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Love as praxis: Academic and activist pathways to food justice

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Abstract

Christine Porter often argued for flipping the script in academia so that community leaders do more of the talking—to reveal their instinctual social theories. This special issue honoring Christine's work feels like the perfect opportunity to do so with an interview I told her about that left an indelible impression on me, with Detroit food justice activist Charity Hicks. I was struck by the similarities in Charity's and Christine's strategies for leading food systems change from two distinct but complementary positions: one a scholar trying to break down "academic supremacy" to leverage the resources and skillsets of academics to be of genuine use to historically marginalized and exploited communities, and the other an activist working to instigate structural change while building the tools for grassroots voices to assert their own agency. What seemed to unite their approaches is a logic that guided Christine's work: epistemological, ethical, and emotional rigor. Three aspects of this essay offer insights about strategies for transforming food systems: the content of Charity's interview itself in the larger context of Detroit's food movement, the long-form format of quoting Charity at length, and the comparison between Charity's and Christine's perspectives. Far from an abstract ideal, the love as praxis that drove Christine and Charity's work—based on practical strategies like a relational root cause analysis, ethical humility, and emotional rigor—should fuel scholars and activists to "*leverage* the food system," as Charity put it, to navigate this precarious political moment to collectively build something better.

Keywords

food justice, local food movement, love, Detroit, triple-rigorous research

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Introduction

The last in-person conversation I had with my friend and colleague Christine Porter often echoes in my mind. In the fall of 2018, colleagues and I invited her to speak at the University of Michigan. One evening as we caught up, I told her about an interview I had done four years earlier with Detroit food justice activist Charity Hicks. Charity's warmth, exuberance, wit, discernment, big-picture view of the world and laser focus on community-driven food systems change reminded me of Christine. Like Christine, Charity was also taken from us far too soon—killed in 2014, only months after our interview. I used a few of Charity's quotes in an article about Michigan's local food movement (Hoey & Sponseller, 2018), but Christine encouraged me to share even more of the interview.[1] As she wrote elsewhere (Porter, 2018a), Christine argued for flipping the script in academic writing so that community leaders do more of the talking. This special issue honoring Christine's work feels like the perfect opportunity to do that and to reflect on why I see so many parallels between the ways that Christine and Charity fought for food justice.

Christine: Scholar Activist

I first heard about Christine even before I met her when I was a PhD student at Cornell. The nutrition professor who served as her PhD Committee Chair—David Pelletier—was also on my committee. The chatter among his students was that Christine was tireless, leading innovative, deeply embedded participatory action research—the kind of work I aspired to do. I got to know Christine through a course that featured two giants among food systems scholars: Phil McMichael, the faculty member leading the course, and Harriet Friedmann, who joined our class while she was at Cornell during her sabbatical. In those discussions about food regime theory (Friedmann & McMichael, 1989) and ways we were trying to study and drive food systems change through our own research, I came to appreciate Christine's dedication to the multi-year, sustained work required to build community trust—first as an organizer, then as a researcher.

In the acknowledgement to her dissertation, she described how, when she began to work on the Ithaca-based Whole Community Project, she "became a born-again citizen, i.e., for the first time in my life, I thought of myself as a citizen (as opposed to an individual or, god forbid, a consumer) with public work to do" (Porter, 2010, p. v).

In essence, I remember thinking how Christine's dissertation was a side project to the public work that compelled her. Her first commitment was to learn from and support local food justice leaders while questioning research conventions based on "US society's dominant positivist, modernist and reductionist standpoints" (Porter, 2010, p. v). Despite her misgivings about academia, Christine was adept at leveraging university resources to build mutually beneficial relationships with community partners. By 2010, as I was deep in my own fieldwork, I heard that Christine had both defended her dissertation and secured a faculty position at the University of Wyoming. She had also earned a US$5 million U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) grant for the Food Dignity project—while still a PhD candidate (Porter, 2018a).

Food Dignity was a chance for Christine to fully embody community-led action research, in partnership with five food justice organizations across the US. In a reflective essay on the first two years of Food Dignity, Christine and her partners cited major challenges—including "peak oil, peak soil, and a tipping point for atmospheric carbon dioxide concentrations" (Porter et al., 2014, p. 116). Nevertheless, they stayed optimistic, striving for "a society where each community exercises significant control over its food system through democratic negotiation, action and

[1] While Christine never mentioned it to me, combing back through her writing, I learned that Charity led a one-day retreat for the Food Dignity Project around 2016 when Christine's USDA-funded Food Dignity team was designing a Community Food Systems undergraduate minor at Cornell (Porter, 2018a). They may have first met in Ithaca when Charity was the keynote speaker for the 2012 Food Justice Summit (Dwyer, 2012), co-sponsored by the Whole Community Project, but it's unclear if Christine attended, as this was two years after she began her faculty position at the University of Wyoming in 2010.

learning in ways that nurture all people in current and future generations" (pp. 116–117).

Especially when she never planned to pursue a faculty position, given the "meager opportunities [she] could find for funding action (as opposed to research)" (Porter, 2018b, p. 45), starting as the lead investigator of a large-scale USDA project focused on "dignity" was a bold way to launch an academic career. To me, she epitomized a true scholar activist (Borras & Franco, 2023)—able to apply conventional research norms in a way that enhanced deeply rooted, community-led work—a dexterity she maintained throughout the remainder of her academic career. In her last major project, Growing Resilience, a public health intervention with food sovereignty leaders in the Wind River Indian Reservation, she blended community-led participatory action research with a randomized control trial focused on home gardens (Porter et al., 2019).

Charity: Water (and Food Justice) Warrior

I also first heard about Charity before I reached out to her in early 2014 when I was a newly minted assistant professor at the University of Michigan, starting a research project on Michigan's local food movement. I knew from news stories that Charity was one of the leading organizers fighting alongside tens of thousands of Detroiters whose water was being shut off for nonpayment, including her own (Gabriel, 2014; Swaine, 2014). I wasn't aware of her equally important work in the local food movement until food movement leaders brought up her name.

When I sat down to talk with Charity, I was struck by how many threads she so easily wove together that could not be disentangled. Her ability to hold so many issues in her mind was evident by the multiple positions she held across environmental justice, water access, and food justice. She co-founded the Detroit People's Water Board, was a policy fellow with the New York–based Everyone at the Table for Health and served as policy director of the East Michigan Environmental Action Council (Community Connections, 2021). She served on the Detroit Food Justice Task Force and co-founded the Detroit Black Community Food Security (now Sovereignty) Network (DBCFSN). With DBCFSN, she co-authored the City of Detroit Food Security Policy (adopted by the city council in 2008; Pothukuchi, 2015), helped establish the Detroit Food Policy Council and contributed to Detroit's first urban agriculture ordinance in 2013 (Pothukuchi, 2015; Wolfe, 2014). She also worked with the US Food Sovereignty Alliance (2014), was in demand nationally as a speaker (e.g., Dwyer, 2012), and served on countless boards spanning public schools, environmental justice, food systems, economic development, and community development (Adams, 2014). Charity's broad expertise explains why she had such an expansive understanding of food systems issues—and solutions—rooted in everyday issues that she and her neighbors experienced. As she described herself:

> I guess you could say I'm cross-pollinated across all of this work. And I carry it with me. There's not a table that I sit at that's not informed by every other table I sit at. … What I'm really trying to do is model a systemic approach to the food system where we don't put blinders on our head.

Breaking Out of Academic Molds: Charity Does the Talking

Unlike the other participants who preferred that I keep their interview confidential, Charity was unapologetic about having her name attached to what she had to say. Why didn't I share all of Charity's story at the time? Partly, I was contending with the space constraints of an academic article where I was trying to blend lessons from several dozen interviews into 14 pages. It meant that only a few quotes from Charity's interview could fit, framed around the research question I had set out to answer (Hoey & Sponseller, 2018). I realized that the dominant way we are trained to carry out and share our research in academia means I fell into the same trap that had constrained Christine in the early stages of the Food Dignity project, as she described:

> … [E]xternally imposed approaches can help answer some narrow research questions and helped me to grasp basic facts and truths of

> each case, [but] they were excluding and obscuring too much insight to enable rigorous and useful storytelling about the CBOs' [community-based organizations'] work. I had been asking myself and co-investigators how we should shift our listening; the answer was largely entwined with who should be doing the talking. (Porter, 2018b, p. 52)

When academics truncate and summarize the words of interviewees, Christine was arguing, they often engage in "discursive obfuscation or co-optation of common wisdom" (Porter, 2018b, p. 38) and inevitably "drown out the stories of people who are doing the work" (p. 52). She admitted to participating in this common, "extractive" practice even as she grappled with how to move away from it, describing how "I took knowledge, mentorship, and wisdom, digested and integrated it with my own, and now share what I learned as sole author" (Porter, 2018b, p. 45). Finding ways for interviewees to characterize their own experiences supports the type of "Triple-rigorous Storytelling" Christine believed could push academics to meaningfully contribute to food systems transformation, based on "Triple-rigorous Research": a participatory approach that grounds research methods—and importantly, the sharing of findings that emerge from research—in epistemological, ethical, and emotional rigor (Porter, 2018b).

Other researchers have also found that analyzing individual interviews is effective for unsettling conventional thinking and inspiring change. Historians, for instance, often write about a single oral history to expand the historical record (Pagenstecher & Pfänder, 2017); oral histories are also used as an advocacy tool so that the testimonies of "those most impacted by injustice [can] be heard in their own voices" (Groundswell, as cited in Platenburg, 2021). John Forester, an urban planning scholar, also uses "practitioner profiles" for most of his research (e.g., 2012, 2020). He uses individual profiles to teach future planning practitioners about the day-to-day tactics for achieving just outcomes in the "face of power" (Forester, 1988) and in the "face of conflict" (2013), finding these oral history "practice stories" to be "ethnographically vivid, instructively engaged and practically grounded—while being theoretically generative" (Forester, 2007, p. 1). Forester's colleague Scott Peters (Forester et al., 2005)—a civic engagement and education scholar who, coincidentally, was on Christine's dissertation committee (Porter, 2010), similarly found that 12- to 30-page practitioner profiles, "engaged not only [educator's] minds, but also their emotions and senses" (Peters et al., 2004, p. 214), "inspir[ing] critical hope and action" (p. 200).

In what follows, Charity does the majority of the talking. I primarily draw on my interview[2] with her, but I also refer to tributes, news stories, and research where she was quoted, as well as videos of Charity's talks and protest speeches. Similar to Christine's admonition to her fellow academics about the ways academia needs to transform to effectuate change, Charity too pushed her fellow activists to fight for structural change using a logic that echoes the Triple-rigorous Research framework.

Epistemological Rigor

The first form of rigor in Christine's Triple-rigorous Research principles focused on what academics are most familiar with—epistemological rigor—the idea of "telling true stories and deriving lessons from them" (Porter, 2018b, p. 37). By "true stories," Christine talked about drawing on "hyper" triangulation of data "via multiple investigators collecting and analyzing multiple forms of data using multiple methods" (Porter, 2018b, p. 47) to ensure "holistic understanding" (Budowle et al., 2019, p. 151).

This systems view similarly underlay the way Charity seemed to see the world. As she and I talked, it was clear that she not only saw the structural causes of inequitable food access, but made other connections too, from "our energy footprint to the sum of everything." Her view was also multiscalar, as she explained: "We can work from both ends, a public policy frame, a macro frame … and a community or neighborhood level frame and meet in the middle." Insight from all of these

[2] Unless cited differently, all of Charity's quotes are from the interview she carried out with me in 2014.

angles was needed to apply a "root cause analysis" to avoid perpetuating past harms and go beyond "tweaking at the edges." In a food justice summit in Ithaca, New York, where she was the keynote speaker in 2012 (Dwyer, 2012), she further described her holistic sense of what "food justice" encompassed:

> Justice for us is multifaceted. It's not just farm workers on the farm picking tomatoes. It's not just the health of our fields and our conservation areas. It's also our political order. Food justice is political justice, it's environmental justice and it's nested together in a system that holds not only the human community but all of our biosphere.

Charity explained that she began to see food systems connections while participating in a master gardener program and working as a research associate on a National Institute of Health study of health disparities led by the University of Michigan School of Dentistry. As their team followed more than a thousand African American Detroit families, she noticed that food was the largest component of overall health, but she also started seeing a bigger picture. She recognized that "food becomes metaphor for not only our health, and not only our cultural life, but it becomes metaphor for everything from our energy footprint to the sum of everything." She seamlessly traversed a dizzying amount of ground as we kept talking.

She expressed, "It's just shocking what we throw out and what's wasted," resulting in a "waste of energy and petroleum and calories and production and fields." She mused about the "need to sit down and slow down and not eat on the go," and her concern that "chemists are feeding us … chemical calories" with "colorings, fillers and byproducts" in a tsunami of junk food and fast food, making us "all one big, giant guinea pig" while too many neighborhoods in Detroit have too few grocery store options with seasonal, fresh, and affordable fruit and vegetables. She was also concerned about food recalls and antibiotic resistance in animals and expressed the need for "honest labeling … to know what we're eating" around genetically modified organisms (GMOs), the "illusion" of choice, and how a "policy of hiding ingredients and not fully disclosing [them] is a deadly policy." And she kept going, describing how:

> There's a plethora of issues in the food system: pay equity for the food chain workers, nitrogen overloads and mono-cropping and no biodiversity in the fields … where you throw down so much insecticide and pesticide that you actually harm the micro-flora and fauna in the soils, and you get dead soil. It's shocking. … When we are truncating the whole community of life, we're in trouble. We get antibiotic use, we get obesity, we get food deserts, we get supply chain issues, we get waste, we get ecological and environmental damage, we get GMOs, Frankenfoods, all of that.

A part of her interview that especially stuck with me, and that formed a thread throughout our conversation, was the way she described "transactional" efforts to address food systems issues—like hunger—rather than systemic transformations that get to "root causes … rooted in community." At the heart of Charity's argument was a normative one: that people attempting to address hunger and other food systems issues are often not asking the right questions or any questions at all if they are purely "transactional," seeing people purely as "mouths to feed" or as consumers, "with no care and concern over the earth, ecological and environmental systems, even access." She noted how "you can take a hungry person and say, 'Okay, I'm going to build a soup kitchen for you' or you can really try to go to a root cause analysis and do a systemic shift so the person is not hungry anymore."

Without a willingness, or perhaps an inability, to see the plethora of underlying and interconnected issues, she worried that many focus only on symptoms:

> We have people that probably have on blinders that are trying to operate within the status quo out of mercy or kindness or benevolence, and kind of a quasi-tokenism … They're happy to just work tweaking at the edges. Like "okay we will work on hunger." … And they're happy. It's like "I'm the turkey sandwich passer-outer."

She then expanded on what she meant by "transactional":

> "Transactional" is in the moment, you're meeting needs … [but] there's not the long-range planning of how we promote the self-determination of communities and their standing agency and voice to problem-solve on their own behalf … [addressing hunger with] very little analysis and very little framing. So that's "transactional." Nobody's thinking about why you're hungry and need a turkey sandwich. Nobody is even really thinking about where the turkey is coming from. It's just you're hungry, and in this moment, we're going to provide for you.

Charity also lamented that up to 2014, the food movement in Detroit, like elsewhere, was limited in its ability to dismantle structural issues because it was too "fragmented" and competitive, creating a "proprietary-ness on our governance, our public discourse, that's not going to serve us well."

> A lot of work that's happening in the food system here in Detroit and around the country is issue-based. … It's poorly resourced, and it's not systemic. … So people say "I'm anti-hunger." And they're only concerned about "did you eat? Are you hungry? Come to the soup kitchen." The issues on access, affordability, other frames—production, the ecological and environmental things around food—are absent. So we got to think about: What are we doing? Are we so fragmented that we're just never going to have a systemic [strategy], or no synergy? … Because we talk it, but we don't walk it. We talk, "oh yeah, we're for dignity and food sovereignty and food security and food justice." Really, we're just in transaction—leave us alone. We're not trying to shift, we're not trying to really have an analysis. We just see hungry people.

In an attempt to build a systemic, synergistic strategy, she then went on to describe some of the work she was a part of in Detroit that was instead guided by a "root cause analysis":

> So, the orgs that I'm with, some of them are trying to shift systemically in a transformative way by looking at the root cause. … The Food Justice Task Force, several groups, are working on systemic and transformative shifts. We call it the "real food justice" experience: … to have access, to have affordability, to have cultural appropriateness, to have health and vibrancy, and to have it all in a level of reasonableness, so you don't have to travel 20 miles to visit a grocery store. … [We are] thinking deeply towards [what it would take for] a sustainable systemic shift. That's not easy, because it involves a large array of actors and some policy work.

She was especially hopeful about the Detroit Food Policy Council and the Detroit Food Security Policy, drafted by 20 Detroit food movement leaders from 2005 to 2008. She described the policy as "a labor of agency … a gesture of community-based leadership," which tried to incorporate ways to address "food dignity and the participation and affordability and the health and the vibrancy and the economic benefit of it all for this population." She also explained how she and others tried to balance immediate needs against structural causes:

> For organizations that have to work in the food system, particularly in Detroit, I think they're multifaceted. I think they're like "Yeah, we got mouths to feed, but we would like to eat well. We got mouths to feed, and we would like not to have our workers exploited in the food chain. Yeah, we got mouths to feed and the minimum wage sucks; how do people have a quality of living in the food system if they can't effectively pay for housing and their food? They need to eat." So across all issues that's confronting us in the food system, definitely a systemic approach [is needed] … definitely multifaceted bottom lines, triple bottom lines so profit doesn't drive everything, but dignity and quality and care for earth. And definitely real intentionality.

At her keynote talk at the 2012 Ithaca Food Justice Summit, Charity further reflected on the journey that she and her fellow activists in Detroit had taken to move away from a narrow focus on anti-hunger, asking "Is that justice? Is that equity?" She challenged Ithaca food activists to do the same, to at least fight for food justice, and to eventually become "food sovereigntists" (Dwyer 2012):

> Food justice is asking the fundamental question, who benefits? Who's been marginalized? Who controls? And those are beautiful justice frameworks. … I would like to invite Ithaca to turn all of us into food sovereigntists. Part of that is to know where your food comes from. How many times have we sat down to a plate and really authentically knew where that food came from and honored who prepared it? And respected those who gathered from the field to the plate? Food sovereignty is about respect, it's about knowledge, it's about awareness, but it's also about participation and self-determination. So that's where we're moving to [in Detroit].

Ethical Rigor

The second component of Triple-rigorous Research is "ethical rigor": the idea that academics should not only acknowledge and make evident the values that shape their research questions, methods and analysis, but that they should be actively guided by their ethics. Christine was particularly concerned that "higher education's entry into sustainable food system work has … been troubling," because of the way she saw academics "professionalizing and deradicalizing community food system work" and "investing heavily in academic but not community capacity development" (Porter, 2018a, p. 218).

Christine's own struggle with ethical rigor was evident when she reflected on the inadequacy of the coding they were applying to qualitative data in the Food Dignity project. She wrote about how "much of this 'data' was increasingly conveying complex forms of analysis, interpretation, and insight, unsuitable for the depersonalized and decontextualized slicing and dicing that coding entails" (Porter, 2018b, p. 51). Agreeing with her research staff that the case studies they were writing were "heartless" (p. 52), she realized how "the coding vocabularies and my case outlines were pressing academic frameworks onto the CBOs' data and expertise" (p. 52). She concluded that "the only chance of research contributing to CBOs resolving … problems is striving for ever-more-equitable community-university action research partnerships" (p. 55).

Like academics, Charity also believed that some food systems practitioners do not stop to ask themselves, or are not being fully transparent, about the ethics guiding their activities and the possible (unintended) consequences of their work. She was adamant that policies and initiatives must first start from a "human dignity perspective and not a market approach." She worried that "we treat food as a commodity" rather than seeing that "food is a human right … as critical to our life as water and air." And she was clear-eyed about what activists were up against, noting how "the market does not acknowledge human dignity. The market is profit at any and all costs. … It's shockingly kind of like a battle of the greatest good versus money and markets." Ultimately, this commodification of food, Charity worried, was "building a parallel system" and "food apartheid."[3]

> Poor people, the majority of Black and Brown people and people in communities and particularly people in Detroit, don't have money to shop at Whole Foods, don't have money to shop at a higher price point. … We don't have the resources to spend 3, 4, 500 dollars a week on food. … I call it the Food Channel foodie culture … people who have purchasing power, who can afford a Whole Foods consumption pattern … And then the rest of us will be eating from the Dollar Menu. I think the Dollar

[3] As opposed to "food deserts," which can make it sound like inequities in food access are naturally occurring, "food apartheid"—coined by Karen Washington in the 1980s—conveys that food disparities arise from intentionally discriminatory housing, transportation, economic development policies, and other explicit actions (Brones, 2018).

> Menu was crafted to suck in poor people at their price point. If you look across all the Dollar Menu, Burger King, Church's Chicken, it is the poorest quality, all hydrogenated vegetable oil, the most industrialized elements of the food system, all sitting on the Dollar Menu. And that's why it's so cheap. It's a dollar and it's still an exorbitant profit because it's really only [worth] 20 cents of a dollar, so the 80 cents is still profit. They actually price point people based on class and race and location. It's food system apartheid across America. We're never going to eat in Detroit the way that Birmingham and Bloomfield Hills [wealthier suburbs of Detroit] eat.

Propelling the commodification of food, Charity argued, is an infrastructure of market-oriented food and agriculture policy, starting with the federal government:

> One of the most critical statements I ever heard of recent was [when] I was at a USDA conference and people were harassing the Foreign Agricultural Service Undersecretary [Michael] Scuse, and they were like "this biotech is inordinate and you guys are producing Frankenfoods and GMOs!" And he turns around, and he was flustered. He was done, and he was like "and we have mouths to feed. Billions of mouths to feed." And I got scared because I was like, "dude is crazy." They see us only as mouths. As consumers. There's no care and concern over the earth, ecological and environmental systems, even access. It's just, "you're a mouth to feed." If that's the only consideration in the foreign agricultural service and across the USDA, we're in trouble. No consideration for quality. Quality? We'll talk about that tomorrow when we got to sell it back to you, because we know you like quality. But up front, the decision is profit. Mouths to feed. That's scary.

At the local level in Detroit, Charity also worried that the burgeoning urban agriculture movement was attracting "opportunism." She was particularly critical of two projects—Hantz Farms and Recovery Park—which many local activists were skeptical of at the time as well, concerned that they were motivated by tokenistic and extractivist economic interests (MacMillen, 2012; Sands, 2013; Thibert, 2012). Charity explained:

> The space that urban ag has generated as a popular movement in Detroit with a lot of orgs engaged in it, has also caught the eye of opportunistic folk. John Hantz. This guy leaves Wall Street … and now he's a farmer. Like really? You're a farmer? Give me the pitchfork, I'll go farm! … There's a big difference between D-town Farms [run by the DBCFSN] and Hantz Farms. There's a big difference between Earthworks [run by the Capuchin Soup Kitchen] and Recovery Park. That guy [leading Recovery Park] was a former day trader on Wall Street, too, Securities and Exchange Commission. Got in trouble for embezzling funds[4] and now he too shows up in Detroit and says "you know what? I'm doing aquaponics. I'm gonna take some addicts that's in recovery, and I'll give them a job, and we're growing tilapia." Like dude, you left Wall Street as a day trader multimillionaire, embezzled money, get in trouble, have your license revoked, and now you show up in Detroit and you're [into the] food system?

While Charity had much to say about the intent of external business interests that were infiltrating Detroit's food movement, she was also frustrated by the "missionary zeal" among the largely white-led nonprofits that were drawn to Detroit to work on food issues:

> [Initially] in Detroit, almost all of the nonprofits that were working in food were all white. And the city is 86% African American. It was inordinate, it was a lot of missionary work.

[4] Here, Charity is talking about the owner of Recovery Park, but coincidentally, both Hantz Farm and Recovery Park founders were charged with fraud and/or embezzlement (Henderson, 2006; McLallen, 2022; Welch, 2022). Recovery Park was eventually forced to close (Devito, 2023), and concerns that Hantz Farm was a city-supported "land grab" also appear to be playing out (Neavling, 2021).

> Black people were done. Particularly, [people were thinking] "this is not promoting problem-solving in Detroit's Black community." Also, the missionary zeal of it all and the do-gooder appeal of it all just created a weird dynamic of saviorism. Like, "I'm coming to save you."

These trends among businessmen and "missionary zeal" nonprofits coming into Detroit suggested to Charity that it was critical to be clear about the intent behind food work in the city:

> So the food system is kind of like a safe haven for all types of shadowy elements and some very high-functioning human dignity elements all comingled together. We need to really go to a root cause analysis on why we're doing things, who is operating in the food system so we can fully unearth intent but also bring up and out the greatest good and not just exploitation, extraction, and opportunistic work.

Charity did not end there, however. She was also honest about her own and other activists' shortcomings. Echoing what Christine worried about, that academics who were studying food movements were "professionalizing and deradicalizing community food system work" (Porter, 2018a, p. 218), Charity also thought that the nonprofit community was often "professionalizing" advocacy and needed to find ways to ensure that residents could advocate for themselves:

> We need highly functioning individuals with capacity and debate skills and dialogue. … This highly professionalized, tokenized advocacy systems we've developed, it's not serving us. It's actually creating half the problems in Detroit. If Detroit is going to be in resilience, and if Detroit is going to have any level of problem-solving on its own behalf, we're going to have to recalibrate the standing agency and the voice of … the individual, because we've been deferring for 40 years to orgs who knew better, had professional [degrees].

Rather than take the time to build the capacity of residents to debate and dialogue for themselves, Charity was concerned that many nonprofits were constraining and dismissing residents' voices, even when they tried to speak up, in a similar way that Christine observed academics abstracting community knowledge. Charity also implied that it was professional training that might be clouding nonprofit staff judgement about the stories and voices worth putting forward:

> Almost 95% of all the actors in the activists and mobilizers in the food system are degreed people. Half of Detroit doesn't even have a high school diploma. So, we've professionalized advocacy, we professionalize acting on behalf of the public to a technical set of people. It makes you feel bad when you're at a table and … everyone across [from] you has multiple bachelors, PhD degrees, they're speaking technical advocacy language, movement jargon, and the only thing you come to the table with is your sense and your lived experience. And then somehow that's truncated, like "well, your lived experience is important, and when we need to get a story, we'll call you, but right now at this table can you leave it to the advocates, the assistants, the organizers, the whatever." It's not fair. We need both/and.

Adding to the problem, she explained, was the way philanthropies and government funders failed to center problem-solving in communities:

> One of the things that's been sucked out of Detroit is a lot of agency because of … the way that the philanthropic community structures programs for poor people, and even the government. So we've got all this philanthropic money, all this government money, and it doesn't allow poor people their own standing. You just become a project participant; you become a utilizer. And then some advocate shows up and is like "well let's check that utilization rates," but nobody asked you "How would you solve this problem?"

To address her concerns that advocacy had become too "professionalized," Charity mentioned

that she was in the middle of launching a Detroit Food System People's Movement Assembly, inspired by similar workshops she participated in at the World Social Forum. In an announcement on Facebook about the first Assembly (Hicks, 2014), she called for "the full community to join the discussion" to "center people who have been marginalized in our communities and across the globe." She described the assembly as "a local gathering to share, strengthen, and co-create an anti-hunger, food secure, food justice, food sovereign local/regional food system in Detroit" based on "a triple bottom line food system ground[ed] in Food Sovereignty which has justice in every element; our quality of life and the earth requires it."

Emotional Rigor

Finally, for the third prong of Triple-rigorous Research, Christine argued that rather than pretend that value-neutral research is possible, "emotional rigor" strengthens our epistemological rigor (Porter, 2018b) through "strong objectivity" (Harding, 1992). In an article for a special issue on food dignity (Bradley et al., 2018), Christine and her co-authors described emotional rigor as "praxis-from-the-heart": the idea of not trying to deny or suppress emotions, as academia often teaches, but to see emotions as "instructional" (p. 232). They advocated for paying attention to feelings that can arise in the process of research—whether "anger and outrage" or "happiness and belonging"—as a way to "keep us connected, and thus, accountable to community partners" (p. 231), to "recognize instances of academic supremacy" and to "allow our values of justice to guide our research" (p. 232).

Emotional rigor also pushes back against the idea that academics must "prevent our professional selves from showing up as humans in our work" (Porter et al., 2018, p. 2). The reflexivity that comes with this emotional rigor was evident in the way Christine was not afraid to share her honest analysis of what she had learned from mistakes she made in working with communities (e.g., Porter, 2018b; Porter & Wechsler, 2018); in the way she brought humility to the way she shared leadership (e.g., as the chair of the Inter-institutional Network for Food, Agriculture and Sustainability); in the way she publicly confronted her university president about unethical practices (Victor & Boomerang, 2018); and in the way she fearlessly put forward food justice–oriented, community-led proposals in front of institutions like the USDA, known to have a narrow view of who and what is worth funding.[5]

Although I only had a single interaction with Charity that April day in 2014, I got the sense that she was guided by a similar emotional rigor as she laid bare so much of her story, curiosity, frustration, regrets, and vision of the work she was trying to accomplish in Detroit. Clips of her in videotaped interviews, public talks, and speeches at rallies show Charity bringing that same fervor—not being afraid to blend her emotions with her intellect. Her emotional rigor was especially evident in a notion that she repeated about protests for basic human rights like water or food, seeing such activism not as an act of waging war, but an act of "waging love," a phrase she coined when she was released from jail after she tried to stop her own water from being shut off (Black, 2020, p. 39). As captured on video at one protest, Charity described how "this is about waging love—we love ourselves, we love our children, we love the earth, we love all of life—so this is not a protest, this is actually an act of waging love" (Cassells et al., 2014).

In her keynote speech at the 2012 Ithaca Food Justice Summit, she expanded on the idea of "waging love," interweaving the notion that making food systems more just relies on us loving ourselves and our bodies, as well as one another and the earth:

[5] In addition to the US$5 million USDA grant for Food Dignity, in 2022 Christine worked with eight minority-serving institutions, with Tuskegee University in the lead, on a US$20 million USDA proposal. It was unsuccessful, but this too reinforced that Christine had an unflinching vision of what she believed should—and could—be funded, as she put it, to "evolutionize, or even revolutionize" higher education to radically change the face of and approach to training the next generation of food systems leaders (Porter, personal communication, October 15, 2022).

> We have to love ourselves. … Think about the beauty of your body and your mind and your spirit, and approach yourself with reverence … because everybody here is important. … We [also] need to affirm each other. … We're good at fighting and attacking and castigating, but we also need to be good at loving, lifting up, and congratulating each other. … Part of our justice work is deepening and broadening our connectivity. … Each of us are important to transmitting information, to setting the example, and to building a beloved community in Ithaca. So part of the work in the community is resilience circles. … Look at your neighbors; this is the power, this is the asset, this is the movement, this is food justice. … [Finally] reach down and tell the earth: peace, I love you. (Dwyer, 2012)

Being grounded in the power of waging love explains how Charity could talk about a litany of issues facing the food system—like corporate concentration, structural racism, and philanthropy carried out with blinders that deepen inequities—while exuding an infectious confidence that "leveraging the food system for democracy, leveraging the food system for equity, leveraging the food system for human dignity is something that's doable." She also implied that food systems could be a conduit, a bridge, to push policymakers to apply emotional rigor to their work, if they could recognize the humanity and dignity in others over their connections to food. As she put it:

> We relegate people to the margins either because they can't pay or because of an analysis that breeds inaccurate assumptions. We have to take the blinders off. … *Public policy is: what we want for ourselves we want for everyone else.* … One of the things that's critical is that we all eat. People are eating in Birmingham and Bloomfield Hills and we're eating in Detroit. … If somebody in Birmingham would have to choose health, they would choose health. Somebody in Detroit would choose health too. We don't willingly wake up and say "you know, we're going to kill ourselves with food."

Discussion

Three aspects of this essay offer insights about strategies for transforming food systems: the content of Charity's interview itself in the larger context of Detroit's food movement, the long-form format of quoting Charity at length, and the comparison between Charity's and Christine's perspectives.

Charity's Views in Context

First, Charity's interview struck such a chord because she brought to life, in her humorous and poignant way, issues that mirrored theoretical concepts that academic scholars were discussing (e.g., Holt Giménez & Shattuck, 2011; Friedmann, 2005; White, 2019). She did it, however, in a way that painted a more vivid and complete picture than I had heard before. She wanted to see more work on root causes like corporate- and government-created "food system apartheid across America" and not just issue-based, "transactional" anti-hunger actions that see people as "mouths to feed" or "opportunistic" initiatives that turn food into a commodity. She was shaping policy—proud of her work on the Food Justice Task Force, the Detroit Food Security Policy, and the Detroit Food Policy Council—but she also wanted to do more to support self-determination and equip "food sovereigntists." She also hoped to see more local, Black-led food organizations and more collective strategizing. Ultimately, she believed that what was sustaining this work and inspiring more to act should be love—personal compassion, relationship-building, and reverence for the earth.

Charity was building upon decades of struggles and visions long shared by many food justice leaders in Detroit (Pothukuchi, 2015). It is no wonder, then, that many of the challenges Charity outlined persist. The need for anti-hunger organizations in Detroit continues and was particularly acute during COVID when organizations—and particularly Black-run organizations—were unable to meet the increased demand for emergency food assistance (Taylor et al., 2022). Tensions still exist between predominantly white business interests and Black leaders pushing for greater accountability (Berglund & Miles, 2025). There are signs that the land and capital needed to start urban farms may still be

more accessible to affluent, white residents (Hawkes et al., 2022). Despite the international spotlight that Charity and others brought to human rights violations around water shutoffs (United Nations, 2014)—which she saw as intimately connected to food justice—the work of "water warriors" continues as shutoffs for nonpayments remain a problem (Mack et al., 2023).

Some of the most recent changes in Detroit's food movement, however, offer hopeful signs that the decades-long groundwork for food justice led by Charity and others is gaining even more ground. In 2023, the City of Detroit appointed a long-time food justice activist as the first Urban Agriculture Director (Mayor's Office, 2023), and the long-debated Animal Keeping Ordinance passed in 2024 (Barrett, 2024). DBCFSN opened the Detroit People's Food Co-Op in 2024, the "Black-led and community-owned grocery cooperative" they had envisioned for over 14 years (Murthy, 2024; White, 2019). DBCFSN also co-launched the Detroit Black Farmer Land Fund in 2020 alongside two other key network weavers, Oakland Ave Urban Farm and Keep Growing Detroit; by mid-2025, they had helped more than 80 Black farmers purchase land in the city (Detroit Black Farmer Land Fund, 2025). Other coalitions of Black-led farms and organizations have also emerged around food waste (the Detroit Community Composting Collective Project) and urban farm water access (the Detroit Water Consortium; Sanctuary Farms, 2025). The Detroit Food Policy Council also continues to be an important leader and convener of an ever-widening tent across Detroit's food systems community (Allnut, 2019; DFPC, 2025; Detroit Food Policy Council, 2025).

Taken together, ongoing challenges and recent progress show that Charity's concerns—and her vision for food justice—remain relevant today. In fact, Charity's mantra of "waging love" still reverberates, guiding much of this continuing work. In 2019, over 3,000 people gathered in Detroit for the "Facing Race Conference," inspiring one participant who said her biggest takeaway was Charity's idea that "even though rage ignites us, love sustains and heals us" (Hawk, 2019). In 2023, environmental justice activists hosted a panel on "Waging Love: Building an Environmentally Just Detroit" in honor of Charity (Lugo-Thomas, 2023), asking "What does it mean to 'wage love'?" and "How is love inspiring your own advocacy and organizing in this moment?" (Allied Media, 2023).

Breaking Out of the Academic (Dissemination) Norm

Second, the format of this essay—a deep analysis of a single interview—is itself instructional, suggesting the need for more creative and contemplative ways to share research findings. After finishing my pre-established questions during an hour of talking with Charity, in the second hour, and the third, as she insisted we keep talking, she took our conversation in many other directions. Centering this essay around her voice allowed me to reflect more fully on the many unintended topics she covered. I also saw how sharing only brief quotes to answer my narrow research questions (Hoey & Sponseller, 2018) lost much of her nuance, side stories, broader context, jokes, and non sequitur insights. Sharing long excerpts freed me from the "depersonalized and decontextualized slicing and dicing" of my more traditional coding that resulted in a precise, but perhaps a "heartless" (Porter, 2018b, p. 52) and less inspiring storytelling approach. It amplifies the need for scholars to consider other creative ways for capturing and preserving individual voices to inspire action, like those that Christine and her community partners used, including "digital storytelling" videos, journaling, narrated photos, and mini documentaries (Budowle et al., 2021; Porter, 2018b).

Putting Charity's and Christine's Ideas Side by Side

Finally, looking at Charity's and Christine's perspectives together suggests that academics and activists could better address food system issues by combining epistemological, ethical, and emotional rigor. Charity and Christine both challenge the notion that food movement leaders "can't be strategic when [their] hair is on fire" (Hoey & Sponseller, 2018), or that reformist actions (i.e., addressing immediate needs like hunger) tend to distract from more structurally focused, progressive (i.e., food justice) or radical (i.e., food sovereignty) actions (Holt Giménez & Shattuck, 2011).

Based on their epistemological rigor—their "root cause analysis" and equal understanding of urgent and long-standing food systems challenges—Christine and Charity were both addressing immediate, basic needs like access to water and food, even while they organized long-term efforts to build food sovereignty. Ethical rigor also pushed both of them to be reflexive of their own missteps and to push fellow academic and nonprofit communities to acknowledge, and rectify, ways they might be complicit in maintaining the status quo. And through their emotional rigor, they both tapped into the emotional toll of food system indignities, while staying optimistic by "waging love" and following a "praxis from the heart" (Bradley et al., 2018).

Conclusion

Charity and Christine shared similar strategies for achieving food justice from two distinct but complementary positions: one an activist trying to break down "academic supremacy" to leverage the resources and skillsets of academics to be of genuine use to historically marginalized and exploited communities (Bradley et al., 2018, p. 232), and the other an activist working to instigate structural change while building the tools for grassroots voices to assert their own agency. In a moment when cruelty is driving US federal strategy (Amnesty International, 2025), policies threaten to deepen hunger and force many farm bankruptcies (Lakhani, 2025; Rosenbaum et al., 2025), and universities are under attack and searching for ways to restore public trust (Aragoni, 2025), Charity's and Christine's insights are especially relevant. Their focus on love is particularly instructive, a long-standing driving force for civil rights activists, educators, and scholars who taught that liberation and deliberation is impossible without a grounding in love (King, 1958; Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994). Far from an abstract ideal, the love as praxis that drove Christine and Charity's food justice work—based on practical strategies like a relational root cause analysis, ethical humility, and emotional rigor—should fuel scholars and activists to "*leverage* the food system," as Charity put it, as a key tactic for navigating this precarious political moment to collectively build something better.

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