in the Food System.” In this series we seek to uncover the structural foundations of racism in the food system and highlight the ways people, communities, organizations and social movements are dismantling the attitudes, institutions and structures that hold racism in place. Food First is convinced that to end hunger and malnutrition we must end injustices in the food system. Dismantling the injustices of racism in the food system, in the food movement, in our organizations and among ourselves is fundamental to transforming the food system and our society.