

Making Academics Work for Justice-Oriented Food Networks: Graduate Student Experiences in Food Dignity

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Abstract: Food Dignity (FD) is an inter- and post-disciplinary, action research project to support five communities' efforts to build sustainable food systems, tell their stories, and create common working ground between the collaborating campuses and communities. Project stakeholders have described this working ground with phrases such as "no-man's land," "bridge," "borderland," and "superfund site." Whatever we call that space, we, FD graduate students spend considerable time working and living there (physically, intellectually, and emotionally). Like tenured and tenure-track professors in FD, we struggle with articulating, and at times challenging, the values underlying knowledge production, and with enhancing the relevance of academic work to practice. However, we face unique challenges defining our relationships with teachers and identifying models of community-academic partnership with which we are comfortable and on which we might build vocations and lives. In this paper, we ask: how do graduate students cultivate a praxis-from-the-heart in no-man's-land? To explore this question and offer insights for a justice-oriented study of alternative food networks, we share examples from our experiences in Food Dignity work, for example: reconciling native and academic ways of knowing; sharing honest self-assessments of feelings and research qualifications to build trust and affirm mutual humanity in participant observation with new urban farmers; and, recognizing the integral role that feelings can and should play in scholarly research and action for food dignity.

Food Dignity (FD) is an inter- and post-disciplinary, action research project to support five communities' efforts to build sustainable food systems, tell their stories, and create common working ground between the collaborating campuses and communities. As activists and scholars, we struggle with articulating, and at times challenging, the values and power structures underlying knowledge production, and with enhancing the relevance of academic work to practice. However, as graduate students, we face unique challenges defining our relationships with teachers and identifying models of community-academic partnership with which we are comfortable and on which we might build vocations and lives.

Some of our frustrations and concerns probably sound familiar:

We have seen the communities in which we live and do research exploited by research. This makes all of us unhappy. Mel, who is from the community where he does research – the Wind River Indian Reservation – said he tries "to visualize what my ancestors would

want us to do today...Traditionally our health was something that was part of our culture and customarily when people got sick it was a tribal matter. Our ancestors achieved a balance when leading tribal members through the cycle of life." But he struggles to prioritize ancestral knowledge and ways of knowing as he crosses between a white world and a native world.

In a different way, Megan has also struggled to recognize the importance of her spirituality in her research, saying "Where I look to guide and inspire my work is primarily to a faith community and tradition that strives -- always imperfectly, but strives nonetheless -- towards justice as "a radical notion of distributive practice that gives to each one what is needed -- by way of legitimacy, dignity, power, and wherewithal -- to live a life of well-being." I want to affirm the value and wisdom of this community and tradition that has sustained me, and continue to build that tradition in my work... Yet since coming to Cornell, the clear message I have gotten, in subtle and not-so-subtle ways, is that that part of me is absolutely not welcome in academia."

All of us who have worked on this presentation use ways of knowing that are not widely accepted as valid or rigorous. For this reason, in this presentation, we explore how, as graduate students, we cultivate a praxis-from-the-heart as we attempt to build common working ground between the collaborating campuses and communities through Food Dignity. To understand this praxis-from-the-heart, we need to talk about how we put stock in our own and our colleagues' emotions, experiences, and ancestral knowledge. We are grateful for our teachers, but make conscious decisions to learn from our emotions, remain true to our values, and rely on each other to learn about how to do emotionally rigorous and ethically grounded academic work.

What will be apparent is that it is only through dwelling in the more difficult emotions -- mistrust, anger, sadness, anxiety -- that we begin to understand what we want to change about our academic praxis and how we can use it to support community-based efforts to build just food systems.

I'm going to begin with a couple of stories from my research at Dig Deep.

I did participant observation research at an urban farm -- Dig Deep Farms & Produce -- a food justice project with a CSA. At one point, I had asked someone about a marketing strategy of selling CSA shares regionally, rather than locally. In response, I was told that the strategy in question was no longer the strategy. But I still saw this strategy being used. I felt like this person wasn't being honest with me and this made me uncomfortable: this person was someone I respected, and, in keeping with an ethic that many in Food Dignity share, I wanted to support the farmers' and leaders' views of the project. Putting academic stock in my mistrust could undercut his authority over Dig Deep's story and reinforce power structures conventional in campus -- community relationships .

I had other experiences at Dig Deep in which I saw the authority of the farmers questioned. The most common way I saw this happen was in the form of racist

microaggressions from outsiders. As the only white person working among the farmers, sometimes outsiders or new members of the group would approach me as an authority figure, which I was not. I grew to consider the farmers my friends and colleagues and respected their authority, their accomplishments as new farmers, and included their knowledge and wisdom as part of the reality of Dig Deep. So, it angered me when that reality would be questioned.

I had trouble reconciling my mistrust and my anger. So, I didn't do anything with the information about marketing strategies for a while. Eventually, I saw the use of multiple marketing strategies as a buffer against the vulnerability of a new food justice project and the difficulties of doing food justice work. My academic training to interrogate and critique would encourage me give validity to my initial mistrust and thus to dismiss an important version of Dig Deep's story, but my feelings did not allow me to do this. Paying attention to my feelings in both of these situations helped me to be more honest about my limited perspective and allowed me to let me be guided by farmers as I continued to do research.

Conclusions:

Although we came from very different research contexts, we came together around the similar ways with which we deal with our emotions and values.

In Food Dignity, many of the community partners are quite open about being propelled in their work by a sense of anger and outrage over injustices. And despite anger being a useful emotion, we are taught as academics to not let our emotions get the best of us

Neither community partners nor we are driven strictly by anger. We are also compelled by the joys of doing the research we do and contributing towards the health and well-being of our communities through that research. But, sometimes other feelings are more prominent. Sometimes when we're in the field, we feel a sense of guilt at our own privilege, self-doubt as outsiders, or lost about how to work in an emotional borderland. The emotions we're talking about can be challenging to deal with personally and are often considered to be inappropriate to discuss with colleagues, advisors, and community partners. But, we want to focus on these challenging feelings because they provide opportunities to pause and reflect, and we can learn a great deal from them.

These challenging feelings could be called diagnostic feelings, signal feelings, or instructional feelings. Part of what makes them challenging to deal with – that they involve a state of suspended agency – also makes them so instructional. This feeling of suspended agency has been described as:

“the affective sense of bewilderment rather than the epistemological stance of indeterminacy. Despite its marginality to the philosophical canon of emotions, isn't this feeling of confusion and what one is feeling an affective state in its own

right? And in fact a rather familiar feeling that often heralds the basic affect of "interest" underwriting all acts of intellectual inquiry (Ngai, 2004:14)?"

These feelings exert their influence internally, but to the extent that they drive inquiry they are also quite social. These feelings can be acute sensors of the cultural milieu, social arrangements and our internalization of these conditions. These feelings we have experienced in our academic work shouldn't be considered "bad" but rather - in a sense - diagnostic of the cultural space we and our food systems research occupy.

When we're not in the field, when we're on campus or at a conference, we want to use these emotions as productively as our community partners use anger and joy. That is, we want to build a research movement on them.

To build a research movement on these emotions, we posit a praxis-from-the-heart, which requires remaining attuned to our various emotions and in fact dwelling with them - not getting stuck in them, but dwelling with them, communing with them. To conclude, in this praxis-from-the-heart, we use self-reflection to avoid getting bogged down by these challenging feelings. Dwelling with our emotions helps us to establish foundations of humility in our research. This, in turn, helps to democratize our research processes, and to recognize the dignity of community partners.