

Graduate students bringing emotional rigor to the heart of community-university relations in the Food Dignity project



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Submitted September 12, 2017 / Revised December 15, 2017, and January 17, 2018 / Accepted January 17, 2018 /
Published online July 18, 2018

Citation: Bradley, K., Gregory, M. M., Armstrong, J. A., Arthur, M. L., & Porter, C. M. (2018). Graduate students bringing emotional rigor to the heart of community-university relations in the Food Dignity project. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, 8(Suppl. 1), 221–236. <https://doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2018.08A.003>

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Abstract

Food Dignity is an inter- and postdisciplinary action research project designed to support five communities' efforts to build sustainable food systems, tell their stories, and create common ground between the collaborating campuses and

communities. Food Dignity graduate students were intermediaries between more senior academic partners and community partners. This paper highlights graduate students' encounters with academic supremacy, which refers to systemic inequalities and the material, ideological, and practical privileges afforded to forms of academic knowledge production. We build on Porter and Wechsler's (2018) explanation of academic supremacy, which

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Funding Disclosures

Food Dignity was funded by USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture's Agriculture and Food Research Initiative Competitive Grant no. 2011-68004-30074.

Megan M. Gregory was supported by a National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship (2009–2012) and a Land Grant Fellowship from Cornell University's College of Agriculture and Life Sciences (2012–2014).

Food First, The Clif Family Foundation, and Heller Foundation provided support for the East Bay Urban Farmer Field School.

they define in another article in this issue, in order to highlight certain aspects that relate specifically to the graduate student experience. Using autoethnography, we describe the institutional ties, emotional experiences, relationships, and values that defined our intermediary status. This status and the support of community partners allowed us to explore ways in which academic supremacy influenced our work and strategies for dismantling academic supremacy. We detail the conflicting pressures from academic institutions and community partners and the role of social justice values in balancing these pressures; we review how academic researchers deal with difficult social problems in the research process and the potential to use emotion as a guide through these difficulties; finally, we posit praxis-from-the-heart as a strategy for using emotions rigorously and productively to combat academic supremacy.

Keywords

Food Dignity; Graduate Students; Emotions; Academic Supremacy; Food Justice; Action Research

Introduction

This paper is about our experiences as five novice scholars collaborating on a research project. This project, called Food Dignity, was funded by the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) and its Agriculture and Food Research Initiative (AFRI). The project was conceived at a time when leaders within the USDA were particularly interested in learning about community-based initiatives to address inequalities related to food insecurity and nutrition across the United States. Food Dignity was a five-year action research and education project with a particular vision:

A society where each community exercises significant control over its food system through radically democratic negotiation, action and learning in ways that nurture all of our people and sustain our land for current and future generations, and where universities and cooperative extension are supportive partners in this process. (Food Dignity, 2011)

The project brought together activists and scholars from five community organizations, four colleges and universities, and one “think-and-do” tank to experiment with and document ways to build just and sustainable local food systems. Everyone involved was already part of multiple communities—social, spiritual, intellectual, familial—and this collaborative effort provided opportunities to build new relationships and communities.

The five young scholars referenced above are the authors of this paper, and we will write from our perspective from this point on. One of us, Christine, was the principal investigator (PI) who proposed the project to the USDA while still a graduate student, although she had begun working as an assistant professor when the project started. The rest of us, Katie, Melvin, John, and Megan, were graduate students. As such, we came to academics with different backgrounds and plans for our futures but found that we all shared a drive to center our research around justice. Furthermore, as graduate students and novice scholars, we often found ourselves between worlds that were at odds with one another.

The fact that the primary recipient of the USDA's research award was a university, despite the requirement to involve community partners, should come as no surprise. These conditions—that grants are almost always granted to universities, and researchers are required to involve communities beyond campus—while often taken for granted, are central to the tensions we explore in this paper. Although Christine and the tenured professors and community partners who led Food Dignity sought to create collaborative processes within it, some basic structural inequalities persisted. Porter and Wechsler (2018) use the term “academic supremacy” to refer to “systemically inequitable social relations between institutions of higher education, especially universities, and community-based people and organizations” (p. 75). Within Food Dignity, graduate students had little say in the overall project design; however, not only did they spend more time doing “field work” with community partners than academic mentors, but they also spent more time on campus than community partners. Thus, graduate students often

served as intermediaries between the worlds of community and academia.¹

The idea of academic supremacy aligns with several bodies of literature that attend to this sort of systemic division. We understand our experiences as residing in “third spaces,” those that exist between divides (e.g., between communities and universities). In the effort to contextualize our experiences, several of us have relied on scholarship of third world feminism (including Anzaldúa & Keating, 2002; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981; Sandoval, 2000; Smith, 2012). These scholars illuminate the idea of bridges, including on whose backs they are built (rarely the scholars!). They also discuss the consciousness needed to traverse bridges and borderlands. At a macro-level, our struggles reflect a paradigmatic chasm between a unifying technical rationality that dominates our universities and an anti-oppression, anti-totalizing relational worldview lived and demanded by our community mentors. This struggle informed our questions about how participatory or engaged our action research might be although it looms much larger than our questions. In terms of the way in which philosophy indicates a path towards a just society, this is critical theory versus postcolonialism, represented by, for example, Habermas (1981/1984, 1990) and Freire (1970) versus Levinas (1961/1990), Bhabha (1994) and the third world feminist scholars mentioned above.

What this means for us as young activists and scholars has to do with our specific struggles to name and challenge academic supremacy and use our research to support community-led food justice efforts. As students, we faced unique challenges in defining our relationships with teachers and identifying models of community-academic partnership with which we were comfortable and on which we could build vocations and lives. Financial support for our work came through our universities, where the produc-

tion of discipline-specific publications is often seen as the most important obligation of graduate students and the measure of a research group’s worth. However, as we worked in that contested third space, our feelings of responsibility to and gratitude for community partner mentors grew, along with our sense of culpability for scholarship that produces inequity. This culpability stemmed from realizing that, in pursuing advanced degrees, we risked internalizing academic supremacy at the same time we were working to dismantle other forms of oppression. As graduate students still unsure of our professional courses, this conflict was a constant source of anxiety. Yet, we all persevered. How we were able to—and, in some cases, not able to—resolve the conflict between our ethical commitments to community partners and the expectations and requirements of conducting graduate research in academic institutions—make up the stories we tell below.

This paper proceeds as follows. The “Backgrounds and Methods” section describes our academic disciplines and the research project that brought us together. “Naming Privileges and Privileging Higher Education” identifies frameworks that helped us define the systemic nature of the ethical and relational challenges we faced as graduate students. We also explore the ways in which ‘academic privilege’ marred our interactions with the communities that welcomed us into their lives and work. The next section, “Putting Emotions and Ethics in the Research Narrative” reviews peer-reviewed literature that provides some guidance and justification for the solutions to the ethical problem of ‘academic supremacy’ that we pursued, as well as others we wish we had pursued. These solutions were often rooted in recognizing and honoring our ethical commitments and emotional responses to the injustices we observed, as well as the inspiring work of community partners we sought to support. The final section, “Serving Social Justice,” addresses how the climate of academic supremacy affected our membership in communities off campus, specific situations in our individual projects through which we recognized, compromised, and upheld our values, and the emotional dimensions of this work. We conclude with thoughts on how our experiences might

¹ Graduate students in Food Dignity included the first four authors of this paper and four additional master’s students who studied with Christine. The “we” in this paper encompasses the graduate student authors, and concurrence from Christine, who draws on her own student experiences in this paper as well.

confront academic supremacy at the institutional level.

Background and Methods

Food Dignity, which ran from 2011 to 2016, was interdisciplinary. Although we shared an interest in and commitment to justice, our backgrounds, institutions, and aims were different. We studied in three land-grant universities, one in each of the states represented in the Food Dignity project. Katie studied community development and geography at the University of California, Davis and worked with Dig Deep Farms in Ashland and Cherryland, California. Melvin earned a master's degree in health promotion at the University of Wyoming, studying with Christine as his chair and working with Blue Mountain Associates in Wind River, Wyoming, which is also where Melvin grew up. Megan and John studied horticulture and adult education, respectively, at Cornell University. Megan worked most closely with East New York Farms! in Brooklyn and John with the Whole Community Project of Cornell Cooperative Extension in Tompkins County, New York. The Food Dignity academic co-investigators at Cornell University chaired their committees. When Christine proposed the Food Dignity project to USDA in 2010, she was also a graduate student, finishing her Ph.D. in nutrition at Cornell University. Our different disciplinary and institutional homes meant that we each had somewhat different experiences with many of the generalizations and critiques of academics that we make in this paper. Furthermore, our affiliations were dynamic, based on progress through our degree programs, ties with community partners, and the social and political contexts in which we found ourselves.

While we shared the short-term goal of pursuing justice through our research, our longer-term intentions and goals were diverse. Some of us began graduate school out of a desire to continue learning about social systems and injustice; others began with the intention of using graduate school to strengthen our capacity for community-based education and activism; some of us had questions about whether we wanted academic careers in the long-term. Of course, even without clear career paths, we also wanted to set ourselves up for suc-

cess after graduation. These factors also deepened and complicated our status as intermediaries. Yet, it is significant that we were all earnestly concerned with using our status as students to advance justice.

This priority of advancing justice through scholarship aligned with the Food Dignity project, where the central research questions sought to find ethical and effective strategies to achieve sustainable and just local food systems. To begin the project, nearly three-dozen community and academic co-investigators produced retrospective case studies of each community organization's work in building more just and sustainable food systems. Examples of their efforts included community and home gardens, urban farms that provided youth leadership training and/or employment, farmers markets, and local policy dialogues. Community partners also expanded their work with a 'community organizing support package' supported through Food Dignity. This package documented their efforts and success in engaging food-insecure communities in impactful decision-making processes. Within this framework of retrospective and prospective case studies, the project's research methods were diverse. They included participation and observation, narrative inquiry, photo and video narratives, cover crop trials, harvest measures, surveys, and document analysis. We were each involved in several of these methods.

For this paper we use auto-ethnography, a method involving self-reflection and analysis of the authors'/researchers' personal experiences. Because it accounts for emotions and relational aspects of research, Adams, Jones, and Ellis (2015) acknowledge auto-ethnography's suitability for studying messy social issues and for using research to advance social justice. In this case, we analyze our personal experiences and emotions in our individual research projects and in Food Dignity. In particular, we focus on the ways in which our roles as graduate students also made us intermediaries between university-based and community-based partners. This status is important methodologically because it was destabilizing and ambiguous. We did not find ourselves following clear paths to tenured professorships or research careers and often doubted the conventions of the institutions whose credentials we sought. Bhabha

(1994) contends that destabilization, ambiguity, liminality, and even temporary-ness are fertile conditions for imagining new political realities. Our field notes, reflective writing during the five years of Food Dignity, our notes from Food Dignity meetings, transcripts from when we were interviewed, and our memories from this ambiguous space and time comprise the data around which this paper is centered.

Naming Privileges and Privileging of Higher Education

Higher education is frequently a tool for validating the myth of meritocracy, which in turn is used to validate inequality (Brennan & Naidoo, 2008). This is an element of academic supremacy. Four additional forms of academic supremacy were apparent in Food Dignity—inequitable employment conditions among university-based and community-based participants; vast differences in the amount of institutional support, especially vis à vis indirect costs; validation of training and capacity development (e.g., producing graduate students) in academic settings and the lack of such validation in community based organizations; and an extreme disparity in the amount of autonomy, control, and accountability concerning funding. The material and practical implications of these forms of academic supremacy are described in detail by Porter and Wechsler (2018, in this issue). In addition to these four forms, we observed that, in many settings, community partners' experiential and place-based knowledge was not accorded the same credibility, authority, and respect as 'generalizable' knowledge produced through conventionally accepted academic research methods; this is another facet of academic supremacy, and it was especially salient for us as graduate students, as we explain below.

Acknowledging difference is an important step in dismantling any oppressive system, including academic supremacy. At meetings attended by participants from across the country, the major theme of our discussions centered around the differences among community and academic participants. These differences were made apparent as each person and organization identified their hopes and need for genuine collaboration. For

many community partners, this required that we address the social status and risks inherent in everyone's roles. Community partners had a clear idea of the differences that separate them from their academic counterparts. One community partner said, "we do things and academics study those things. The historical weight of studying being more important than doing is difficult to get past." Although several community partners emphasized that the backing of scholars lends credibility to their efforts, most project collaborators questioned whether scholars deserve this power. Those who questioned this status often invoked the disparity between what community and academic partners risk. If the farms we research fail, farmers and organizational leaders could lose their income and even their careers; however, academics, including graduate students, could still write and publish about their failure in ways that advance our academic careers. This is academic supremacy.

Despite the existence of these differences, a few academics tried to downplay them, saying things like "I'm not a normal academic" and "I live in the community too." A few also pointed out differences within the academic setting between, for example, staff and tenured professors. However, such comments trivialized important structural inequalities and the resulting challenges community partners face. Since naming structural inequality is a necessary first step in working towards justice, such dismissal on the part of self-proclaimed atypical and progressive scholars, or even staff within the academy, hindered conversations about how to transform academic practices or dismantle knowledge-power hierarchies. As students, acknowledging what set us apart from community partners was necessary for establishing trust and collaborating with them. Doing so afforded us, as students, further privileges. Not only were we privileged via the social status associated with formal education, but also by the unpaid, undercredited mentorship and teaching that community leaders in the project generously provided. Our in-between status as graduate students was significant; perhaps it was because of this status that we were more comfortable acknowledging our position than tenured faculty, since we

did not yet fully belong; we were perhaps also more comfortable than some academic staff, since earning graduate degrees put us on a privileged path to belonging (regardless of whether we actually saw ourselves staying on such a path). Ultimately, this dynamic validated our decisions to turn to community partners as teachers, decisions that were further validated through additional dimensions of academic supremacy.

Academic supremacy can manifest itself in the resistance to articulate and address complex, messy problems. In our time with community partners, we encountered complex local issues that lacked clear answers, simple solutions, or opportunities for isolated intervention. In much of academia, there is more focus on questions that can be answered definitively (and therefore published in peer-reviewed literature), even if the questions are so simplified as to be useless in a practical setting. For example, at one of the first Food Dignity meetings, several tenured faculty discussed publishing academic articles. One announced, with a frustrated tone, that she did not plan to publish anything based on her involvement because the research could not be conducted in what she deemed to be an adequately controlled environment. This reflects an aspect of academic supremacy—the idea that knowledge not generated in a controlled environment or process is not valid or is less valid than information generated under controlled conditions. Another said he was not worried about publishing—he knew he could—but was more concerned about doing work that served the community partners. The pressure to publish for graduate students is not as strong as for tenure-track faculty, and this pressure varies across disciplines. We were, ourselves, held accountable to academic standards in our dissertation research proposals and are well aware of the tension surrounding publication. Thus, we felt pressure to use widely accepted methods for achieving ‘generalizable,’ rigorous results that contribute to the publication record of our graduate lab or research group. Like other aspects of academic privilege that daunted us, there was little we perceived we could do about these pressures and conventions that influenced our thinking and research planning.

Academic supremacy grants researchers greater control over what questions get investigated and privileges supposedly generalizable and discrete knowledge (e.g., from randomized controlled trials in health fields and randomized complete block designs in agricultural fields). This happens despite the potential of participatory research to generate more localized and nuanced knowledge that is rooted in a particular place and is useful to people working toward community well-being. Fortunately, we all had advisors, or at least committee members, who appreciated and supported our efforts to raise complex, messy questions of importance to community-based partners. However, institutional shortcomings—particularly doctoral timelines for qualifying exams, proposals, and degree completion and methodology courses—created barriers to embracing these questions. These barriers meant that some of the most interesting practical questions, contradictions, and tensions we encountered in our field work with community-based partners remained underexplored (Cook, 2009; Gregory & Peters, 2018, in this issue).

Megan and Katie encountered these dilemmas in their work with farmer field schools. Megan worked with community gardeners in Brooklyn to implement cover crop research across staggering environmental variation. Prioritizing gardener interest and engagement over specific, controlled soil and light conditions meant that the results were applicable to real community gardens, but she had to accept that she could not tease out all the effects of soil and light on cover crop performance. This will make her research harder to publish, though it could provide useful insights, if not definitive answers, for others working to improve soil quality in urban gardens and farms.

In Katie’s research with urban farmers, farmers told her that existing resources were not appropriate for their needs. This dialogue inspired the creation of a peer-to-peer learning network. Katie’s efforts to publish a case study about this network and how it adopted anti-racist practices in response to the stated needs of farmers was met with comments asking for proof of racism in existing farmer training programs. Had Katie pursued the research agenda of interest to potential (and eventual reviewers), she would have reinforced the academic

supremacist notion that experiential and place-based knowledge is not as credible as ‘generalizable’ knowledge produced through conventionally accepted academic research methods, nor would she have been able to support the immediate goals of the urban farmers with whom she partnered.

Identifying these forms of academic supremacy was an important process for us, but we were still left looking for guidance about how to use our position within universities to address structural inequities. In the examples above, in addition to others, we experienced anger and frustration that our academic institutions were more concerned with the rigor of our proposals and problem definitions than the potential relevance and benefits of the research to community partners. Moreover, coursework and academic timelines reinforced a false binary between rigor and relevance (Porter, Hargraves, Sequeria, & Woodsum, 2014). Food Dignity community partners would not stand for such a dynamic, and we credit them with showing us a new research path—one along which we were able to productively use our emotions to shape research where the relevance enhanced the rigor. The next sections address why, how, and where we came to position our emotions in research.

Putting Emotion and Ethics in the Research Narrative

Whereas emotions and non-neutrality were once rebuked as undermining the scientific method (Pretty, 1995), such positivist views of knowledge production are no longer the only perspectives represented in academia, although they remain common in biophysical sciences. The literature on emotions in research tends to focus on mitigating the impacts of researchers’ emotions, often commiserating about the emotional dimensions of research and discussing ways in which to support graduate students through the emotional challenges they inevitably face (Calgaro, 2015; Klocker, 2015). This mitigating stance towards emotion in research contrasts with the notion that emotion might play a valuable role in systematic knowledge production. The place for emotion in research, if any, is usually allocated to a “researcher’s narrative,” which Humble (2012) describes as stories from the research process that are shared conversationally or

informally, as opposed to being published as part of the “research narrative.”

Our academic training teaches us to produce research narratives for peer-review and publication that are stripped of our researcher’s narratives, that is, stripped of emotion, ethics and values. Cook has called this process “tidying away the mess” (1998), where emotions, along with professional knowledge, judgment, tacit knowledge, intuition, and professional maturity are at odds with a “neat” methodology, a methodology that is often misconstrued as a rigorous one. However, in Food Dignity, much of the most important data for answering the core research questions are a part of that “mess.”

The different priorities of project partners and the complexity of the Food Dignity project led community- and academic-based partners to describe the collaborative working ground with phrases such as “no-man’s land,” “bridge,” “borderland,” “minefield,” and “superfund site.” As graduate students and intermediaries in the project, we became intimately familiar with this fraught terrain, and we looked to our emotions to navigate it.

A small body of literature examines how emotions might guide us through these potentially explosive landscapes. Askins, a human geographer who does research with refugees and asylum seekers, highlights the motivational and transformative dimensions of emotion in research, emphasizing that they are key to building relationships and forging solidarity. She explains, “emotions and affects from previous work and life experiences compel me... to do ‘good work’ in line with my passions rather than structures of academia” (2009, p. 10). Hardy, (2012) writing about human rights and sex work as a geographer, stresses that recognizing emotions, both the researcher’s own and the emotions of participants, can challenge “homogenisation of the local,” presumably whether the local refers to people or place. Others emphasize that institutions of higher education must engage with “moral and affective commitments” of students and researchers in order to meet calls for social justice in academics (Hey & Leathwood, 2009). Despite these calls to pull emotions out from under the rug and recognize their potential value in research, which includes but

goes beyond accounting for our subjectivities, there are very few emotions mentioned in specific research contexts and even fewer examples of how researchers used these emotional experiences to gain new insights that advanced their research and social justice agendas. Furthermore, amidst calls for deeper, longer-term collaboration between academics and activists and increasing transparency about collaborative processes (Levkoe et al., 2016; Reynolds & Cohen, 2016), there is little acknowledgement of the importance of emotions.

In the following sections, we provide stories from Food Dignity, and specifically our dissertation and thesis research, to illustrate how we aimed to work from a place of productive feeling, establish common working ground, and conduct rigorous research. We call this holistic approach to scholarship praxis-from-the-heart and contend that it can help prevent, redress, or mitigate the exploitation of local communities for academic research purposes. We also contend that praxis-from-the-heart can support full engagement of the insights that community partners have to offer to the co-production of knowledge and ensure the relevance of research to community-based social justice practices. The examples that follow demonstrate how we employed a praxis-from-the-heart approach and how we think we could have done it better.

Serving Social Justice

Conflicting Pressures

While powerlessness and uncertainty about how to transform academic structures are part of the graduate student experience, there is a rather positive aspect to this status of being not-fully academic—the ability to facilitate connections across cultural, occupational, and educational divides. Turning to our community partners as teachers was important to fostering such connections. Not only did we engage them as teachers and mentors, we drew inspiration from their willingness to raise issues concerning disparities in funding, status, and perceived legitimacy of partners' knowledge and experience in mixed company. These conversations resonated with us because of the ways in which we felt out of place in academia. This made our desire

to become part of groups outside the realm of academia all the more powerful.

To the extent that we have been shaped by and belong to multiple communities, we have seen the very communities in which we live and do research exploited through research. We are also acutely aware that there is a long history of exploitative research practices (particularly research conducted in communities of color and/or low-income communities) that violate our deepest values. These realities sometimes undermined our sense of self-confidence. At times, they are saddening, frustrating, and angering. And yet, they motivated us to strive to create a different type of relationship between researchers and communities by drawing on the wisdom of the communities to which we belonged, including our families, ancestors, faith communities, and others.

Melvin's experience conducting research on the Wind River Reservation—where he grew up and still lives with his family—provides an example of a Food Dignity graduate student drawing on the practices of his ancestors to shape more equitable research relationships. He struggled to prioritize ancestral knowledge and ways of knowing as he crosses between a white world and a native world, between the academic world in Laramie, the location of his university, and the social service provider world on the reservation. Yet in reflective writing shared among our graduate student group, he wrote of how his connections with his ancestors have helped him adapt his research to serve the good of his community:

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... When working with American Indian communities, the application of standard methodology can be thrown out the window. Collecting data will require researchers to have interpersonal communication with American Indian participants... I try to listen to the stories of my ancestors and the stories my people are telling me today. I do this in order to find a way to unite American Indians for

the common good...in the hopes of assuring that the Northern Arapaho and Eastern Shoshone tribal members have the opportunity to live healthier lives.

In a different way, Megan also struggled to recognize the importance of her spirituality in her research. In reflecting on the role of ethics in her research, she wrote:

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.”² 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, this has been a struggle in the context of a large research university, where the institutional emphasis on publication in high-impact academic journals conflicts with values of building relationships and prioritizing the well-being of communities, both in what research questions are explored and how research is conducted.

Although we brought values of justice and respect with us into the project, we sometimes struggled to uphold them. When we experienced emotional discomfort—feelings of invalidation, frustration, and sadness—it was often a sign that we were struggling to bring our values into practice. Our relationships with community partners helped us to understand the specific ways in which our values were relevant and actionable. We developed these relationships by working together in community-based projects. Over the course of several years, we shared information about our backgrounds, helped each other understand new perspectives, revealed vulnerabilities, and built trust. In doing so, we developed a sense of mutual respect. This respect enabled us to share our

² The quotation is from Brueggemann, 1999, p. 49.

emotions—outrage, joy, sadness—and to receive encouragement to pay attention to them. In this way, our partners showed us that the parts of us that made us whole, but were unwelcome in academia, were welcome in their world. They helped us place value in our emotions and held us accountable to our values. They helped us see the importance of owning our status, partial though it may be, as academics while staying true to ourselves. Our accountability to ourselves and community partners proved to be an important anchor while we faced some of the academic pressures discussed above. The value we placed on the experiences and wisdom of community-based partners provided a critical, though not complete, counterbalance to these pressures. Next we offer two stories that reflect how we dealt with these often conflicting pressures.

Building Bridges

Through the encouragement and support of Food Dignity community partners, we developed tools for responding to some of the conflicting pressures described above. We aspired to hold onto values we were told did not belong in academics, use them to learn from and connect with community partners as both feeling and analytical people, and devote our research practices to the interests of community partner organizations. Furthermore, we aspired to use methods that challenged the notions of power and status that accrue from academic ways of knowing and make room for more collaborative approaches to research that place community interests and capacity development at the center. This meant, among other things, addressing the kinds of complex and localized questions of interest to food justice practitioners. To do this, we put stock in our own and in our colleagues' emotions, experiences, ancestral knowledge, ethics, and values. In doing so, we strived to honor the multiple communities to which every one of us in the project belonged. While our ethics and values motivated us to embrace our role as bridge builders, we did not always know how to behave in this role. The following stories illustrate strategies that helped us build common working ground between the collaborating campuses and communities through Food Dignity.

Megan's story speaks to the process of developing relationships and research designs that support community efforts with the support and mentoring of community partners. In the midst of her research, she wrote:

As we began to shape our research to learn about cover cropping practices in urban gardens, I was worried about history repeating itself—about these gardens and gardeners being *'used' as a means* (in this case, to generate agro-ecological knowledge). By contrast, I thought it important that the agroecological and social health of the gardens be *nurtured as ends*, valuable in and of themselves and for the well-being they foster in the neighborhood. In order to contribute to the gardens and strengthen gardeners' capacity for sustainable practices, it seemed like a no-brainer to me that participating gardeners would choose which cover crops they wanted to plant in their plots. This way, we could consider each gardener's vegetable rotation and management goals, and choose the cover crops most likely to suit their needs. As long as I was careful to document background conditions for each plot—soil properties, light availability, intercrops, and so forth—I figured that we could learn a lot about the different cover crops and their performance in urban gardens, while supporting gardeners' goals for the plots they tended.

Megan faced skepticism about the academic merit of her research proposal because sharing decision-making power with gardeners made the experimental design much *'messier'* than is typical in agricultural research. Yet, in reflecting on their first season of cover crop research, one of Megan's community partners commented that it was wonderful to see gardeners so engaged with the process and eager to share their learning about cover crops with others. This partner highlighted the one-on-one assistance in individual gardens, helping gardeners select and plant cover crops, as one of the most valuable aspects of the project. For Megan, this affirmed the value in the practice of sharing decision-making power with gardeners

and taking time to foster gardeners' learning and leadership development—which the dominant academic culture views as distractions (at best) or impediments (at worst) to producing *'rigorous'* biophysical research. Thus, the perspective, encouragement, and mentoring of community partners provided essential support for carrying out ethical commitments in participatory research.

Like Megan, Katie also felt compelled to do research that served the farmers with whom she worked. Early drafts of her dissertation proposal consisted of her conjectures concerning how to best achieve this goal, but did not reflect conditions on the ground. As she was beginning her research, she reflected:

In the first couple of years that Dig Deep Farms operated, leaders frequently described running the organization with the phrase, "building the plane while flying it." One of the implications of this flight strategy was that new farmers had to learn on the job and step into farm management positions before they felt ready. After I left the farm office one day, I noticed one of the farmers sitting outside the greenhouse and I stopped to say hi. He had a pen and piece of paper with him, but otherwise didn't appear to be doing anything. When we started talking, I realized I was mistaken. He was trying to create a plan for starts that would grow in the greenhouse and be transplanted, in succession, on the farm. He had helped out in the greenhouse before, but this was the first time he was responsible for running it. He asked me for help.

As a social scientist, I came to do research with Dig Deep Farms because of my interest in how the farm impacted the surrounding neighborhood, how it impacted farmers, and what it meant for local government support for urban agriculture. I spent time working with the farmers, but never advanced beyond novice in my farming know-how. As I sat with the farmer that day, I felt useless and powerless. When I started graduate school, I imagined doing activist research and contributing to food justice activism. But here I sat, unable to translate my years of school and

academic skills to anything practical.

Around the same time, managers started recognizing the need for greater mentorship and instruction for the farmers and invited experts to visit the farm. I was present for one such visit when we were going to learn how to set up a fertigation system. But as we walked the fields, this expert identified everything that could be improved, quickly jumping from one topic to another. The farmers and I were similarly overwhelmed. What suggestion was most important to address? How could we slow this guy down? How could we focus the conversation on something practical and actionable?

Eventually, Dig Deep Farms leaders decided to start an urban farmer field school. It would be peer-to-peer and facilitated by other urban farmers in the food justice movement in the region. They asked me to coordinate. This I could do. I understood what the farmers needed and wanted to learn. I had felt confused alongside them and understood their need for demonstrations in the learning process. I wasn't intimidated by experts and could communicate what instructional models would be most effective. I could find motivation in my earlier sense of uselessness. I would have to create my own research questions about the work I was being asked to do, but that was a burden I was honored to have.

Katie faced self-doubt about doing research that actually mattered to farmers, ultimately abandoning her original dissertation proposal when she found a role for herself that addressed the farmers' needs and creative vision.

In both Megan's and Katie's stories, multiyear relationships and mentoring from community partners were prerequisite for research projects that satisfied community needs and academic pressures. These examples also point to the lack of confidence, from others as well as ourselves, that can develop when we do food systems research. In each case, listening and seeking to prioritize community well-being in research design resulted in a project in which gardeners' and farmers' local

knowledge improved the research and ensured that it contributed to community education as well as garden and farm sustainability.

Of course, there are also many smaller, individual acts we can and sometimes did perform in an attempt to diminish the injustices brought by academic privilege. We sought funding from other sources on campus so that more grant funds could be allocated to community-based partners. We applied for our own grants so we could hire community members as co-organizers, researchers, and educators receiving stipends. We volunteered in the organizations that partnered with us as a partial repayment for time spent mentoring us. We were confidants, offered rides, made lasagna for someone going through a rough time, and attended funerals to support partners we had come to consider family. While the impacts of these activities varied, they represent small ways in which we asserted agency in the face of academic supremacy and made interpersonal decisions based on shared humanity rather than conventional research pressures.

In addition to creating context-specific strategies to contest academic privilege, we also had to justify these strategies as rigorous. The methods conventionally accepted as rigorous are beyond the scope of this paper and are detailed in our theses, dissertations, and other publications (Armstrong, 2015; Arthur, 2015; Bradley, 2011, 2015; Gregory, 2017; Gregory & Peters, this issue; Meek et al., 2017; Porter, 2010, 2013; Porter, McCracken, & Naschold, 2016). However we also engaged in emotionally rigorous work, which we describe in the next section.

Praxis-from-the-Heart

Action research has a fraught nature (Herr & Anderson, 2005; Pulido, 2008), with personal and interpersonal highs and lows. Along with some of the more uncomfortable feelings, we all experienced joy, love, and even belonging, despite our in-between status. These emotions helped keep us connected and, thus, accountable to community partners. In many ways, these positive experiences served as touchstones when we faced more difficult emotions, which we and other project partners routinely did. Our emotions proved to be inval-

able in helping us to navigate our dynamic roles as intermediaries between communities off campus and those in academics. They helped us to recognize instances of academic supremacy, including in our own actions and priorities, to nurture relationships with diverse community partners, and to allow our values of justice to guide our research in changing social contexts. We label this use of emotions in research as *praxis-from-the-heart*.

An example of positive emotions comes from Megan's research. Gardeners participating in the Brooklyn Farmer Field School were eager to share their learning, so she helped them organize field days each spring to show the cover crops to other gardeners in the neighborhood. After the first such field day in the Spring of 2012, Megan wrote about feelings of pride and joy in watching participating gardeners teach others (Gregory & Peters, in review for this issue). These feelings helped sustain a commitment to community education within her research. She wrote in her field notes:

As I biked home from [FFS garden], savoring the sense of satisfaction at the showing and teaching and learning that went on at our little field day, I realized that I recognized the feeling I've been trying to describe...It's the joy of sitting quietly and watching the flowering of a person's potential to learn, teach, mentor, inspire, knowing you had a small part in planting some new ideas, and then helping them learn to value their own experience as something worth sharing for the benefit of the community.

It is one of my favorite feelings in the whole world.

In addition to positive emotions such as pride and joy, Food Dignity partners also experienced many difficult emotions. Community partners in particular are quite open about being propelled in their work by a sense of anger and outrage over injustices related to food insecurity, employment discrimination, gender- and race-based oppression, and academic theft. We also often felt such difficult emotions and contend that they can be productive, despite being taught that there is no place for emotions in academics.

Sometimes when we are in the field, we feel a sense of guilt at our own privilege, we feel a sense of self-doubt as outsiders or unskilled interlopers, or we feel lost about how to work in an emotional borderland. Emotions—like the guilt and anxiety we often felt—can be challenging to deal with personally and are often considered to be inappropriate to discuss anywhere but the informal researcher's narrative. Worse, we may receive messages or have already internalized the idea that we do not even deserve to have these feelings. However, in contrast to arguments that guilt is self-indulgent or unproductive, Audre Lorde explains that "guilt is not a response to anger; it is a response to one's own actions or lack of action. If it leads to change then it can be useful, since it is then no longer guilt but the beginning of knowledge" (2012, p. 130). Thus, we also want to focus on these challenging feelings because, if we pause and reflect, 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, p. 14)

These feelings exert their influence internally, but, to the extent that they drive inquiry, they are also quite social. Challenging feelings can be acute sensors of the cultural milieu, social arrangements, and our internalization of these conditions. Feelings, such as the anxiety we have experienced in our academic work, shouldn't be considered "bad," but rather diagnostic of the cultural and political spaces we and our food systems research occupy. For example, discomfort can signal structural

inequality or frustration can signal irrelevance of a research question. By contrast, happiness and belonging can signal relevance. Of course, it is possible to misinterpret our emotions. Nevertheless, making a deliberate effort to understand our emotions can prove to be insightful and productive as we make important choices about how to relate to community partners and uphold values, particularly values of justice, as we conduct our research.

While there are some examples of scholars integrating emotional rigor in their work, including in the fringes of Food Dignity (Bradley & Herrera, 2016; Wechsler, 2017), there are ways we wish we had done this better. For example, Katie regrets not documenting her emotional experiences more thoroughly. A majority of her field note entries mention the emotions that other people expressed to her; however, only a minority of entries document her own experiences of sadness, happiness, embarrassment, frustration, and excitement. None of her social science research method classes addressed the role of emotions. Of course, Katie could have taken initiative to more methodically describe her emotions along with details of site visits and interactions. While it is difficult to say what this could have yielded, as we argue below, paying more attention to these experiences in the research process would likely have enriched the research itself. Ultimately, rigorous emotional work deserves more academic support than it currently receives.

Similarly, Megan regrets yielding to pressure to focus on dissertation manuscripts first upon finishing her field work. Meanwhile, gardeners waited for her to prepare their individual soil test results as well as a report and presentation of soil and cover crop research results in an accessible format. While she did eventually fulfill these obligations to her gardener research partners, they waited a long time for information that they not only helped produce, but information that could further inform their gardening practices. Had Megan paid more attention to the guilt she felt, she may have made different, and more ethical, decisions about how to prioritize research and education tasks.

Importantly, acknowledging and responding to emotions (both positive and negative) means that that researchers must accept a degree of vulnera-

bility, a taboo practice according to the normative research narrative. Vulnerability is scary for many people, often for good reason. Emotional vulnerability can serve as grounds to cast doubt on the soundness of our own analyses or experiences as well as those of community partners. Too often, academics, including students, conceal their emotional involvement behind ostensibly tidy methods and analysis. Yet, this honesty and vulnerability reveals that much of what guides us as researchers is not a special power unique to academics. Rather, what guides us are our emotions and our values. Melvin's and Megan's stories about their ancestry and faith, respectively, are further reminders that our humanity can help us build solidarity with and do research in service of community partners. Blending the researcher's narrative and the research narrative casts light on problematic, conventionally accepted knowledge-power hierarchies, and demands that academic researchers, like community-based ones, become the researched. These stories and ideas have implications beyond the lives of graduate students.

Conclusion

After the conclusion of Food Dignity, a community partner and an academic partner discussed the impacts of the project. How had our group collectively shifted the values and priorities of academia? The community partner lamented the lack of progress on the academic side. Perhaps we, the students, did too. One of us is a community garden coordinator for cooperative extension; another is a research scientist with a project in his home community; and another is working in construction and urban agriculture. Only one of us has decided to pursue a tenure track position, only after a year and a half of working in undergraduate experiential teaching in collaboration with activists. While we are still thinking, feeling, analytical people, we have chosen to apply our skills and values outside of large research institutions, where we hope they will have a better chance of flourishing and contributing to the struggle for justice and social change.


We hope these settings will allow us to use our emotions as productively as our community partners use theirs. We hope other researchers will take up this task of using emotions productively. This

would entail using emotions to call researchers' attention to the "mess," including important issues previously unconsidered by researchers, such as the structural inequities in community-academic collaborations and potentially exploitative or disrespectful research dynamics—like those that have made our community partners (and us!) wary of research. It should also inform our writing and presentations, and we should use our emotions to merge the unofficial "researcher's narrative" with the more formal and public "research narrative." In short, it requires honesty.

Honesty and openness about emotions, relationships, and shared humanity can be the foundation for a radical research movement. This honesty requires remaining attuned to our emotions, not getting stuck in them. We saw our community partners do this in ways that were innovative, and these innovations were the subject of the Food Dignity project. We also saw our community partners use their emotions in ways that nurtured self-determination and resilience, both in us and in their communities. This nurture enabled us to use self-reflection to avoid getting bogged down by challenging feelings. Inhabiting our emotions helped us to establish foundations of humility in our research. This, in turn, helped to recognize the dignity of community partners and to democratize our research processes. Whereas the steps for gaining academic credentials often seemed taken for granted and accepted without question, we hope that praxis-from-the-heart can help more graduate students and researchers identify and unseat many of the power relations we experience as we perform academic work off campus.

Furthermore, to the extent that employing emotionally rigorous methods can combat academic supremacy, it is necessary to look beyond what we can each do as individual researchers. As with other forms of oppression, structural changes are necessary. The tendency to reduce complex problems to definitively answerable questions is a feature of academic supremacy that conventional ideas about rigor reinforce. As graduate students committed to serving the interests of community-based food justice movements, we struggled to articulate and explore complex, messy problems within an institutional context that discourages

such endeavors as 'unpublishable.' In writing this article, one reviewer asked that we more strictly adhere to a traditional academic paper format or eschew the format completely. But we insist that more hybridity is needed throughout our academic conventions as it allows for greater honesty about in-between status and the messy social problems we studied. Because hybrid forms of communication mirror reality more closely, it also invites wider participation in academic practices, like publishing, that are based on experientially gained information. Employing emotionally rigorous research methods in our studies allows us to acknowledge the full messiness of not just action research, but of complex social injustices and the multitude of ways people live with and respond to them. Our community partners showed us that such work requires courage.

With this critical reflexivity about our collective graduate student experiences, we have stretched across only inches of the chasms between small community organizations fighting for food sovereignty and large research universities, between unifying critical theory and postcolonial theories that name unity as oppressive in its totality, and between action and research that we have strived to weave into ever-stronger ropes for climbing towards social justice goals. We deliver no answers, but have shared our struggles and our strategies for navigating this terrain. We increasingly learned to name and own our systemic privileges, including academic privilege. In the face of practical and paradigmatic gaps between our academic and community accountabilities and mentorship, we sometimes could only name the conflicting pressures, but not resolve them. We strived to stretch and grow in hybrid, bridged, "third" spaces (Bhabha, 1994). Most of all, we found that we needed to be as rigorously vulnerable in the emotions of our research relations as we have been in our knowledge generation methods. This praxis-from-the-heart method was the most reliable guide we found to serving social justice with our action research. 

Acknowledgements

We extend our deepest gratitude to all of our teachers, especially our community partners who mentored us,

welcomed us into their work, held us accountable to values of justice, love, and heritage, and encouraged us. We also are grateful for the support for and from Food Dignity

In particular, Megan thanks Deborah Greig, David Vigil, Sarita Daftary, and Daryl Marshall of East New York Farms! and community educator partners, Nayda Maymi and Brenda Thompson-Duchene, for their guidance and practical support for the Brooklyn Farmer Field School. Scott Peters, Laurie Drinkwater, and Marianne Krasny provided scholarly guidance in designing and interpreting Megan's research in adult education and horticulture.

Katie thanks Pac Rucker, Sam Faulkner, Tommie Wheeler, Mike Silva, Jarryd Smith, Hank Herrera, and Marty Neideffer of Dig Deep Farms. She also thanks her advisor, Ryan Galt, for his support and encouragement.

Christine is especially grateful to E. Jemila Sequeira of the Whole Community Project and Gayle M. Woodsum of Feeding Laramie Valley and Action Resources International for their mentorship; to Scott Peters, David Pelletier, Kathy Rasmussen and Phil McMichael at Cornell University for their academic guidance; and to her students for the hope and challenges they offer.

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