

FROM CIVIL RIGHTS TO FOOD JUSTICE:
HISTORIOGRAPHY, FOOD POWER AND RESISTANCE

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Throughout the American Civil Rights movement, food played a central role within the social and economic politics of Mississippi. For proponents of the movement, food became a critical tool of resistance in response to inequality. For opponents, food was used as a weapon of power to maintain white supremacy and undermine the entire movement. Yet narratives of food are largely absent from civil rights historiography, obscured by struggles for voting rights, integration, and education. Written as three papers, this dissertation shifts the way we understand the historical struggle for civil rights, the contemporary struggle for food justice and food sovereignty, and the politics of food.

The first paper recovers the broader food story of the civil rights era in Mississippi and shows how power and politics obscured key elements of that story at the intersection of gender, class, time, and space. Drawing on a wide range of archival materials, civil rights scholarship, and interviews, I analyze responses to the 1962-1963 Greenwood Food Blockade and examine the work of activists such as Fannie Lou Hamer and L.C. Dorsey to ensure food security among poor blacks in the Delta through efforts such as farm cooperatives and food projects. The second paper situates the concept of food power—the use of food as a weapon or an element of power in the global context of politics and national security—at the center of post-1965 anti-civil rights activism in Mississippi. Led by US Representative Jamie Whitten, Senator John Stennis, and Senator James Eastland, the congressional white power structure ignited a campaign against War on Poverty efforts designed to alleviate poverty and hunger in Mississippi. Such antipoverty efforts, in the

context of civil rights throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, threatened the politics of white supremacy. In the third paper, I juxtapose the historical case of Freedom Farms Cooperative in Mississippi and the contemporary case of Rocky Acres Community Farm in Central New York to demonstrate how these cases help us understand relations between historical and contemporary struggles for food justice as a strategy for building emancipatory forms of food power and sustainability.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Bobby J. Smith II was born in Fort Hood, Texas in 1988 and raised in Fort Worth, TX. He graduated *magna cum laude* from Southwest High School in 2007 and *summa cum laude* from Prairie View A&M University in 2011 with a Bachelor of Science degree in Agriculture, studying Agricultural Economics. In 2013, he earned a Master of Science degree in Agricultural and Applied Economics from the Charles H. Dyson School of Applied Economics and Management at Cornell University. In 2017, he was named the Medgar and Myrlie Evers Research Scholar-in-Residence at the Mississippi Department of Archives and History in Jackson, MS, where he conducted archival research on relationship between the politics of food, race and activism in the Mississippi Civil Rights era. He was also the recipient of a 2017 Engaged Cornell graduate student grant for his research that examined how food justice activism rises in response to social, political and economic inequalities embedded in the American food system in both historical and contemporary contexts.

In 2018, he was awarded the inaugural *Study the South* Research Fellowship at the Center for the Study of Southern Culture at the University of Mississippi. The support of the Center for the Study of Southern Culture will enable Bobby to conduct post-doctoral archival research that sheds light on the relationship between food, power and opposition to the civil rights movement in Mississippi. Specifically, this work explores how food was a weapon of opposition and a tool of resistance in the Mississippi Delta during this era. It also focuses on amplifying the voices of contemporary activists in rural areas and their connections to food narratives in the civil rights movement. His research agenda is located at the intersection of sociology, African American studies, food studies, agriculture and history.

“Now all glory to God, who is able, through his mighty power at work within us, to accomplish infinitely more than we might ask or think.” - Ephesians 3:20

First, I give all glory to God for everything, without Him I am nothing.

To my family, friends, and all those who have helped me up to this point in my life, this dissertation is respectfully dedicated.

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I started writing this section while I was on a plane headed to Raleigh, North Carolina in February 2017 to visit my family and celebrate the 100th birthday of my great-grandfather, William Oscar Blount, Sr., affectionately known as “My Daddy” to our family. While on the plane, thinking about my dissertation (of course) and reflecting on my life, I realized how blessed I was to be able to celebrate this occasion with my great-grandfather. Born over 100 years ago, near the tobacco fields of Pitt County in Eastern North Carolina, my great-grandfather farmed his entire life. During his birthday celebration, countless family members and family friends spoke about the importance of land, hard work, Black self-determination, the grace of God and family memories. As each person spoke, I was reminded, that the land has always been in my blood and that the struggle for food justice and food sovereignty in the United States is both scholarly and extremely personal.

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agreeing to be my chair and supporting me during a critical time in my graduate school career (you already know the story, so I don't have to tell it here). I also want to thank you for introducing me to Charles Payne's *I've Got the Light of Freedom* over two years ago in your community organizing class. As you already know, that book introduced me to the beginning of a "food story" of the civil rights movement, which served as a foundation for my entire dissertation project. I also thank you for pushing me to think beyond Payne's book and to make connections to issues today. To Lori, thanks for seeing something in me over three years ago when I took your qualitative methods course, introducing me to Michel-Rolph Trouillot's *Silencing the Past*, and challenging me to think beyond my research ideas at the time. You have been a mentor and friend, and I thank you for the many conversations and allowing me to "drop-by" your office to talk. To Noliwe, thank you for believing in me and helping me think through my dissertation project and pushing me to write about "Mississippi's war against the War on Poverty." I am grateful that you saw something in those "two paragraphs" in an earlier draft of chapter two and trusting me to complete it. The support of you all made all the difference during this entire dissertation process.

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and the entire Archival, Reading, and Media room staff. Because of you, I essentially had unlimited access to not only the physical archives but also your personal archives.

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Interestingly, while I was in Jackson in 2017, I attended a month-long series of events hosted by Fannie Lou Hamer Institute at the COFO center at Jackson State University in which many civil rights activists and scholars met up and revisited the movement to prepare for the commemoration of the Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer’s 100th birthday. I also had the opportunity to attend the opening of the Mississippi Civil Rights Museum in December 2017 and the adjoining commemoration lectures. At such events I had the opportunity to meet Charlie Cobb, Dr. Mary King, Mr. Figures, Rev. Ed King, Rev. Rev. Wendell Paris, Sr., and a host of other unsung heroes of the movement. I also met scholars such as historians Clayborne Carson, John Dittmer, and Emilye Crosby who have written extensively about the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Mississippi movement. I am forever indebted to this experience and exposure.

Lastly, I want to thank my accountability partner Sherry Zhang and the amazing staff at Mann Library. Sherry, we wrote together almost every day this past year and throughout that time we developed a close friendship. Thanks for being there during some of the most stressful days of my dissertation writing. I am glad that we both finished this process together and I wish you all the best. To the Mann Library staff, especially Mel, Selena, Erica, and Camille, thanks for the candy and friendly support throughout this past year of intensive writing. I also want to thank every person I didn't or forgot to name that helped me along this journey, thank you for believing in me.

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FROM CIVIL RIGHTS TO FOOD JUSTICE: AN INTRODUCTION

Since reading sociologist Charles Payne's (1995/2007) groundbreaking study on the Mississippi Black Freedom Struggle, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, I have been interested in questions about the relationship between food, race, power and inequality in the civil rights era. With these questions I seek to understand how the politics of food¹ and food activism shaped the social, political, economic, and nutritional realities of poor rural blacks during the civil rights era in the Mississippi Delta. While several generations of historians, sociologists, and political scientists have written about the civil rights movement, narratives of food are largely absent from their scholarship. They are obscured by the dominant narrative (Hall, 2005) of the movement, which focuses on struggles for voting rights, integration, and education. Consequently, we know very little about the centrality of food as a political force during the civil rights era. Moreover, we miss out on a number of actors, struggles, initiatives, projects, and programs that could help activists and scholars understand problems of today, such as the prevalence of structural racism and inequality in the production, consumption and distribution of food. Activists that engage in this work align with the concepts of 'food justice' and 'food sovereignty.' While the terms are different, social justice, food, land and the politics of resistance are woven into the fabric of the movements associated with them. Yet contemporary scholarly and public discussions on food justice and food sovereignty are rarely—if at all—intertwined with historical conversations about the civil rights movement.

To address this issue, my dissertation project and research agenda shed light on connections between civil rights and food justice/sovereignty efforts in the context of food politics, inequality,

¹ The politics of food is defined as "personal, local, organizational, and national power struggles driven by fundamental concerns of who can eat what and under what conditions" in Potorti (2015), p. 5.

and social movement activism. Located at the intersection of sociology, food studies, agriculture, African-American studies, and history, my research agenda challenges the dominant narrative of the movement and offers a new line of civil rights inquiry. This new line of inquiry extends what we know about the movement and illuminates how food, and control over access to food, mattered to movement politics. It also informs and contextualizes contemporary conversations about food justice and food sovereignty at the intersection of food, agriculture, race, class, and gender. The main goals of my research agenda are (1) to recover and reveal unexplored aspects of civil rights movement politics and scholarship; and (2) to inform and understand contemporary struggles and conversations around food justice and food sovereignty in the United States. Written as three papers, this dissertation project is my first step in pursuing these goals.

Dissertation Project Overview

Together, the three papers in this dissertation shift the way we understand the historical struggle for civil rights, the contemporary struggle for food justice and food sovereignty, and the politics of food. First, this dissertation challenges the dominant narrative of the movement and expands our understanding of food as a vital political force, weapon, tool and tactic in the struggle for civil rights in Mississippi. Second, it demonstrates that food justice and food sovereignty movements in the United States have deep roots in the politics of the civil rights movement, and the historical arc of the long black freedom struggle. Third, it enhances our understanding of the relationship between food, race, power, and inequality in social, economic and political struggle.

In the first paper, titled “Repositioning Food in Civil Rights Historiography: Class, Gender, and the Politics of Food in Mississippi, 1962-1975,” I offer a “food story” of the civil rights era in the Mississippi Delta that foregrounds the role of everyday food activism in the movement. I also analyze how power and politics, in and outside of the movement, obscured key elements of the

story at the intersection of gender, class, time, and space. Drawing on a wide range of archival materials, civil rights scholarship, interviews, and the methodological approach of Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995), the food story I construct and tell focuses on three discrete moments of food activism in the Delta: the 1962-1963 Greenwood Food Blockade, the development of Freedom Farms Cooperative, and the development of the North Bolivar County Farm Cooperative. While these moments are often discussed or mentioned separately, I weave them together to construct a food story. At the center of this story are poor rural African American communities and women activists—including Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer and Mrs. L. C. Dorsey—who organized food projects in the late 1960s and 1970s. Yet, we know little about the food activism of these women or their food projects due to their rural locality, class position as sharecroppers and the gendered nature of food work. Moreover, even in “historical-spatial representations” (Dwyer, 2000) that seek to memorialize key moments of the movement in Mississippi, their food activism and projects are virtually absent. By shifting our gaze from the dominant narrative of the movement, my food story expands our understanding of the Black Freedom Struggle and illuminates a strategic era of movement organizing when activists extended the civil rights agenda to include food, land and employment.

In the second paper, titled “Mississippi’s War *Against* the War on Poverty: Food Power, Hunger and White Supremacy,” I examine how local, state, and national actors in Mississippi used “food power” (Wallenstein, 1976; Gross and Feldman, 2015; and McDonald, 2017) to maintain white supremacy and undermine the civil rights movement.² While national actors of the civil

² While food power is often theorized as the use of food as a weapon or an element of power in the global context of politics and national security, I define it as any set of interactions during times of crisis, whether formal or informal, between local, state, and national actors that use food—or programs designed to ensure access to it—and agriculture as weapons to stabilize the crisis.

rights movement faded in to the periphery of the Mississippi struggle after the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, local opponents of the movement took center stage. I use this moment as an entry point in a story that illuminates the political maneuverings of an oppressive form of food power that was exercised by Mississippi congressmen Jamie Whitten, James Eastland, and John Stennis. Such maneuverings, in the context of the politics of white supremacy, enabled civil rights opponents to successfully dismantle post-1965 civil rights activism that sought to address the economic and food realities of poor rural blacks through anti-poverty programs. To tell this story, I reposition food from the periphery to the center of movement inquiries. I also track instantiations of food power throughout a wide range of archival materials and published scholarly work on the Mississippi movement and the War on Poverty. Specifically, I pay attention to how Whitten, Eastland and Stennis used their food power to successfully manipulate Operation Head Start and thwart Senator Robert F. Kennedy's "discovery" of hunger in the Mississippi Delta. By doing so, I reveal a new wave of white resistance to the movement, beyond the usual tactics of media manipulation, violence and economic intimidation. I also offer a critical understanding of the social, economic, and political forces that worked against civil rights activism.

In the third paper, titled "Building Emancipatory Food Power: Freedom Farms, Rocky Acres and the Struggle for Food Justice," I explore the dual process in the struggle for food justice of dismantling negative, oppressive forms of food power while also building positive, emancipatory forms of food power. Juxtaposing the historical case of Freedom Farms Cooperative in Mississippi and the contemporary case of Rocky Acres Community Farm in Central New York, I demonstrate how this dual process can push the food justice movement beyond issues of food access in order to attend to issues of community agency, resilience and economic power in the movement. Although the Freedom Farms and Rocky Acres cases are situated in two socially and

historically distinct contexts, they share similar attributes: both created autonomous rural farm spaces for marginalized communities to grow food, resist inequality, and cultivate community agency. Moreover, the cases provide insights on how the food justice movement also rises in response to the development and exercise of emancipatory food power by marginalized communities. Here, I do not see food power as simply or only a mechanism that creates uneven access to food, as most narratives of food justice suggest. I also see it as a form of emancipation, empowerment and resistance. This helps us see that the project of dismantling oppressive policies and structures of food power must be accompanied by the project of building emancipatory food power. This dual move has deep roots in the arc of the long Black Freedom Struggle. Illuminating and examining it deepens our understanding of the historical significance of community agency, resilience and autonomy in the struggle for food justice. It also provides insights that activists and organizers can use to strengthen current and future movements that address issues of rights, land, self-determination, autonomy, agency, economic democracy and participation in the act of accessing food and beyond.

The Larger Research Agenda

This dissertation project is only the beginning of a larger research agenda that examines and analyzes the relationship between inadequate access to food, structural inequalities, and social movements in historical and contemporary contexts. To this end, the central research questions of this agenda are (1) what does the politics of food in the civil rights movement reveal about connections between inadequate access to food, structural inequalities, and social movements? and (2) how do these connections inform and contribute to contemporary conversations around food justice and food sovereignty? As the next step in addressing and answering these questions beyond the dissertation, I envision a book project that merges historical scholarship on the civil rights

movement and scholarly and public conversations on food justice and food sovereignty. Through an examination of the politics of ‘food power’ in both oppressive and emancipatory forms, this book project draws lessons from the ways in which food was central to the agendas and strategies of opponents and proponents of the civil rights movement in Mississippi as way to contribute to our understanding of food justice today. Moreover, this book project sheds light on the critical nature of the politics of food power that involves the struggle to engage in the dual process of dismantling oppressive forms of food power and building emancipatory forms of food power discussed in paper three of this dissertation. To do this, I see this book project separated into three main parts.

The first part of the book examines my food story of the struggle for civil rights in Mississippi that explores and examines the centrality of the politics of food power to the strategies and agendas of both opponents and proponents of the movement. In the case of opponents, I argue that the use of food and agricultural policies as weapons by Mississippi congress illuminates the role of oppressive forms of food power during the civil rights struggle and sheds light on the social, economic and food conditions of poor rural black communities. In the case of proponents, I argue that the use of food projects, initiatives and agricultural knowledge in response to oppressive forms of food power—including the conditions produced by them—demonstrates the critical role of emancipatory forms of food power in the civil rights agenda. By positioning these cases together, this first part provides a more complete food story of the civil rights era in Mississippi and sheds light on a context where oppressive and emancipatory forms of food power operate at the same time.

The second part of the book examines the story of the struggle for food justice and food sovereignty in the United States today and explores the strategies and organizing frameworks of

current activists in urban and rural black communities. Based on my ongoing research on food justice in Mississippi and Central New York, and experiences as a scholar-activist in the movement, most food justice projects rely on a linear process of activism that involves a two-step process. The first step is to dismantle oppressive forms of food power and understand its implications within the food system and beyond so that we can create space for alternative forms of food power. The second step is to build emancipatory forms of food power that create space for community empowerment, agency, autonomy, and resilience. Using this process as a focus, this part seeks to show how this process enhances and limits the potential of the food justice movement to achieve its goals. By illuminating this, I argue that in order for food justice to achieve its goals it must engage in dismantling oppressive forms of food power and building emancipatory forms of food power simultaneously.

The third part of the book combines data generated in parts one and two to show how engaging in the politics of food power could help us—as scholars and activists—achieve the goals of food justice and food sovereignty movements. To do this, I draw critical lessons from narratives of food in civil rights history (as told in my food story of the civil rights era in Mississippi) and demonstrate how they can be used to understand and contribute to contemporary conversations among food justice activists and scholars in black communities. Specifically, I argue that insights in both historical and contemporary contexts of food justice activism illuminate the possibilities of the movement in the future that address food system problems and larger societal issues at the same time. To this end, food justice can be aligned with other movements that seek to address and achieve social, racial, economic, and political justice for all, especially for black communities.

Overall, this book project provides a critical foundation for my larger research agenda and contributes to an emerging conversation on important links between the black freedom struggle

and the struggles for food justice and food sovereignty in a U.S. context. It is my hope that my research agenda, even beyond the dissertation presented here, creates a platform for scholars and activists to critically engage in conversations about the future of the food justice movement. Moreover, I hope that in the process of writing this book and engaging with community activists—across geographic spaces—to generate new knowledge, that communities can find this book useful in some way. It could be simply through a book read or even using some of the cases used in the book as part of an arsenal of examples or stories that can be used when strategizing, mobilizing or organizing. These examples or stories are not necessarily to be used as blueprints to be replicated or applied in the wrong context, however, as reference points that (1) enable activists to locate their own work alongside it; (2) link their own knowledge with the knowledge created through this project; and (3) enrich their current efforts to develop innovative approaches in the struggle to achieve food justice and food sovereignty for all.

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**PAPER ONE: REPOSITIONING FOOD IN CIVIL RIGHTS HISTORIOGRAPHY:
CLASS, GENDER, AND THE POLITICS OF FOOD IN MISSISSIPPI, 1962-1975**

Abstract

Scholarly concerns for the Black Freedom Struggle during the American civil rights era are often positioned in what historian Steven F. Lawson described as the three generations of civil rights scholarship. Taken together, these generations reveal a political story of the movement that has served as the era's dominant narrative. While this narrative reveals the importance of voting rights, integration and education to the civil rights agenda, it simultaneously obscures how food activism and control over access to food influenced movement politics. In this paper, I offer a "food story" of the civil rights era in the Mississippi Delta that foregrounds the role of everyday food activism in the movement and analyze how key elements of this story was obscured by the production of the dominant narrative. At the center of this story are poor rural African American women activists—including Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer and Mrs. L. C. Dorsey—who organized food projects in the late 1960s and 1970s. Yet, we know little about them or their projects due to their rural locality, class position as sharecroppers and the gendered nature of food work. Moreover, even in "historical-spatial representations" that seek to memorialize key moments of the movement, their food activism and projects are virtually absent. By shifting our gaze from the dominant narrative of the movement, my food story expands our understanding of the Black Freedom Struggle and illuminates a strategic era of movement organizing when activists extended the civil rights agenda to include food, land and employment.

Introduction

Scholarly concerns for the Black Freedom Struggle during the American civil rights era are often positioned in what historian Steven F. Lawson described as the three generations of civil rights scholarship.¹ Starting in the late 1960s and 1970s, the first generation was written mostly by sociologists, political scientists and historians who focused on significant leaders such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and events such as the March on Washington within the national-political (“top-down”) context of the movement. Sociologists analyzed the political forces that impacted the development and formation of social protests in the movement, while political scientists focused on black voter participation and the response of the government to pressure from civil rights groups. Historians, in contrast, contributed biographies of key figures and organizations of the movement with a focus on political issues.² As a result, Lawson argued, “they conceived of the civil rights struggle as primarily a political movement that secured legislative and judicial triumphs.”³ This scholarship relied on the wealth of evidence readily accessible in archives of the United States government, records of major civil rights groups such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and oral histories of major activists. Taken together, these sources “revealed a political story” that has served as what historian Jacquelyn Dowd Hall described as the “dominant” narrative, or in the words of activist Bayard Rustin, the “classical phase” of the movement, “that begins with the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, proceeds through public protests, and culminates with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.”⁴

Following this body of early work, the late 1970s and 1980s saw the initiation of a second generation of scholarship interested in the local-social (“bottom up”) context of the movement. Written mostly by historians who relied on oral histories of local activists, this scholarship placed

key figures and events in the periphery, arguing that the “focal point” of civil rights inquiries should be the local histories of important movement sites and grassroots organizing traditions. However, this rethinking of the movement became hotly contested when historian Clayborne Carson argued for these studies to be placed under the banner of the “black freedom struggle.” Carson noted that “use of the term civil rights movement, rather than such alternatives as black freedom struggle, reflects the misleading assumption that black insurgencies of the 1950s and 1960s were part of a coordinated national campaign.”⁵ “More than a matter of semantics,” Lawson observed, “this alternative expression signified that protest activities were not narrowly aimed at obtaining legal victories from the federal government but sprang out of waves of liberationist struggles in black communities.”⁶ Representative studies of this generation, Charles Payne noted, include Robert Norrell’s study of the historic community of Tuskegee, Alabama *Reaping the Whirlwind*, William Chafe’s study of race relations in Greensboro, North Carolina *Civilities and Civil Liberties*, and David Colburn’s work on the struggles for legal integration and education in St. Augustine, Florida *Racial Change and Community Crisis*.⁷

More recently, from the late 1980s to now, a third generation of scholarship has emerged, focused on a more “interactive” approach to the movement, integrating the first and second generations of civil rights scholarship, “the local with the national, the social with the political.”⁸ Studies in this generation “demonstrated that the movement involved a complex mix of local, regional and national groups and events,” Mark Newman noted. “Patient and painstaking grassroots organizing and leadership were as important to the movement’s development as prominent national leaders, federal action and well-publicized direct-action protests.”⁹ Representative studies include John Dittmer’s *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* on black politics in Mississippi from post-World War II to the mid-1960s, Charles

Payne's *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Struggle* on the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee's (SNCC) work in the Mississippi Delta town of Greenwood, and Adam Fairclough's examination of the political struggle for justice and equality in Louisiana, *Race and Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana, 1915-1972*. These studies at the state and local levels illuminate everyday lived realities of local people, and their relationships with the national movement.

Jeanne Theoharis observed that this third generation of scholars took "their cues from the elemental questions of inquiry," and "questioned the most basic aspects of the story – who led and undertook these movements, what the movement was actually about, where it took place, when it happened, and why people engaged in a movement (or what they hoped to change)."¹⁰ This new (re)configuration of civil rights storying is well illustrated in the recent collection of essays in *Freedom Rights: New Perspectives on the Civil Rights Movement* edited by Danielle L. McGuire and John Dittmer.¹¹ In this edited work, McGuire and Dittmer assemble essays that describe a movement "that is multiracial, cross-regional, and international with local and national actors and organizations working in concert." Specifically, these essays examine new questions that shed light on the role of family, sexuality, gender, and sexual violence in the struggle for civil rights as well as the cultural and political roots and legacies of the movement.

However, these questions, whether located in a "top-down," "bottom-up," or "interactive" approach, reinforce the dominant "political story" of the civil rights movement, characterized by the attainment of access to the legal, political, and educational systems for blacks. As a result, other goals, objectives and struggles have been silenced throughout civil rights scholarship. One struggle, in particular, that is absent from these scholarly accounts is the struggle for the right to access food among rural poor blacks and the centrality of food activism to the movement. When

struggles for food show up in the civil rights story, they appear as disruptions to the political goals of the movement, rarely remarked upon or discussed in detail. For example, the 1962-1963 Greenwood Food Blockade enters civil rights scholarship pre-packaged in a story about SNCC and its struggle for voting rights in Greenwood, Mississippi. This event brought food to the center of the movement, and throughout the rest of the 1960s and into the early 1970s, activists turned their attention to the food realities of blacks by implementing initiatives that addressed issues of hunger, malnutrition, and poverty. Yet, as historian Angela Cooley argued in her analysis of the Freedom Farms Cooperative, a project developed by activist Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer in the Delta, issues of food and hunger “failed to generate the same type of national public outrage sufficient to produce real results.”¹²

In this paper, I offer a “food story” of the civil rights era that foregrounds the role of food access and everyday food activism during the movement and analyze how this story was obscured by the dominant narrative of the movement. To tell this story, I draw on a wide range of archival materials, civil rights scholarship, interviews, and the work of Michel-Rolph Trouillot to reposition food in those sources to generate my narrative.¹³ While the dominant political narrative told in Lawson’s typology of civil rights historiography reveals important episodes of the Black Freedom Struggle, it simultaneously obscures at least three critical moments when struggles over access to food influenced movement politics. First, it obscures how both proponents and opponents of the movement used food as a tactic, weapon and tool before, during, and after the 1962-1963 Greenwood Food Blockade in the Mississippi Delta. Second, it overlooks how activist Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer used freedom farms to advance an African American food sovereignty agenda built on the economic power of her community and civil rights organizations. Moreover, it overshadows

how activist Mrs. L. C. Dorsey led the North Bolivar County Farm Cooperative and addressed the relationship between food and public health in poor rural black communities.

Repositioning food sheds light on these moments which reveal a food story of the movement and illuminates how power and politics obscured key elements of the story at the intersection of gender, class, time, and space. At the center of my food story are poor rural actors who mobilized to address the food realities of black communities. These actors were mostly women who played a pivotal role in the politics of food during the civil rights era, beyond just cooking for the movement. Yet, we know little about them due to their rural locality in the Delta, class position as sharecroppers and the gendered nature of food work, in relation to the national movement, which is characterized by mostly middle-class men such as Dr. Martin Luther King and other prominent male figures. Moreover, even in “historical-spatial representations” that seek to memorialize key moments and events of the movement, food initiatives and projects of the era are absent.¹⁴ By shifting our gaze from the dominant narrative of the movement, my food story expands our understanding of the Black Freedom Struggle and illuminates a strategic era of movement organizing when activists extended the civil rights agenda to include food, land and employment.

Methods

I conducted research for this project in three phases, drawing on archival materials, historical scholarship, and interviews. In the first phase, I read SNCC’s *The Student Voice* newspaper, 1960-1965, to gain an understanding of how the group framed food, specifically around the blockade, and examined accounts of the event in the civil rights literature.¹⁵ Among the wealth of scholarship on SNCC and their voter registration project, I found four seminal texts on their work that included a detailed story about the Greenwood Food Blockade: Charles Payne’s *I’ve Got the Light of*

Freedom, John Dittmer's *Local People*, Clayborne Carson's *In Struggle*, and Howard Zinn's *SNCC: The New Abolitionists*.¹⁶ While all four texts are critical to understanding the event, Payne's text is the only book-length treatment of the movement in Greenwood and provides a descriptive narrative of the events occurring before, during, and after the Blockade. Taken together, these sources revealed that food was framed as a weapon of opposition by members and affiliates of the White Citizens' Council, and it was also used as an organizing tactic for SNCC. Yet, the provision or withholding of food is only mentioned as a disruption to the traditional political story of the movement; it is not the subject of discussion or analysis in and of itself.

In the second phase of this research, I conducted archival research at the Mississippi Department of Archives and History (MDAH) in Jackson and interviewed six civil rights activists and community members during the summer of 2017. At the archives, I combed through over 100 collections including papers, memoirs, manuscripts, print media and organizational records related to the civil rights movement in the state. The specific civil rights archives and related collections at MDAH are categorized along the same lines of the political story of the movement with a strong focus on voting rights activism, integration and education. This construction of the archives corroborates the historical scholarship on the topic and depend mostly on materials generated by activists and civil rights organizations. This diverse set of holdings includes the papers of Mississippi civil rights icons, Aaron Henry, Medgar Evers and Fannie Lou Hamer; the historic Tougaloo College Mississippi Civil Rights Collection, which contains documents such as oral histories of activists and personal papers of groups active in the movement; Mississippi print media including the *Greenwood Commonwealth* and *Jackson Advocate*; and manuscripts on key figures in groups such as the White Citizens and the Sovereignty Commission that opposed civil rights in Mississippi.

In these materials, SNCC's response to the blockade is the most visible instance of food activism, heavily documented in Mississippi print media. Other struggles or forms of food activism appear only fleetingly as a means to an end or as a disruption to political goals of activists or communities. However, I discovered, buried within the papers of Mississippi historian James Loewen, the personal papers of activist Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer, and the records of the Mississippi Council on Human Relations remnants of a time period, 1965-1975, when Mississippi activists turned their attention to the politics of food. This time period is characterized by two important food projects in the Mississippi Delta, the Freedom Farms Cooperative and the North Bolivar Farm Cooperative. Both projects started in 1967 with women leading the projects well in to the early 1970s, and records reveal that both cooperatives worked together on several initiatives to secure financial support from organizations such as Measure for Measure in Wisconsin.

Toward the end of the second phase, I selected six people to interview based on their participation in the Mississippi civil rights movement and recommendations from archival staff. All six were men and ranging in age from 64 to 95. The interviews, ranging from twenty to ninety minutes in length, were conducted in-person and recorded using a digital audio recorder and transcribed using a transcription service. I asked broad questions about their role in the movement and direct questions about their own experiences or local struggles around food and the food blockade. When asked about the blockade or their participation in food efforts, specifically, respondents recalled the event but informed me that their work was not directly connected to food efforts to counter it. As one activist told me, "many of the women and folks in the movement who worked with food in the movement have since died and they would have been more helpful in terms of your research." As a result, the interviews conducted provided rich context on circumstances related to how, when and where poor rural blacks in the Delta accessed food during

the civil rights era, but minimal information on the blockade itself. Such recollections reflected the organization of the archives and corroborated the treatment of the blockade and food in civil rights historiography.

The third phase of this research involved an analysis of all the data collected in the first and second stages of this research. I used food activism as a conceptual framework, and following Michel-Rolph Trouillot, repositioned evidence collected in the second phase to generate my food story of the movement. Since the evidence gathered from the archives, civil rights scholarship and interviews in their current form recreate the same political story of the movement and marginalize the centrality of food activism, I relied on additional reports, books, and scholarship in sociology, African-American studies and food studies to construct this narrative. As a result, it was difficult to track the appearance and framing of food in these materials due to the fact that food is not categorized in any of the archives or materials regarding the movement in Mississippi. Thus, to tell my story I piece together traces of food and food activism throughout the materials to position everyday food activism as central to the Mississippi civil rights movement and shed light on the importance of food within the black freedom struggle. Throughout my story, I purposefully position the dominant political story of the movement in the periphery of my food story to reveal new ways of thinking about the civil rights movement and add to the construction of a more complete history of the civil rights era. This story also illuminates how a treatment of food activism in the civil rights era can inform current struggles.

A Civil Rights Food Story

The civil rights food story I develop below focuses on three discrete moments of food activism in the Delta: the 1962-1963 Greenwood Food Blockade, the development of Freedom Farms Cooperative and the development of the North Bolivar County Farm Cooperative. Set against the

backdrop of the mechanization of the cotton industry, decline in the need for black labor, and limited access to food, these moments illuminate how activists, poor sharecropping women and communities sought to address their day-to-day realities. While these moments are often discussed or mentioned separately, I see them as being a part of a larger food story and weave them together to construct my narrative. This narrative will be told across three different sections; however, they should be viewed as one story beginning with SNCC's response to the Greenwood Food Blockade and culminating with the development of two similar, yet different cooperative farms in the Delta.

As it relates to cooperative farming, the development of such programs can be largely understood as part of the long history of black rural agricultural cooperative development throughout the south that resurfaced during the mid-to-late 1960s in response to land displacement. In February 1967, a group of representatives from twenty groups across the southern states met to develop the Federation of Southern Cooperatives (FSC). According to historian Greta de Jong, this group organized as the “central service organization to meet the financial, educational, and technical needs of low-income cooperatives,” and selected Charles Prejean to lead the group. As a native of Lafayette, Louisiana and one generation removed from sharecropping, Prejean was inspired by the poverty of his parents and grandparents to join the civil rights movement in the 1950s. Specifically, he focused on cooperative organizing in the movement, working with the Southern Consumers Cooperative (SCC), under the mentorship of the cooperative's founder Albert J. McKnight, a black priest and community organizer.

“According to Prejean,” de Jong wrote, “civil rights leadership and cooperative leadership overlapped in many rural southern communities” and “activists who had gained their initial organizing experiences on civil rights projects continued their participation in the freedom struggle through the FSC.” As explained in one of FSC's earlier annual reports, the turn to cooperatives

was an “economic response to the civil rights movement,” in the southern states. This reasoning captured Prejean’s thoughts when he stated, “If a community is experiencing common problems with little resources, it seemed to us it made so much sense to pool resources together and use them to satisfy a common need.”¹⁷ In the Delta, this common need was access to food and jobs caused by the changes in the plantation system.

At the time, the Mississippi Delta was most known for its egregious quest to maintain Jim Crow racial codes and the sharecropping system of the plantation economy. Although during the post-civil war era many blacks saw this system as a “step” toward becoming independent landowners and worked on plantations to secure their right to land, by the 1930s this system was a *de facto* way of life, designed to maintain a subservient black worker class.¹⁸ To do this, white plantation owners gave blacks cheap labor contracts, credit to purchase supplies for planting, and “furnishings”—housing, food, and shelter—to work on plantations and cultivate cotton crops. Within this agreement, black sharecroppers accessed food in three intersecting ways. First, by establishing credit at plantation commissaries or grocery stores chosen by their employers, black sharecroppers gained access to food. To access credit, blacks required white patronage as a form of validation to store owners, so they could purchase cheap staple foods that would sustain them with the credit given. As a result, they often suffered from hunger induced malnutrition and relied on a “monotonous diet dependent on cornmeal, salt pork, field peas or beans and molasses.”¹⁹

Second, on some plantations sharecroppers were also given access to a “truck patch”—small plots of land slightly larger than a garden space—that sharecroppers used to grow food for their families during, and a little time after, the cotton season. On this plot, usually located on the side of a plantation shack, sharecroppers would plant vegetables and raise livestock such as chickens, hogs, and cattle. They would also plant “treats” such as sweet potatoes and use the cows

for fresh milk.²⁰ However, the use of the truck patch was often disrupted by the need for the production of more cotton. During “good” crop years, plantation owners would raise the price of cheap staple foods and strongly discourage the use of the truck patch for vegetable and livestock production, forcing sharecroppers to forgo food production and plant cotton. Instances such as these kept blacks in poverty and solely dependent on white plantation owners for food provision.

Third, to supplement the “furnish,” black sharecroppers would often use federal food programs, such as the federal commodity surplus food or food stamp programs. Supported by the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933, as part of President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal economic programs, these programs were heavily relied on during the winter months when the cotton crop had been harvested and no field work was needed. In an effort to control agricultural prices and feed millions of hungry poor Americans during the Great Depression, the federal government purchased surplus foods to be distributed to these populations through county welfare agencies. Although both programs were framed as social welfare initiatives to feed the poor, the programs overwhelmingly benefitted white farmers by providing price supports for them.²¹ Moreover, states and counties had the option whether or not to administer the programs, and in the Delta the programs were controlled by county administrators who were mostly plantation or business owners active in the White Citizens’ Council. This group, organized in the wake of the *Brown* decision of 1954 in response to civil rights activism, placed an economic chokehold on the Delta throughout the 1950s and 1960s.²² Any black sharecropper, farmworker, or employee discovered to be participating in civil rights efforts was forced, sometimes violently, to stop participating in efforts or be terminated from work. When economic intimidation didn’t work, food deprivation was used to ensure that blacks would not participate in civil rights efforts and remain dependent on whites for their basic needs.

The 1962-1963 Greenwood Food Blockade

Located near the eastern corridor of the Mississippi Delta in Leflore County, Greenwood is situated at the confluence of the Yazoo, Tallahatchie and Yalobusha rivers and was a major epicenter for proponents and opponents of civil rights. Both the county and city are named after Native American Chief Greenwood Leflore, who ceded the remaining Choctaw lands in Mississippi to the American government in 1830, earning him “the name of traitor from the Choctaws and a large estate from the government.”²³ By the early 1960s, Greenwood’s population was twenty-two thousand with over 600,000 people living within sixty miles of the city and Leflore county had a population of about 50,000 with over two-thirds of the population being black and poor. Whites held 100 percent of the political offices and owned about 90 percent of the land. Most of the land was dedicated to cotton production, cultivated by an overwhelmingly large black population of sharecroppers or day laborers. The county area was once known as the cotton capital of the world, making it one of the most heavily populated areas between Memphis and Jackson, and a strategic location for the headquarters of the White Citizens’ Council.

In 1960, ninety-five percent of whites were registered to vote compared to less than two-percent of blacks. The median income for black families was \$1,400, three times less than white families. Moreover, twenty-two thousand blacks depended on the commodity surplus food program and the overall median income in the county was \$2,300, two times less than the national median income. Howard Zinn observed that even in medical care, out of the 168 beds in the county hospital, 131 were reserved for whites. In his study of Greenwood, sociologist Charles Payne noted that eighty-two percent of black households were substandard and that most blacks lived in tarpaper shacks. These shacks were similar to shotgun houses that sharecroppers lived in on plantations. Many of these houses did not have floors or access to clean water. As it relates to

education, the median years of schooling for blacks over the age of twenty-five was 5.1 compared to 11.2 for whites.²⁴ Taken as a whole, these demographics, coupled with the strong presence of the White Citizens Council, impacted the day-to-day social, economic, political, and food realities of blacks. As a backdrop to the organizing tactics of SNCC and the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) in the Delta—which included SNCC, NAACP, Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE)—such dynamics also created massive, often times violent resistance to the work of civil rights activists in the area.

In November 1962, the all-white Leflore County Board of Supervisors held an open meeting to discuss the county's participation in the federal surplus food commodities program, which was administered by the State Department of Public Welfare.²⁵ The meeting was open to all white citizens, however, activist Samuel Block noted that less than one percent of those who would be impacted by the future of this program were white. At this meeting, President J.H. Peebles of the Greenwood Bank of Commerce made the motion to discontinue the federal food program and “it carried by a vote of 40 in favor of the motion and 29 against,” according to the *Greenwood Commonwealth* newspaper.²⁶ This meeting marked the beginning of the Greenwood Food Blockade and left over 90 percent of program, totaled at over 20,000 participants, who were mostly sharecroppers or landless farmworkers that looked forward to the food commodities (mostly corn meal, rice, flour, and sugar) to sustain them during the winter months, hungry and in need of food.²⁷ SNCC organizers Charles Cobb and Charles McLaurin noted, in a report on a similar situation in nearby Ruleville, the movement's Sunflower County headquarters, that the program was “the only way Negroes make it from cotton season to cotton season. If this is taken away, they have nothing at all.”²⁸

The Leflore County Board of Supervisors maintained that this action was not retribution for SNCC's project and cited financial reasons for cutting off the food aid. However, historian Howard Zinn posited that the vote to discontinue the food program was a form of economic intimidation toward Greenwood's black community.²⁹ In the first full history of SNCC, *In Struggle*, Clayborne Carson recorded that "SNCC workers saw the action [blockade] as an intimidation attempt, designed to weaken further the voter registration effort."³⁰ In *Local People*, John Dittmer observed that the county cited "excessive administrative costs as the reason" for discontinuing the commodity surplus food program, which the Greenwood publication *The Greenwood Commonwealth* corroborated.³¹ In *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, Charles Payne posited that the action of the county board was a "miscalculation of the local power structure" that SNCC was able to exploit by showing Greenwood's black community the "connection between exclusion from the political process and poverty."³²

SNCC's Mississippi Project Leader Robert "Bob" Moses, moreover, along with Sam Block and activist Willie Peacock, who was later named the chair of the SNCC Greenwood food relief committee saw this moment as a "unique opportunity for bridging the local and national movement," historian Laura Visser-Maessen observed.³³ As a result, SNCC paused their ongoing efforts around obtaining political power for the black rural poor and organized a national food drive led by the food relief committee and selected the Wesley United Methodist Church, several blocks from downtown Greenwood, as its main food distribution center. Specifically, the basement of the church's Sunday school room, where mostly older women, such as Ms. Ella Edwards, organized and distributed the foods. This location, just blocks from the headquarters of the White Citizens Council, enabled SNCC to distribute 400 to 600 boxes of food a day from the Sunday School room in the Wesley United Methodist Church. By February 1963, black actor Harry

Belafonte and black comedian Dick Gregory were involved in securing food for Delta blacks, turning national attention to the plight of poor blacks in the Delta. This kind of attention threatened to expose the white power structure's use of food as a weapon against civil rights activism and state political actors such as Governor Ross Barnett and Public Welfare Commissioner Fred A. Ross publicly condemned SNCC's free food distribution program.³⁴ For instance, in February of 1963, Fred A. Ross released a public statement, lamenting that "Dick Gregory, Martin Luther King, the Congress of Racial Equality, the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, and similar racial agitation promoters are rendering a disservice to the Negro Population in Mississippi," Ross stated. "The cheap publicity generated by Gregory, and the gullibility of national news media...may result in the surplus food commodity program in Mississippi being seriously curtailed or wiped out entirely."³⁵ At the time, this was the first public display of the white power structure's use of food as a weapon to mitigate what they saw as "outside racial agitation." However, local newspapers in the Mississippi Delta maintained that the withholding of commodities was not a response to civil rights activism.³⁶

While the county board of supervisors initiated the blockade, local white grocery store owners and landowners perpetuated it. For landowners, the federal commodities food program decreased the need for sharecroppers to depend on plantation credit to purchase food. For grocery store owners like President Morris Lewis, Jr. of the Lewis Grocer Company in Indianola, the federal commodities food program was "a dangerous and growing threat to their control."³⁷ Just a few days after the November meeting of the Leflore County Board Supervisors that started the blockade, Lewis wrote a letter to over 400 retailers he served stating that the federal commodities food program was "a disgrace to the county, the State of Mississippi, and the federal government."³⁸ Lewis also owned Sunflower Food Stores and saw the commodity food program

as competition to those in the food business, a waste of taxpayer dollars, and something that would threaten his control over access to food in the Delta. As a result, he petitioned the state to apply for the federal food stamp program with the backing of the Mississippi Sovereignty Commission, the state agency developed to counter all civil rights activists in the state and financial supporter of the White Citizens' Council. By 1967, 470,000 Mississippians were enrolled in the food stamp program and two counties in the Delta, Bolivar and Quitman were the top two poorest counties in the nation.³⁹

Ultimately, SNCC organized a national campaign to petition President John F. Kennedy and USDA Secretary of Agriculture, Orville L. Freeman, to intervene on the Greenwood food situation.⁴⁰ During Spring 1963, SNCC testified before the House Judiciary Committee citing the denial of food via the federal food program, recommending that "Government action be taken to insure the sharecroppers of Leflore County surplus food and that if present rules prevent distribution of government surplus food to the needy, that the rules be changed with a stroke of the Secretary of Agriculture's pen."⁴¹ In response to their testimony and efforts, "the Justice department opened an investigation, and as a result, county officials were warned that unless they resumed the food distribution, the Department of Agriculture would take over and continue the program."⁴² An internal SNCC newsletter reported that on March 22, 1963 the Leflore County Board of Supervisors reinstated the program in response to the SNCC's activism and campaign to get the program back.⁴³ However, the program was funded solely by the USDA with no money from the county, and food drives continued throughout the Delta.⁴⁴

The Greenwood Food Blockade, and the circumstances surrounding it, inspired Howard University student William "Bill" Mahoney to organize SNCC's fourth leadership conference under the theme of "food and jobs" that November. As a member of SNCC's executive committee

and director of the organization's Washington office, Mahoney strongly urged SNCC to consider addressing the economic realities of the communities in which they work, linked to their food realities.⁴⁵ The conference, held on the campus of Howard University, discussed issues that impacted rural black communities: agricultural mechanization, problems of small farmers, and access to employment.⁴⁶ While SNCC never created a national program that would ultimately address these concerns at the local level, some activists returned to the south to organize black farmers in Mississippi to run for county office in the USDA's Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service (ASCS) agency.⁴⁷ Specifically, in the Mississippi Delta, local activists extended the civil rights agenda to include access to food, land, and employment under the banner of cooperative farming. This agenda manifested in the creation of cooperative farms such as the Freedom Farm Cooperative (FFC) and the North Bolivar County Farm Cooperative (NBCFC), developed by civil rights activists Fannie Lou Hamer, L. C. Dorsey and landless Blacks in the late 1960s.

The Freedom Farms Cooperative

In his study of the history and sociopolitical structure of the Delta's plantation system, Clyde Woods argued that "the new institutions, communities and leaders that emerged out of the Delta Freedom Movement were not the creation of the SNCC, SCLC, CORE, NAACP, or Delta Ministry...they emerged from the daily lives and the collective history of the people of the Delta."⁴⁸ For instance, following the Greenwood Food Blockade and the political victories of 1964 (Freedom Summer and the Civil Rights Act) and 1965 (Voting Rights Act), many COFO activists left Mississippi while local leaders were inspired to continue the work of the movement by addressing the day-to-day realities of rural black communities. As Nashville, Tennessee journalist John Egerton put it when visiting civil rights activist Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer's newest project, the

Freedom Farm Cooperative (FFC), “Now that the Movement has dissipated...in the Mississippi Delta...what started there in the early 1960s didn’t stop when the Movement moved on; in big ways and small, black citizens who have caught a vision for freedom still reach for it.”⁴⁹ However, this vision for freedom was located at the intersection of agriculture, food, land, Black self-determination and economic development.

By the mid-1960s, the Delta’s plantation system had become highly mechanized and required less black labor. As a result, many blacks who were sharecroppers and farmworkers found themselves displaced and in extreme poverty with little to no access to food. It appeared as if the wins of the civil rights movement did very little to change the economic and food realities of poor rural Blacks in the Delta, especially in Sunflower County where activist Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer resided with her husband Perry “Pap” Hamer. During this time, as sociologist Monica White explained in her study of Mrs. Hamer and the Freedom Farms Cooperative (FFC), “rates of malnutrition, Type II diabetes, hypertension, and other diet-related illnesses were among the highest in the nation” along with the infant mortality rate in Sunflower County’s black population.⁵⁰ According to the 1960 U.S Census, less than ten percent of the county’s black population had six or more years of education. Over sixty percent were employed in agriculture or a related industry with sixteen percent of black men employed as farmworkers. Forty-two percent of black women worked as domestics or day-laborers.⁵¹ Such conditions, White stated, “left many black families with little choice but to join the second wave of the Great Migration to northern, urban areas, which promised better living conditions, education and employment opportunities.”⁵² From 1960 to 1970, the county’s black population decreased by twenty percent, identical to the same decrease observed from 1950 to 1960.⁵³

As a native of the Delta, born into a family of sharecroppers, Mrs. Hamer was familiar with these horrible conditions that exacerbated food insecurity, hunger, and malnutrition in the Delta. Since her early years in the movement, after being recruited to join SNCC by activist Charles McLaurin, Hamer always linked her own food realities to the struggle for black political power. For example, after going to register to vote at the Sunflower County courthouse in Indianola, her plantation owner asked her to withdraw her application or be fired. Mrs. Hamer refused to do so and was fired from her job at the Marlowe Plantation and evicted from her plantation shack. In a 1963 letter to northern supporters of SNCC, Hamer linked her plight to the realities of Delta blacks, petitioning supporters to send “cars, food, clothing, and most of all money”, she wrote, “which will help greatly in our struggle for freedom.”⁵⁴

However, by the late 1960s, Mrs. Hamer realized the limitations of asking supporters for assistance and decided to fully address the needs of poor black rural communities in the context of their agrarian past. Hamer’s ultimate goal for blacks throughout the US, and especially in Mississippi was for them to become “first class citizens” who could “get the things we’ve always been denied rights to.”⁵⁵ Rights such as the right to food and the right to land were central to this platform, which represented her food activism in the development of FFC. In a 1971 speech delivered in her hometown of Ruleville, Hamer declared

While politics...is the first step toward erecting a representative and a responsive government that will deal with the basic needs. Land, too, is important in the ‘70s and beyond, as we move toward our ultimate goal of total freedom. Because of my belief in land reform, I have taken steps of acquiring land through cooperative ownership. In this manner, no individual has title to/or complete use of the land...Cooperative ownership of land opens the door for many opportunities for group development of economic enterprises which develop the total community rather than create monopolies that monopolize the resources of a community.⁵⁶

In her history of black cooperatives and the economic thought that brought them to life, Jessica Gordon Nembhard points out that Mrs. Hamer’s idea of cooperative ownership echoes

sociologists W.E.B. Dubois and Chancellor Williams notions of black economic progression at the intersection of economic sustainability, cooperation, and community.⁵⁷

The Freedom Farms Cooperative (FFC) was officially chartered by the state of Mississippi in June of 1970.⁵⁸ While the farming operation began a year earlier with the hiring of SNCC worker Mr. Joseph Harris as the farm manager, and the purchase of forty acres of land near the town of Drew, just northwest of Ruleville, the charter was a huge accomplishment for FFC. The charter allowed FFC to become registered as a “nonprofit, agricultural and charitable corporation” recognized by the state.⁵⁹ According to article VI of the charter, the purposes of the cooperative were

- (a) For benevolent purposes and especially the accumulation of funds and production of food for the relief of destitute persons...
- (b) To cultivate social intercourse among the members and assist in improving moral and social conditions of its beneficiaries; and
- (c) To purchase and own such real estate and other property as may be necessary for the society; and
- (d) For the purposes of above specified to receive donations and to receive, manage, take and hold real and personal property by gift, grant, devise or bequest; and
- (e) For the purposes above specified and any other charitable purpose...⁶⁰

To financially support FFC, Mrs. Hamer never petitioned federal agencies for funds due to her vision of freedom that required community self-reliance and self-determination. FFC relied on annual membership dues, originally set at \$3, to support “no income families” in the production of food and building of homes on the land the cooperative owned.⁶¹ Moreover, she heavily relied on a number of friends and groups she knew who would be willing to support the farm and understood its commitment to social justice. For instance, Harry Belafonte distributed a fundraising letter requesting funds to support FFC in 1969. “Now, to give hundreds of landless poor people a chance at self-help, economic-self-sufficiency, and political power,” Belafonte wrote, “Mrs. Hamer has organized a farm cooperative... a community of free, independent people

can be built if financial help is given at this time.”⁶² By the end of 1970, other fundraising efforts were being led by Measure for Measure, a Madison, Wisconsin based organization dedicated to social justice for all, Mr. Lester Salamon, a teaching fellow at Harvard, the Freedom from Hunger Foundation, and other personal contributors.

As a result of these efforts, in early 1971, FFC was able to purchase an additional 640 acres of land to expand its farming community and operation near Drew. This expansion allowed FFC to divide the land into plots based on the crops being produced with 300 acres devoted to cotton production and 209 acres for soybeans. Profit from these crops were to be used to meet the land payments, while the remaining acres were devoted to the production of fresh vegetables to be distributed to any one in need. However, the farm not only provided access to fresh vegetables but also to fresh meats that were an integral part of the traditional southern diet of rural blacks, such as pork through their “bank of pigs” or what Hamer called the “Oink-Oink or Pig Project.” She is said to have stated as her rationale for the project, “These families cannot live on vegetables alone. There must be meat on their tables also.”⁶³

In October of 1967, the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW) donated fifty young female pigs and five male pigs to Mrs. Hamer so that she could start the pig bank.⁶⁴ As part of the NCNW’s “program for women’s self-help,” Jessica Gordon Nembhard observed, the organization’s President Dorothy Height saw the pig bank as “helping people meet their own needs, on their own terms.”⁶⁵ Just a few years prior the 1964 Freedom Summer, President Dorothy Height of the NCNW and Polly Cowan, a volunteer of the organization, developed the “Wednesdays in Mississippi” project that “raised funds, and distributed supplies, including food, to antipoverty projects throughout the state.”⁶⁶ This group was comprised of all women who “would fly into Jackson on Tuesdays, on Wednesdays they would travel to nearby communities to

visit the Freedom Summer projects and meet with local women, and on Thursdays they would return home,” historian Debbie Harwell observed.⁶⁷

The NCNW’s commitment to empower women through food activism under the banner of “anti-poverty” work was aligned with what Hamer biographer Chana Kai Lee described as Hamer’s “involvement in gender-based politics.” At FFC and within the larger Ruleville-Drew community, black women were not only responsible for food for their families through cooking but many of them were also experienced farmers. For example, sociologist Monica White noted, the first breeding/boarding barn for the pigs on the grounds of FFC was built and maintained by local women.⁶⁸ To maintain and grow the pig bank, women allocated one pregnant female pig to each poor family that agreed to participate in the program. As part of this agreement, the poor family was required to take care of a pregnant female until she gave birth, after which they were required to return the female pig to FFC along with two of the offspring. The remaining offspring belonged to the family and was used for sustenance, along with the vegetables from the farm.⁶⁹ By 1975, over 800 families had benefitted from the work of these women and FFC owned about two-thousand pigs.⁷⁰ This project was a critical component of FFC’s larger agenda to be “a black controlled institution that would have its strengths in the land and would be able to support the indigent blacks and Whites of the Sunflower county area that are being displaced by increased mechanization of agricultural production” as described in a 1973 FFC status report and request for funds.⁷¹

Ultimately, FFC’s efforts were designed to impact poor people of all races through the production of food and other social services. As historian Chris Myers Asch explained, “Hamer envisioned Freedom Farm to be far more comprehensive than just a farm...it became part farm, part social service agency. Providing subsidized housing, childcare, help with utility bills, and even

college scholarship for local students. It also employed as many as thirty-two people.”⁷² Although, by the end of the 1970s, FFC was unable to sustain its operation due to financial reasons, unforeseen weather patterns, and the deaths of farm manger Joseph Harris in 1974 and Mrs. Hamer in 1976, the work of FFC impacted the food realities of thousands of poor rural blacks in the Delta and alleviated food insecurity among blacks in Sunflower County for almost a decade without government intervention. In this way, this brief story of FFC is instructive in that Hamer and FFC envisioned a form of community sovereignty with food and agriculture at the center.

The North Bolivar County Farm Cooperative

In 1971, civil rights activist Mrs. L. C. Dorsey described the North Bolivar County Farm Cooperative (NBCFC) as a project born out of “the trauma created by mechanized farming, minimum wages, and ineffective food stamp programs” which “set the tone for the successful organization of an agricultural cooperative.”⁷³ This cooperative, in part, was designed to help poor rural blacks and displaced sharecroppers use their own community and agricultural knowledge to produce food and create economic self-determination. Dorsey, who was a former sharecropper and the project’s second director, understood the power of community economic development and situated the genesis of the cooperative in the context of “antipoverty work,” which she viewed as “a continuation of the civil rights movement.”⁷⁴ Echoing the sentiments of the theme of SNCC’s November 1963 conference, the cooperative’s “foremost task” was to provide “food and jobs for many blacks who otherwise would have suffered from starvation.”⁷⁵ As Herbert Black wrote in his full history of the farm cooperative, *People and Plows Against Hunger: Self-Help Experiment in a Rural Community*, “the co-op had two goals...the immediate aim was to relieve malnutrition...the second objective was to supply jobs.”⁷⁶

The NBCFC's twin goals were part of a much larger initiative of the first rural community health center in the US, the Tufts-Delta Health Center (TDHC), to address the deteriorating health conditions of impoverished black residents in northern Bolivar County, the second poorest county in the nation at the time. In 1965, Drs. H. Jack Geiger and Count Gibson, two white civil rights activists and physicians at the Tufts University Medical School in Boston, received a \$1.5 million grant from the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) to establish the TDHC in the historically all-black town of Mound Bayou.⁷⁷ Founded on July 12, 1887 in the northeast corner of Bolivar county by Isaiah T. Montgomery and his cousin Benjamin T. Green, former slaves of Joseph E. Davis, the brother of Confederate president Jefferson Davis, Mound Bayou was an oasis of Black self-determination.⁷⁸ By the outset of the twentieth century, the town had an all-black government with a successful economy driven by agriculture and forestry including a thriving downtown business district with a bank, cotton-oil mill plant, churches, a school, and stores. By the time the cooperative started in the late 1960s, however, Mound Bayou and surrounding areas in the Delta had witnessed a significant increase in unemployment, poverty, hunger and outmigration linked to the mechanization of the cotton industry and the white power structure.

From 1940 to 1960, over three million black people fled the Delta for the North for better living conditions, leaving behind older relatives to care for grandchildren and other family members.⁷⁹ Eighty percent of the population in Bolivar was black with a yearly average family income of \$929 and sixty percent of Blacks in the labor market being unemployed with wages averaged at only \$3 a day. For blacks 21 and over, the average years of education were 4.1 and farming was the major occupation of most who could find work. Taken together, these dynamics further exacerbated issues of hunger, poverty, and malnutrition, especially among infants. As historian Greta de Jong wrote, "sixty out of every 1000 black babies died within a year of being

born, a rate that was three times the national average and comparable with those in the most impoverished developing nations of the world.”⁸⁰

Taking these alarming statistics into account, Dr. Geiger and his colleagues decided that Mound Bayou would be the best place to implement a community health center that would service the 500 square mile radius of northern Bolivar county. Although he faced extreme opposition from the white power structure, the OEO grant allowed him to operate outside of the structure since they were unable to control the financial future of the center. Several years earlier, Geiger had traveled to Mississippi as part of what historian John Dittmer called the “medical arm” of the civil rights movement.⁸¹ This group of doctors, who were part of the Medical Committee for Human Rights (MCHR), went to Mississippi to provide health care and support for civil rights activists during freedom summer. During this time, Geiger witnessed first-hand the horrible environmental conditions that impacted communities that the civil rights movement was organizing. This experience, in part, influenced him to develop the community health center and at the core of it would be the movement’s goals to empower black communities.

The purpose of the health center was to provide a different type of healthcare, termed “community-oriented primary care,” that would go beyond the health needs of the community to mitigate social, economic, and environmental factors that impact health. To understand the community needs of Mound Bayou, Geiger hired Dr. John Hatch, a black social worker from Boston, to head the center’s community development and organizing department. Hatch, a native of rural Arkansas who had relocated to the north for education and a better life, was excited to return to the south but felt as if he needed to learn more about the then current realities of the Mississippians. When discussing his initial experience of Mississippi at a 1970 Health Conference of the New York Academy of Sciences, Hatch stated “I found that rural Mississippi is no less

complex in terms of conflicting values and social forces...I had wondered if the civil rights movement had made much difference in the relations between blacks and whites in rural areas: it had not.”⁸² Although the political realities of blacks had received the most attention in rural areas, to Hatch, it appeared as if the food and economic realities had been placed in the periphery.

Thus, during the summer and winter of 1967 Hatch went around to visit communities to hold meetings to explain the purpose of the TDHC and to understand their lived realities so that these issues could be implemented into the center’s plan. After one meeting in the nearby town of Rosedale, just twenty miles from Mound Bayou, at a Baptist church a woman stood up and stated “Thank God for Tufts and the government for bringing us medical care. But we all know our greatest need is food.”⁸³ When reflecting on the summer of 1967 when Mr. Hatch made his visits, Mrs. Pearl B. Robinson stated that plantation life had gone from “bad to worst” in that one cotton machine could now “do the work of 100 people” and that chemicals now “control the weeds we used to chop by hands.” She further explained that it was hard to find little work during this time and that “food was our number one problem.”⁸⁴ In response, the TDHC began “stocking food in the pharmacy and giving out prescriptions for groceries that were filled by local stores.”⁸⁵ However, Geiger and Hatch saw the food prescriptions as a short-term solution to a larger problem.

As a result, Hatch hired Mrs. L. C. Dorsey to assist with community resources. Hatch also developed a committee in every community that would address the food problem along with other problems that impacted the communities. Each committee held separate meetings to discuss their problems and elected one person to serve on what would become the North Bolivar County Health Council that would develop solutions to the problems presented in the communities. In the community that Mrs. Robinson lived in, for instance, they discussed how to gain access to food. “We got together to find out about welfare laws, food stamps, and other programs that might help

people,” she explained. “The information helped some people, but many who needed help couldn’t get it. We began to talk about other things we might do to get food.”⁸⁶ Mrs. Dorsey saw these meetings as similar to the community meetings civil rights activists would hold to discuss how to gain access to the political system, however, this time it was how to gain access to the food system or even create their own. However, as Mrs. Robinson stated, “most of us had no land.”⁸⁷

Recognizing the need to mobilize and provide food to the majority landless black population of northern Bolivar County, John Hatch called a meeting on December 9, 1967. This meeting, held in an almost abandoned theater in downtown Mound Bayou, led to the formation of the NBCFC, which was originally just supposed to be a simple garden club.⁸⁸ “We were trying to set up a way for people to use the skills they already had,” Hatch stated in an interview with historian Thomas Ward about the NBCFC, “to solve what was really their number one health problem, which was nutrition.”⁸⁹ The meeting was attended by over sixty community members, thirty-four of whom were unemployed and landless. Hatch recalled how many were interested in making the farm self-supporting so that the community could be in full control of their food supply. He also invited Dr. Roy Brown, the TDHC medical director, to speak about “the medical value of food,” journalist Hebert Black stated. “He described in particular the needs of the pregnant women and children for protein and green vegetables.”⁹⁰ Also at the meeting were a few local black farmers who owned land in the county such as Mr. David Dulaney and Mr. Isaac Daniels, who donated pieces of land and some tools to start the cooperative.⁹¹

Within a few months, the NBCFC obtained start-up funding from the OEO “with the understanding that it would eventually become a self-sustaining operation,” Thomas Ward explained, along with donated tools and additional land.⁹² Dr. Geiger secured two new tractors and by the Spring of 1968, 500 families had signed up to join the NBCFC at fifty cents each, and the

farm was ready for its first planting season. However, knowing that the farm would need additional funding to ensure that it would be able to expand and sustain itself, Geiger and Hatch wrote a \$152,000 “nutritional demonstration grant” to the OEO “to avoid any controversy that critics might arouse regarding the farm being some sort of communist program.” The farm also received \$10,000 from Measure for Measure, which also provided critical funding to Fannie Lou Hamer’s Freedom Farms.⁹³

By the fall of 1969, the NBCFC was operating independently of the TDHC and being run completely by former sharecroppers and farmworkers who made up the cooperative’s board of directors. This board, made up of thirty-six delegates, elected Will Finch, former sharecropper in North Bolivar county, as the board’s first chairperson. To run the day-to-day operations of the cooperative, the board hired John Brown, former manager of the nearby Abe Miller plantation, to be the farm manager and L. C. Dorsey as the project’s director. John Hatch was originally elected the cooperative’s director, however, those responsibilities interfered with his work at the TDHC, so he resigned from this position.⁹⁴

At its peak, under the direction of Mrs. Dorsey, the NBCFC produced over a million pounds of food on 427 acres of land with over 900 families receiving food and employed over 200 people at \$4 in cash plus \$6 dollars in food credit which totaled at \$10 per day during the season.⁹⁵ As historian Greta de Jong observed, within its first full season the NBCFC “effectively solved the hunger problem in Bolivar County.”⁹⁶ Moreover, the cooperative developed a frozen food locker for food storage and also produced enough vegetables to not only feed its members but was also able to supply vegetables for seven hot lunch programs in the area that targeted local senior citizens and school-aged children.⁹⁷ To support their increase in capacity and operations, the NBCFC even erected an office building and storage sheds which allowed them to hold workshops throughout

the Delta to help other communities mobilize and address their needs. For instance, Mrs. Dorsey and the NBCFC were advisors to Mrs. Hamer's Freedom Farm Cooperative and played a vital role in its development in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In 1969, the NBCFC's yearly progress report stated "Our first goal was to help people out of malnutrition. We have done it. Now we are moving to help people out of poverty, which is what caused the malnutrition...we have the future potential for economic independence."⁹⁸

From the late 1960s through the 1970s, the NBCFC addressed both the food and economic realities of poor black communities in the northern area of Bolivar County. As an extension of the Tufts Delta Health Center, founded by activists in the "medical arm" of the civil rights movement, the cooperative empowered the community to create social change through the production of food.⁹⁹ As one of the members stated in 1971, the cooperative taught us "that we can produce vegetables here in the Delta, that we can responsibly manage our resources, and that there is economic potential of the food industry perhaps as a source of employment to our people."¹⁰⁰ Although the farm cooperative did not develop a sustainable, long term solution to the ills of malnutrition, poverty and hunger in North Bolivar county, as historian Thomas Ward wrote, "the importance of the North Bolivar County Farm Co-op in empowering the poor people of the Delta cannot be overstated."¹⁰¹ This project, in part, helped displaced farmworkers link their agricultural skills to employment and food production, which allowed them to directly benefit from skills that were once embedded in the plantation politics of the sharecropping system. Thus, organizers such as Geiger, Hatch, and Dorsey made the connection between hunger and the oppressive structure of the Delta, while also advancing a community-based agenda as a solution.

Repositioning Food in Civil Rights Historiography

While I told this story through three discrete moments, they are all part of an ongoing food story of the movement. This food story attests that civil rights struggles were not simply about access to political and educational systems for poor rural blacks in Mississippi. To tell this story, I relied on narratives available in archival materials and reassembled evidence in the corpus of the civil rights movement. Although food activism is not a sustained theme or issue in the entire corpus of the movement, when repositioned at the center of the movement a new story is revealed. Yet the “political story” that is reproduced in Lawson’s typology of civil rights historiography reinforces a narrative that places food and struggles to access food in the periphery of the movement. Even when civil rights stories are told from the “bottom-up,” as my food story does, the narrative is still represented by an overarching story about voting rights and education. Thus, the politics associated with reproducing the “political story” of the movement and the positioning of food in civil rights historiography reflect instantiations of power in the production of civil rights narratives and intra-movement dynamics at the intersection of class, gender, time, and space.

First, the political story positions middle-class black men as leaders of the movement who were all mostly free of white economic control. These men were financially independent, lived outside some of the most segregated places in the south, and did not suffer from numerous acts of reprisals that black sharecroppers in places like the Delta encountered as a result of movement participation. Thus, these figures did not experience the lived realities of poor rural blacks, especially issues of accessing food through land obtained through the sharecropping system, in the same ways. They positioned access to education and voting rights as the way to achieve “freedom” from the racist sociopolitical plantation system throughout the south, which linked agriculture to oppression. That is to say, as historian Chris Myers Asch noted, in the Delta “freedom from which

the movement had struggled implied liberation from the fields.”¹⁰² This illustrates, in part, how the class dynamics of the movement buried instances of food activism. The movement placed black autonomy in the context of access to political power, which displaced autonomy that could be gained from the material improvements in the lives (i.e. agriculture) of rural blacks in the Delta.

Second, by focusing on the role and efforts of prominent middle-class men in the movement, narratives have obscured the role and efforts of black women and local people and excluded efforts of food activism. Local black women did the invisible, behind the scenes work of cooking to ensure that activists could continue to work, taking care of their communities and organizing efforts to achieve movement goals. While black men led efforts of black political activism in the Delta, as Charles Payne noted, women led organizationally. “Women took civil rights activists into their homes, of course, and giving them a place to eat and sleep,” Payne explained, “but women also canvassed more than men, showed up more often...and frequently attempted to register to vote.”¹⁰³ Payne has argued elsewhere, that the national “shift from movement-as-community to movement-as-political party” throughout the 1960s could be viewed as “shifts away from behavior patterns that in this society are socially coded as feminine and towards patterns socially coded as masculine, expressed most vividly by those nationalist organizations that as a matter of policy expected women to take a step back.”¹⁰⁴ That is to suggest, that community organizing work (in our case food activism) was viewed as a woman’s role, while political work was viewed as a man’s role.

Moreover, the gender dynamics of the movement cultivated “spadework”—as activist Ella Jo Baker called it—for women to do that was often secondary to the leadership roles of men. As historian Bernice Barnett similarly argued that although women were rarely allowed to take formal leadership roles in the movement and organized in the background, “these women were often ones

who initiated protest, formulated strategies and tactics, and mobilized other resources (especially money, personnel, and communication networks) necessary for successful collective action.”¹⁰⁵ They also mobilized food, which was extremely necessary for successful collective action in the movement and even just to keep people from starving. For instance, while SNCC activist Willie Peacock was chosen to lead SNCC’s food relief committee in 1963, black church women from a Methodist church organized the food and ensured that everyday folks could get access to food, especially those who were on welfare and depended on the commodities during the blockade. One year later, during the freedom summer of 1964, we see women at the forefront again flying in and out of Jackson to work with local women and ensure that both civil rights activists and supporters of the movement had enough food to sustain them during the movement. These women would organize food drives and projects, while also cooking meals for activists and sharecroppers. Both FFC and the NBCFC had Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer and Mrs. L.C. Dorsey, respectively, who both were women and former sharecroppers, lead efforts in pooling together resources to mitigate community issues of food insecurity, poverty, malnutrition, and hunger in the late 1960s. Yet, such efforts failed to gain visibility by the national, politically focused agenda of the movement in the late 1960s.

Third, civil rights historiography conforms to a specific time period, outlined by specific scholars, moments, policies, and shifts. When most scholars write about the movement, it begins with the Brown decision of 1954, climaxes with the passage of both the voting rights act of 1964 and the civil rights act of 1965 and ends with the death of Dr. Martin Luther King. As a result, new scholarship on the movement constrains its investigations to that specific time period and conforms to a narrative that places political advancement at the center of struggles, which places food activism in the periphery. Moreover, time and perceived goals operate as tools of power to capture

the work of activists that visibly represented what “civil rights” are. Although, Jacquelyn Dowd Hall has argued for the “long” civil rights movement that positions the movement as a continuum of events before and after the 1954 to 1968 movement, Steven Lawson maintains that a “short” civil rights movement (1954-1968) is needed for historians to understand the importance of this moment. Whether the movement is “long” or “short,” the temporal politics of civil rights historiography conceals the ongoing struggle for food and the forms of activism used to address the food needs of African Americans.

Finally, even in what Owen Dwyer described as “historical-spatial representations” or symbolic characterizations of the civil rights movement that “re-inscribe certain hegemonic narratives,”¹⁰⁶ food activism and struggles are absent. There are no historical markers that tell the story of the Greenwood Food Blockade or commemorate the food efforts of local poor black women. The statue of Mrs. Hamer is located in the Fannie Lou Hamer Memorial Garden in her hometown of Ruleville on a piece of land that once belonged to Freedom Farms. However, many people who visit the monument do not know this and the farm is only mentioned as a line item on a stone plaque near her statue. Right next door to the monument is the Ruleville Head Start building which also houses Mrs. Hamer’s museum. Even there, only one section is dedicated to Freedom Farms, and the rest of the exhibits provide ample information on her life as a sharecropper and subsequent civil rights activism. Just less than 25 miles northwest of Ruleville, the Tufts-Delta Health Center in Mound Bayou has multiple historical markers that explain the origins of the center. However, the North Bolivar County Farm Cooperative isn’t mentioned anywhere on the markers. Moreover, there is no remembrance of this important project or its all black leadership under the direction of Mrs. Dorsey or of the black farmers that donated land to support the cooperative.

Conclusion

Repositioning food in civil rights historiography reveals a strategic era of the black freedom struggle that extended the movement's agenda beyond formal school integration efforts and the politics of voting rights. This revised agenda challenges what we know about the dominant narrative of the movement and shows how certain historical actors expanded the meaning of freedom and civil rights to include access to food, land, and employment in the context of cooperative farming and agrarianism. Rural Poor African American women played a critical role in this shift in movement politics as they mobilized, organized and led this second wave of civil rights food activism. Yet, the dominant narrative that is often reproduced in the three generations of civil rights historiography, still places food strategies and tactics in the periphery to focus solely on national leaders, politics, and issues. As such, the circumstances surrounding the absence of a treatment of food activism in civil rights historiography reflect instantiations of power both in and outside the movement at the intersection of class, gender, time and space.

Consequently, we miss out on a number of actors, struggles, initiatives, projects, and programs that could help activists and scholars understand problems of today like the prevalence of structural racism and inequality in the production, consumption and distribution of food. Activists that engage in this work align with the concepts of 'food justice' and 'food sovereignty.' While the terms are different, social justice, food, land and the politics of resistance are woven in to the fabric of the movements associated with them. Similarly, as sociologist Monica White has argued, the same components of these movements were also a part of the civil rights agenda. She further argues that contemporary activists should examine the work of cooperatives in the civil rights era such as Freedom Farm Cooperative "as a model for the movement in the future."¹⁰⁷ In this way, White is suggesting that current food justice activists look back at civil rights

historiography to understand how the strategies and tactics of the past could enhance their mobilizing and organizing strategies today.

However, at the moment many historians, sociologists, political scientists and even journalists that influence the way we tell the civil rights story in popular discourse, restrict the movement to a specific set of tactics and goals that address specific issues. As a result, instances of food activism are concealed in the civil rights narrative that could be relevant today. Thus, to tell stories like this narrative and bring food from the periphery to center, civil rights scholars, historians, and curators will have to look for often-overlooked actors like Fannie Lou Hamer and L.C Dorsey that organized in poor rural black communities. While these women were central to the movement in Mississippi, they were not national leaders or figures. Thus, by recovering their food activism and other goals of civil rights struggle, we will create future stories of the movement that extend civil rights to include more than just access to a political, legal and educational system for blacks. Such shifts in how we story the movement could reveal more unexplored aspects of movement politics that can help activists who engage in a wide range of issues build a better future for all.

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**PAPER TWO: MISSISSIPPI'S WAR *AGAINST* THE WAR ON POVERTY:
FOOD POWER, HUNGER, AND WHITE SUPREMACY**

Abstract

Most studies of Mississippi during the American civil rights era focus almost exclusively on the strategies and tactics of proponents of the movement in response to white resistance and violence. Lunch counter sit-ins in Jackson, marches in the Delta, demonstrations in Oxford and boycotts in the southwest and southeast regions of the state are overwhelmingly rehearsed when people learn about the Mississippi movement. While these studies extend our understanding of the struggle for civil rights in the state, they simultaneously limit our understanding of white resistance to the movement. In contrast, this paper shifts our prefigured gaze on proponents to opponents of the movement to illuminate how local, state, and national actors in Mississippi used what historians, political scientists and legal scholars have described as “food power”—the use of food as a weapon or an element of power in the global context of politics and national security—to maintain white supremacy and undermine the civil rights movement. Specifically, this paper focuses on two specific instances during the post-1965 civil rights struggle when the congressional white power structure in Mississippi manipulated Operation Head Start and responded to the Senator Robert F. Kennedy’s “discovery” of hunger in the Mississippi Delta. The use of food power by the white power structure provides a critical understanding of the social, economic, and political forces that worked against civil rights activism and enhances broader public and scholarly understandings of the American Civil Rights Movement.

Introduction

At the height of the American Civil Rights Movement, just one year after President Lyndon Baines Johnson declared his “unconditional war on poverty” and three months before the passing of the landmark Voting Rights Act of 1965, United States Representative Jamie Whitten of Mississippi delivered a speech at the Thirteenth Annual Meeting of the Delta Council in May 1965. Angered by the intensification of voting rights activism and the looming poverty program in Mississippi, Whitten called attention to the power of the Delta Council, which controlled the region’s development projects and initiatives, to protect the state’s white supremacist system from “militant agitators.” He proclaimed to the group and other guests that, in his opinion, the struggle to attain voting rights for Blacks was “merely a front for a massive takeover by militant agitators” to obtain power “to control industry, agriculture and even labor.” He encouraged the all-white council, who at the time had over 3000 members, to “continue to show restraint and respect for the law in the hope that as it becomes clear to the rest of the country that the South is only a beachhead to these radical leaders for a take-over nation, the laws will be changed.”¹

Whitten’s speech echoed the beliefs of the state’s emblematic white supremacist groups—the community-based White Citizens’ Council and the Mississippi legislature-sanctioned State Sovereignty Commission—in that the rise of voting rights activism threatened the social, economic and political lives of the white planter and middle classes in the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta, who held the most power in his district. According to Whitten, this uproar in support for voting rights was a critical component of the larger civil rights agenda initiated by the *Brown* decision of 1954, which he described as a “downhill road to integration, amalgamation, and ruin.”² Thus, to ensure that the “militant agitators” did not take control of “industry, agriculture and even labor,” a group of three powerful Mississippi congressmen—US Representative Jamie Whitten, Senator John

Stennis, and Senator James Eastland—ignited a war against the War on Poverty. As part of President Johnson’s Great Society campaign of 1964, the War on Poverty promised to address and eradicate hunger throughout the nation by making it the “urgent business of all men and women of every race and every religion, and every region.”³ However, in a place like Mississippi, specifically the Delta and plantation counties, the eradication of hunger through anti-poverty programs threatened the politics of white supremacy.

Most studies of Mississippi during the American civil rights era focus almost exclusively on the strategies and tactics of proponents of the movement in response to white resistance and violence. Lunch counter sit-ins in Jackson, marches in the Delta, demonstrations in Oxford and boycotts in the southwest and southeast regions of the state are often rehearsed when people learn about the Mississippi movement. While these studies extend our understanding of the struggle for civil rights in the state, they simultaneously limit our understanding of white resistance to the movement. In contrast, this paper shifts our prefigured gaze on proponents to opponents of the movement to illuminate how local, state, and national actors in Mississippi used what historians, political scientists and legal scholars have described as “food power”—the use of food as a weapon or an element of power in the global context of politics and national security—to maintain white supremacy and undermine the civil rights movement.

In the 1978 article “Scarce Goods as Political Weapons: The Case of Food,” political scientist Peter Wallenstein situated food power in the US context and described how food as an economic commodity can be used as weapon.⁴ According to Wallenstein, since economic commodities are necessary to maintain life, they can also be used to threaten it as well if “effectively used” as a military weapon.⁵ Thus, food as an economic weapon, “just as military weapons,” Wallenstein argued, “can be used to *punish* enemies and *reward* friends.”⁶ Drawing on

Wallenstein, legal scholars Aeyal Gross and Tamar Feldman argue that “food is not merely an economic commodity, not only because of its essentiality to life, but also because of its significance to human existence: our cultural experiences, our family and communal lives, our pleasures, and our bodies.”⁷ They use the term ‘food power’ to describe “situations in which one State seeks a coercive advantage over a target country by manipulating the volume and timing of its own food exports, for example by placing a selective embargo on food exports, with the aim of punishing the target country or forcing it to change its policy.”⁸

In *Food Power: The Rise and Fall of the Postwar American Food System*, historian Bryan L. McDonald further delineated the ways in which the US has used food power as coercive tactic in times of international crisis. For example, during the American civil rights era, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) revealed its stance on food power in the agriculture handbook *Guide to Civil Defense Management in the Food Industry*.⁹ “The history of mankind and the records of his wars clearly demonstrate that food,” Mr. Orville Freeman, President John F. Kennedy’s Secretary of Agriculture wrote in the foreword of the handbook, “is a prime weapon, a prime target, and a prime element of survival.” Recognizing the significance of this statement, Bryan McDonald wrote “Freeman’s attribution of the centrality of food to conflict is part of a long tradition recognizing that food, and the ability to control availability, access, utilization, and stability of food, could be vitally important to the legitimacy and security of states.”¹⁰ Moreover, McDonald points to the world food crisis of the 1970s and the food embargo in response to the oil crisis as examples of the US exerting its food power in the global arena.¹¹ According to McDonald, food power can even be used “indirectly, in the form of trade or humanitarian assistance, or directly in the form of giving or withholding food in times of crisis.”¹² Just as Gross and Feldman similarly

argued that food power can be “exercised not only through direct control over food supply and food availability, but also by impacting people's access to adequate food.”¹³

For the purposes of this paper, I define food power as any set of interactions during times of crisis, whether formal or informal, between local, state, and national actors that use food—or programs designed to ensure access to it—and agriculture, as weapons to stabilize the crisis. For white supremacists and pro-segregationists in Mississippi, the development of the civil rights movement in the Magnolia State—illustrated by the possibility of Blacks having voting rights and segregation in schools being dismantled by the *Brown* decision of 1954—was seen as a “racial crisis” that threatened the lives of the white power structure and planter class. Thus, to protect the lives of the white planter class, I argue, the congressional white power structure in Mississippi, led by Whitten, Eastland, and Stennis, used food power to manipulate any efforts of the War on Poverty to uplift poor rural Black communities in the Delta. Such a move to sustain white supremacy made the massive white resistance movement in Mississippi, as historian J. Todd Moyer has stated, “sui generis in the heady days of the civil rights revolution.”¹⁴

The story of Mississippi’s war *against* the War on Poverty is instructive and entangled in the political, social, and economic backdrop of the struggle for civil rights in Mississippi. It illustrates how actors in the congressional white power structure in Mississippi used food power, directly stimulated by political maneuverings, to manipulate policies and programs at the intersection of agriculture, food, health and welfare to maintain white supremacy and thwart any efforts of Black advancement in the state. Therefore, to tell this story I reposition the backdrop of the civil rights struggle from the periphery to the center of movement inquiries and track instantiations of food power throughout a wide range of archival materials, historiography and scholarly work on the Mississippi movement, tying together narratives that are often told

separately. Specifically, this story focuses on two specific instances during the post-1965 civil rights struggle when the congressional white power structure in Mississippi used food power to manipulate Operation Head Start and respond to Senator Robert F. Kennedy's "discovery" of hunger in the Mississippi Delta. This use of food power by the white power structure provides a critical understanding of the social, economic, and political forces that worked against civil rights activism and enhances broader public and scholarly understandings of the American Civil Rights Movement.

Mississippi Food Power: White Supremacy, Farm Policy and Food Programs

The development of organized white resistance and opposition to the American Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi played a critical role in the food power wielded by the state's congressional white power structure throughout the postwar era. Amplified by the historical politics of white supremacy and the fear of integration, opponents of civil rights reignited the southern quest for "state rights" built on the state's one-party system, which at the time was the Democratic party.¹⁵ Here, state rights can be defined as "local autonomy, diminution of federal power, and interposition of state authority between the citizen and supposed excesses of the national government."¹⁶ However, in the case of Mississippi, as Historian James W. Silver has shown, the state used federal power to protect its social and economic system—characterized by the plantation system and rurality—to in fact destroy local autonomy and thwart the advancement of Blacks in the case of slavery in the 1850s and civil rights in the 1950s. In the case of the 1960s and 1970s, local, state, and federal actors in Mississippi—influenced by what Clyde Woods described as the "Delta Plantation Bloc"—crystalized the ideology of white supremacy at the intersection of federal farm policy and food access to undermine Black insurgency and self-determination through anti-poverty programs.

The Delta Plantation Bloc represented a powerful group of white male leaders who were mostly part of the white planter and middle classes that sought to sustain “White supremacist attitudes, alliances, institutions, social policies, and economic programs,” Woods explained.

Plantation bloc leaders asserted their superiority of the plantation system and of their leadership while continually advocating the expansion of their monopoly over agriculture, manufacturing, banking, land, and water. They also sought to preserve their monopoly over local, county, and state finances. Their commitment to the elimination of federal programs designed to lessen ethnic and class exploitation was, moreover, unwavering.¹⁷

To sustain the pace of their dominance over the Delta and other plantation counties, the plantation bloc created the White Citizens’ Council in 1954 and the State Sovereignty Commission in 1956. At the community level, the White Citizens’ Council was designed to maintain segregation through economic control. At the state level, the State Sovereignty Commission provided detailed surveillance of civil rights activities in the state. Together, these two groups fought viciously to maintain segregation, which represented—as prominent member of the plantation bloc and founder of the White Citizens’ Council Robert “Tut” Patterson stated—“the freedom to choose one’s associates, Americanism, State Sovereignty and the survival of the white race.”¹⁸

Simultaneously, the bloc relied on the political maneuverings of powerful national actors who were also landowners in the region to protect their domination of the region: Representative Jamie Whitten of Tallahatchie County, known as “the permanent secretary of agriculture” who served over fifty years in congress representing most of the Delta; Senator James Eastland of Sunflower County who served as chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee which allowed him to single-handedly control the results of nearly all of the civil rights bills after 1956 until his retirement in 1978; and Senator John Stennis of Kemper County who served over forty years in congress was chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee in the 1960s and chair of the Senate Armed Services Committee during the Vietnam War.¹⁹ Among the most powerful of them

all, Representative Whitten of Tallahatchie County, leveraged his clout at the national level in Washington to enhance the lives of white cotton planters in the Delta at the expense of poor rural Blacks. As a cotton planter himself—and chair of the powerful House Agricultural Appropriations subcommittee at the time—Whitten understood both the financial and racial politics of the crop. For example, as political scientist Mary Summers pointed out, under Whitten’s leadership cotton remained the costliest among all federal agricultural subsidy programs.²⁰ Moreover, Whitten’s political maneuverings between the 1940s and 1960s created conditions that exacerbated poverty, food insecurity and hunger among poor rural Blacks in the Delta.

For example, in late 1945, the Mississippi congressional delegation received a scathing report on the Delta county of Coahoma written by southern sociologist Frank Alexander. The report, which was overseen by Arthur F. Raper of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics (BAE), found that the county’s dependence on plantation politics and white supremacy was linked to the increasing reliance of Blacks on the federal government for assistance for their basic needs such as food.²¹ “Many southern congressmen saw the Coahoma County report together with the BAE’s release of its postwar conversion plans for the cotton South in 1944 as acts of war,” political scientist Mary Summers posited.²² In response, Whitten led a counterattack on the findings and the BAE’s postwar plan for cotton production during the House agricultural appropriations hearings in 1946. Whitten accused the BAE of trying to disrupt and rework “the social set-up of my section of the Nation or the rest of it with racial intermingling.” He accused them of making friends with groups like the NAACP which was interested in understanding and dismantling the power dynamics of the plantation economy in the south which kept agrarian Blacks inferior to and dependent on the white planter class.²³

During the mid-to-late 1940s, moreover, Whitten used his legislative power to block a number of potential USDA studies that attempted to identify social and economic problems of Black army veterans returning from World War II to the south. Pulitzer Prize winning reporter and journalist Nick Kotz argued that these moves by Whitten, “helped insure that Agriculture Department farm policy would never seriously include consideration of the effects of its programs on sharecroppers or farmworkers.”²⁴ By the 1960s, Whitten’s power and influence allowed his district to receive \$23.5 million dollars in individual federal farm subsidies to reduce acreage in cotton production that only went 0.3 percent of the population, while constituents who lived below the poverty threshold, approximately 59 percent, received only \$4 million dollars in federal food relief aid.²⁵ Such imbalances perpetuated poverty, food insecurity, hunger and malnutrition and infuriated civil rights activists who understood the centrality of federal food relief to the diets of Whitten’s impoverished constituents who were mostly poor, displaced Black farmers, sharecroppers, or day-laborers. Moreover, Whitten’s maneuverings also killed a federal program designed to teach displaced black sharecroppers and farmworkers how to drive tractors during Orville Freeman’s tenure as the US Secretary of Agriculture.²⁶ “As a result,” Kotz noted, “farm policies which have consistently ignored their toll on millions of black poor have contributed to a rural-urban migration, to a civil rights revolution, and to the ruin of Americans.”²⁷

Political Scientist Don F. Hadwiger shared similar insights to Kotz on the relationship between race, federal farm policy and the civil rights movement. “The civil rights revolution exposed the severe class discrimination which both Negroes and poor whites had experienced,” Hadwiger explained, “and emphasized the Jim Crow practices under which Negroes alone had suffered.”²⁸ Hadwiger found that southern domination throughout each congressional agriculture committee fueled both the protection of white rural farmers in the south and resistance to both civil

rights and many antipoverty projects that sought to uplift those who were marginalized. “Even the domestic food-assistance programs were to be used only to dispose of farm surpluses, to maintain a compliant and low -cost work force,” Hadwiger further explained, “and to bargain for urban votes on farm bills.”²⁹ The use of farm surplus exclusively for domestic food assistance programs such as the federal commodities food program and the Food Stamp program inextricably linked federal farm, food, and welfare policy.

As a result, the most basic problem with US food assistance programs was that they were “the products of political compromise between legislators who represented hungry voters in the Northeast and those who represented ambitious farmers in the Midwest and South,” Historian Felicia Kornbluh argued, “In this compromise, farm interests had the upper hand.”³⁰ This compromise produced two consequences that detrimentally impacted poor rural Blacks. Describing this, Kornbluh writes:

The leading purpose of these programs was to sustain the prices of agricultural commodities...neither commodity food nor the Food Stamp program was “designed primarily to help the poor.” Therefore, USDA administrators did not take it as their charge to correct the limited nutritional value or appeal of the commodities they distributed; they fulfilled the most significant of their objectives by taking commodities out of the for-profit market so that prices did not drop too far. The second consequence of the unequal compromise that underlay the food programs under USDA was that they were administered locally and at county discretion. Large farmers dominated the local governments charged with deciding whether to adopt the program.³¹

In the Delta, the administration of local food programs by large planters and local governments perpetuated the vulnerability of poor rural Blacks who relied heavily on free food from the surplus commodities program.³² Such programs were not mandated at the local level by the USDA, however, under federal law counties were not allowed to implement both the free food program and the food stamp program.³³ While civil rights activists favored the surplus commodities food program, the white planter class and local white grocers preferred to administer

the food stamp program. For example, in Sunflower County, the birthplace of the White Citizens Council, Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer and other civil rights activists opposed the food stamp program and organized a campaign in the late 1960s against the program and circulated a petition asking for a free food stamp program to be implemented in the county.³⁴ On paper, the food stamp program had much to offer poor black sharecroppers and farmworkers. Each recipient could buy food stamps, use them, and then receive more stamps to purchase more food. Essentially, this program was designed to increase the purchasing power of the poor. “In practice, though, the food stamp plan amounted to virtual extortion from the poor,” journalist Nick Kotz argued. The program was championed by USDA economists “with the rationale that it would provide more money to the farmer than did the commodity programs” Kotz further argued.³⁵

Moreover, the food stamp program was also championed by plantation owner and Senator James “Big Jim” Eastland, who historian James C. Cobb described as “the staunchest segregationist in the United States,” as a way to boost local business for white grocers. As a card-carrying member of the WCC, Eastland was the epitome of the group. Not only did his power reach all the way to Senate, he was also one of the largest landowners in Jamie Whitten’s congressional district.³⁶ He owned 5,000 acres in Sunflower County and directly benefitted from the USDA’s cotton subsidies and acreage reduction programs. For instance, in 1967 the Eastland plantation received a \$168,524.52 cotton subsidy to reduce its acreage in production of the crop. While these instances were not unusual for Delta planters under the leadership of Jamie Whitten in the 1960s, such dynamics coupled with the Delta’s reliance on mechanization to produce cotton and the region’s racist sociopolitical environment, caused many Blacks to leave the county. From 1960 to 1970, the Sunflower County Black population decreased by 7,758 and by another 1,670 between 1970 and 1980.³⁷

During the 1964 congressional debate over whether to create the food stamp program, Senator Eastland worked to support the food stamp bill and had a conversation with President Lyndon B. Johnson about white grocery store merchants who would benefit from the program. He explained to Johnson that the commodities program in the “nigra areas” caused many merchants not to make a profit although the Blacks who worked on plantations had income to purchase food.³⁸ Using his plantation as an example, Eastland stated, “now you take the niggers on my property: they got plenty of money, but every damn one of ‘em will line up and get commodity. The merchants in my areas want food stamps, because they get a cut out of it.”³⁹

President Morris Lewis, Jr. of the Lewis Grocer Company in Indianola was representative of white grocery store merchants that Senator Eastland was referring to. Lewis, a financial supporter of the Mississippi Sovereignty Commission who owned Sunflower Food Stores and once served as the president of Mississippi Economic Council, was known for his campaign to dismantle the surplus commodity food program in Mississippi in support of the food stamp program.⁴⁰ In 1962, Lewis wrote a letter to 400 retailers across Mississippi asking them to join his efforts against the commodities program and garner support for the then food stamp pilot program. In his letter, he described the commodities program as “a disgrace to the county, the State of Mississippi, and the federal government” and a “growing threat to the free enterprise system.”⁴¹ Lewis further lamented that the free food distributed by the commodities program caused “the federal government to enter in the food business in competition with the tax paying food retailers and wholesalers in this state.”⁴²

The letter was quoted in a number of newspapers in the Mississippi Delta including the *Delta Democrat Times* and the *Enterprise Tocsin*. One article commented that “Lewis suggested that since the responsibility for initiating any kind of food program lies with the boards of

supervisors, the retailers talk to their supervisors in favor of making the change from commodity to food stamps.”⁴³ Such power dynamics further exacerbated hunger and starvation among poor rural Blacks in so far as when Sunflower County made the switch from commodities to food stamps in the Spring of 1966 over ten thousand people was unable to access food. As John T. Edge observed, “Delta residents went hungrier, children starved.”⁴⁴

Rather than go hungry, poor blacks in the county were forced to participate in a newly developed government loan program to purchase stamps or establish credit with local white grocers like Morris Lewis, Jr. Civil Rights activists in the county saw the process of applying for a loan or credit to purchase food “as one more way for poor black families to incur debt they could not pay.”⁴⁵ Thus, in the eyes of activists, this situation increased not only black dependence on the white grocery store structure and plantation owners in the Delta, but also poverty. For instance, Historian Mark Newman noted, “In some cases, planters often certified their workers’ income, which determined their eligibility for food stamps, and thus retained a powerful influence over the workforce. Some grocery stores only accepted food stamps for the most expensive brands of food and...raised prices when the county entered the food stamp program.”⁴⁶

The all-white Sunflower County board of supervisors and other county officials used the food stamp program in ways that stripped Blacks of their dignity and autonomy in order to maintain white supremacy. In some instances, as Historian Jill Ann Cooley pointed out, poor Blacks who mostly worked as day-laborers or domestics were subject to various validation procedures beyond getting income approval from white plantation owners which included allowing them to purchase only certain kinds of foods that were “considered to be fit for a poor black family.”⁴⁷ Drawing on a report from staff at Sunflower County Progress, the county federal social service agency who

ran the Emergency Food and Medical program (EF&M) which helped poor people gain access to food stamps, for example, Cooley wrote that the

staff reported that they paid for groceries selected by a beneficiary family, and the family purchased roast beef. The staff considered roast beef to be too expensive compared to bologna or neckbones, on which they thought beneficiaries should subsist. As a result, the sole concern seemed to be price, and perhaps the quality of food to be fit for a poor black family. The EF&M staff made no mention for the preference, nutrition, or autonomy of the community members they served.⁴⁸

However, the food stamp program was not the only program that the congressional white power structure in Mississippi sought to manipulate to maintain white dominance. They also used their food power to attack a War on Poverty program, Operation Head Start, that addressed the food and health needs of poor rural black children while supplying jobs to mothers.

Co-opting Operation Head Start: John Stennis vs. The Child Development Group of Mississippi

In August 1964, congress passed the Economic Opportunity Act, which established the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO), headed by the founder of the Peace Corps under President Kennedy's administration, Sargent Shriver.⁴⁹ At the foundation of programs initiated by the OEO were community-based agencies under the Community Action Program (CAP). This program was designed to support community-based solutions to poverty by giving poor communities financial support to support their needs and realities.⁵⁰ For rural Blacks in Mississippi, the program offered more than just an opportunity to address their needs, it allowed them to exercise autonomy from the white power structure that controlled every aspect of their lives. Realizing this, the congressional white power structure in Mississippi demonstrated its blatant disregard for the poverty legislation by unanimously voting against the Economic Opportunity Act and dismantling any policies or programs that addressed the food realities of Blacks or used OEO funds to empower poor rural Blacks to control their own lives.⁵¹

In the summer of 1965, the Child Development Group of Mississippi (CDGM) received a 1.5 million-dollar grant from the OEO to start a seven-week pre-school training program under the National Operation Head Start program. Created by Dr. Tom Levin, a psychoanalyst who worked as part of the “medical arm” of the civil rights movement during the Freedom Summer of 1964, CDGM was a statewide poverty organization that served over 6,000 children through eighty-four centers in twenty-four counties, making it the nation’s largest Head Start program at the time. Children who participated in the program received educational training, medical care and two hot meals a day. For impoverished participants in the Mississippi Delta, who were mostly Black, this program was located in Freedom Centers and Houses established by civil rights organizations and was the only way many of them could access nutritious food, health care and education. Moreover, staff recruited to run the program were mostly local women and civil rights activists who served as directors and teachers of the centers, allowing many of them to escape dependency on the white power structure for the first time in their lives.⁵²

One year prior to the development of CDGM’s Head Start program, Levin began to lay the groundwork for the organization and knew that he would need the support of local people who worked with groups like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Invited by Jim Forman of SNCC to attend the group’s 1964 staff meeting at Waveland, Levin expressed to the group how he envisioned a learning environment for poor Black children that would “be much more than simply early childhood education.” It would also “act as focus to organize a community around their social aspirations.”⁵³ While SNCC did not publicly endorse CDGM, Historian John Dittmer noted that Levin was able to convince SNCC member Frank Smith to be the director of community staff.⁵⁴

As a result, many movement activists, such as Mrs. Unita Blackwell and Mrs. L. C. Dorsey in the Delta were recruited to join CDGM's efforts and established centers in their communities.⁵⁵ The sponsoring agency of the Head Start program became Mary Holmes Junior College, a historically black private school in the northeastern part of the state, and its central office was located at the headquarters of two dominant civil rights groups, the Delta Ministry and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) in Mount Beulah. Although CDGM's Head Start programs were not the only ones operating in the state in the summer of 1965, their programs were almost exclusively led by people who were public supporters of the civil rights movement and saw this antipoverty work as, in the words of L. C. Dorsey, "a continuation of the civil rights movement."⁵⁶ This clear connection to the movement and the advancement of a Black anti-poverty agenda made CDGM a moving target for the Mississippi congressional white power structure and the State Sovereignty Commission. While the local white power structure in the Delta refused to support the program and often harassed CDGM workers, the congressional white power structure decided to attack the group from within the federal government itself.

Less than two months after the start of CDGM's Head Start program, Senator John Stennis began a powerful and successful crusade against the organization. Stennis, who once declared that "imported racial zealots and agitators" desired the Civil Rights Act of 1964, was a powerful figure in the Senate Appropriations Committee.⁵⁷ This committee, historian Mark Newman noted, was the sole source of funding for both the OEO and the Vietnam War, which President Johnson relied on for financing.⁵⁸ Stennis's influence as chair of the Senate Appropriations Committee and later chair of the Senate Armed Services Committee during the Vietnam War, allowed him to use funding for the Vietnam War as an underlying pawn to keep government officials in the OEO, and even President Johnson from interfering with the business of Mississippi. Such power in the Senate

yielded constant devastating blows to the CDGM and further exacerbated poverty, hunger, and malnutrition throughout the state.

On June 29, 1965, John Stennis demanded that the Appropriations Committee send a group of accountants and inspectors to investigate CDGM's operations. Stennis's desire to send this group came on the heels of charges made against CDGM earlier that month regarding the misuse of grant funds to support the civil rights movement by Mississippi congressmen William Colmer and John Bell Williams, who coined the term "Black Monday" to describe the *Brown* decision.⁵⁹ Moreover, to assist the group of inspectors, the State Sovereignty Commission provided them, and eventually the OEO, with information gathered from two informants placed in the CDGM's central offices.⁶⁰ On that same day, Mississippi Governor Paul Johnson sent correspondence to OEO head Sargent Shriver describing the CDGM as "an effort on the on the part of extremists and agitators to subvert the lawful authority in Mississippi and create division and create dissention between the races."⁶¹

By the end of July 1965, Stennis's committee discovered that CDGM had provided bail money for a few employees who were jailed for participating in MFDP civil rights demonstrations in Jackson. Historian Mark Newman recorded that CDGM had "improperly recorded as bail money salary advances it had made to staff members arrested for participating in MFDP protests during their free time."⁶² Whether CDGM directly provided bail for employees or "salary advances" didn't matter, Stennis used this information to accuse the organization of misusing funds and petitioned the OEO to withhold all future funding from the group. However, instead of withholding funds from CDGM, the OEO attempted to force the group to relocate from their headquarters on a site operated by the movement to Mary Holmes Junior College as a way to appease Stennis, but to no avail. Activists and CDGM representatives fought against the change

of location since the college was located over 100 miles from most of the active civil rights movement sites. As a result, this further infuriated Stennis and “poisoned the atmosphere between OEO administrators in Washington and CDGM staff members.”⁶³

Nonetheless, after months of fighting the Mississippi congressional white power structure and OEO officials, CDGM was able to still provide services to their communities and secured a 5.6 million-dollar grant from OEO in February 1966 to continue programming into the summer months. While Stennis, joined by Senator Eastland, complained to the OEO that the organization was virtually funding communist efforts of “extreme leftist civil rights and beatnik groups in our state,” the CDGM continued to operate.⁶⁴ Yet, the summer 1965 struggle for the CDGM caused members of the Delta Ministry to characterize the War on Poverty as a “war against the poor,” as many critics of the program had claimed, that contributed “to the further rape and emasculation of the Negro community, enabling the white political structure to intensify even more strongly its hold on community life.”⁶⁵ Although CDGM faced constant accusations, by October 1966 the program had spread to thirty counties. Yet, the OEO never fully regained support for the CDGM after Stennis and his committee attacked the organization and started to “comply with the demands of the Mississippi political establishment,” sociologist Charles Payne observed.⁶⁶ As a result, John Stennis and Governor Paul Johnson developed two poverty programs, one at the local level and one at the state level, to redirect state funding from OEO and block the CDGM from receiving such funds.

At the local level, Stennis and Governor Johnson used OEO funds to establish the flagship War on Poverty initiative—the Community Action Program (CAP)—in counties throughout the state. While the OEO “envisioned CAP as a cooperative effort by government, the private sector and poor people to attack the problems of poverty at the most basic level,” John Dittmer contended,

“white Mississippians wanted nothing to do with the program in which Blacks participated as equals.” However, due to the controversy surrounding the CDGM, “Governor Johnson and his allies came to see that by setting up CAP agencies in Mississippi communities, local whites could prevent the flow of federal dollars into program like the CDGM.”⁶⁷ As a result, the county boards of supervisors, who were mostly plantation owners and white supremacists, appointed all CAP board members in the Delta to advance an anti-Black agenda.⁶⁸ They selected only whites or wealthy blacks, mostly men, who were “always either silent or compliant when faced with numerous and powerful whites,” one OEO investigator observed.⁶⁹ For example, in Bolivar County the CAP board, composed of eight whites and eight Blacks voted to withhold OEO funds from the CDGM in the county, which resulted in the program using unpaid volunteers to run centers for over 1000 children.⁷⁰ Instances such as these occurred throughout the Delta.

At the state level, the Mississippi Action for Progress, Inc. (MAP) organization was developed in September 1966 to eventually replace the CDGM. Appointed by Governor Johnson, the twelve-member board—which included no women or poor people—was chaired by Owen Cooper, a successful businessman from Yazoo City who was chair of the Mississippi Economic Council and the Mississippi Chemical Corporation which at the time was one of the largest agro-chemical companies in the world. Johnson also selected people such as Leroy Price and Oscar Carr Jr., two wealthy Delta plantation owners, state NAACP President Aaron Henry and Mr. Charles Evers, brother of slain civil rights activist Medgar Wiley Evers. Less than three weeks after the board was selected, the Jackson Daily News released a story with the headline “12 MAN BOARD REPLACES CDGM.” This publicly signaled the widely known fate, at least for both Black and White Mississippians, of the CDGM.⁷¹

By October 1966, the OEO replaced CDGM director Tom Levin and forced the group to relocate its headquarters to the Milner Building in downtown Jackson, which housed the Mississippi division of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). At last, the OEO had finally given into the demands of Stennis and his committee after receiving a critical report of CDGM created by Senate Investigator Paul Cotter. In the report, Cotter found that CDGM centers were being run by staff that “clearly fall into the category of extremists” and could be using the children “as pawns to serve other purposes” such as spreading the doctrine of some civil rights activists.⁷² For example, the idea of Black Power was linked to the Head Start program in a cartoon drawn by Bob Howie of the *Jackson Daily News* that fall. The cartoon depicted a teacher standing in front of a classroom pointing at a blackboard with the words “BLACK POWER” written on it while a student with a T-shirt on with the words “HEAD-START” looked at the blackboard attentively.⁷³

On October 3, 1966 the OEO informed CDGM that their new grant proposal was rejected and that they would not receive any more funding. Eight days later MAP received three million dollars to operate in thirteen counties and another ten million dollars from Sargent Shriver. In response, activists mobilized to protest and demand that CDGM be funded, however, by this time the Mississippi congressional white power structure had already won. One year later, after countless attacks and charges against CDGM by the Mississippi congressional white power structure, the State Sovereignty Commission, and in turn, the OEO, the organization dissolved, and remaining funds were transferred to MAP in December 1967. By the Spring of 1968 the OEO cut Head Start funding in Mississippi by 25 percent in the context of looming conversations about financing the Vietnam War, a move dictated by John Stennis who controlled the financial underpinnings of the entire federal government.⁷⁴ This left many CDGM supporters and civil rights

activists even more suspicious of federal intervention in community affairs, especially efforts to address poverty, hunger, malnutrition, and food insecurity.

(Un)Discovering Hunger: Jamie Whitten vs. The United States Department of Agriculture

In the midst of the battle between CDGM and the Mississippi congressional white power structure, the confluence of federal farm aid to the white planter class and federal food assistance to poor rural Blacks attracted national attention in April 1967 when Senators Robert F. Kennedy of New York and Joseph Clark of Pennsylvania “discovered hunger” in the Delta.⁷⁵ As chairmen of the Senate Committee on Employment, Manpower, and Poverty, Joseph Clark scheduled hearings at the Heidelberg Hotel in Jackson to learn more about CDGM and assess “the effectiveness of the Mississippi phase of President Lyndon Johnson’s war on poverty...[and] determine by the hearings the success of the state poverty program and decide which of the programs should be continued.”⁷⁶ Historian Felicia Kornbluh added that Clark ultimately wanted “to illustrate the positive side of the War on Poverty.”⁷⁷ As mentioned in the previous section, CDGM’s Head Start program was the largest in the country at the time, and coming off of its Summer 1965 success, it was used as a model to show how funds from the War on Poverty can have positive impacts on communities. However, for poor rural Blacks and civil rights activists in Mississippi, the plight of CDGM was already leaving a bitter taste in their mouths.

On April 10, 1967, NAACP civil rights attorney and activist Marian Wright Edelman testified before the Senate Subcommittee (which also included Jennings Randolph of West Virginia, Claiborne Pell of Rhode Island, Edward M. Kennedy of Massachusetts, Gaylord Nelson of Wisconsin, Winston L. Prouty of Vermont, Jacob K. Kavitz of New York and George Murphy of California).⁷⁸ Followed by powerful testimonies about the inadequacies of state-administered federal food assistance programs from activists Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer (misspelled as “Hammer”

in the congressional record) and Mrs. Uita Blackwell, who were a part of the “Community Leaders Panel,” Edelman further spoke about the terrible social and economic conditions that many poor rural Blacks in the Delta lived in and petitioned the committee to travel to the area to see the poverty for themselves.⁷⁹ For up until this point, Delta poverty was virtually “undiscovered” and silenced by the political maneuverings of the Mississippi congressional white power structure. Any time the issue of hunger came up at the national level, for example, Governor Johnson, Representative Jamie Whitten and Senator James Eastland would deny such instances. In one televised interview, Governor Johnson went on record saying, “No one is starving in Mississippi. The Nigra Women I see are so fat they shine,” attempting to dismiss the prevalence of poverty in the state.⁸⁰

Yet, when Senator Jacob Javitz asked Mrs. Edelman whether she felt as if the counties in the Delta that “switched to food stamps in order to pressure the very Negroes who needed food the most,” her response shifted the dynamics of the hearing. Moreover, she exposed the conditions created by the local white power structure’s support of the food stamp program and campaign against the commodities program:

That’s right, Senator Javits, and many people feel too that it’s part of an overall State policy to not respond to the overwhelming need in the delta in order to force these Negroes out because they don’t want them here...People who have participated in civil rights have been cut off from welfare, and we have been able to document this in many counties. The whole welfare department is simply not functioning to serve the needs for the poor and particularly in the Negro community...so far the poverty program has done nothing to change the basic economic structure, which has to be changed, or to really deal with the root problem that is causing poverty...I wish the Senators would have a chance to go and just look at the empty cupboards in the Delta...Starvation is a major, major problem now.⁸¹

In response to her testimony, Senator Clark and Senator Kennedy decided to conduct a tour of the Mississippi Delta, drawing national attention to hunger and poverty among black

Mississippians. “It would seem that one of the first things the subcommittee should do when we get back to Washington” Senator Clark stated,

is to place the facts of this hearing which have been developed this afternoon about hunger in Mississippi, the inadequacy of the food stamp program, the totally inadequate diet in those areas where food is being given away, before the Department of Agriculture, and insist on a prompt answer as to what can be done about it.⁸²

Three days after the hearing, Kennedy and Clark returned to Washington, D.C. and met with Secretary of Agriculture Orville Freeman to discuss an intervention for the Delta. They pleaded with Secretary Orville to send emergency aid to the Delta since they had made a promise to Ms. Wright and other poor Mississippians that they would do just that. Ultimately, Kennedy and Clark were confronted with strong opposition from Senator Eastland of the Senate Agriculture Committee and U.S. Representative Jamie Whitten, chairman of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture, both staunch supporters of the dual organization of the south.⁸³ As a result, the senators fought for Mississippi and were able to influence the passing of the of the Public Health Service Act (Partnership for Health Amendment) of 1967 which authorized the Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare to conduct a 6-month “comprehensive survey of serious hunger and malnutrition and health problems related thereto in the United States.”⁸⁴ However, they underestimated Mississippi’s white power structure that operated beyond the state level into the department, led by Mr. Jamie Whitten of Tallahatchie County, known in Washington as the “permanent secretary of agriculture.”⁸⁵

Shortly after the passing of the amendment to the Public Health Service Act, Whitten was notified by Dr. George Irving, director of the USDA’s Agricultural Research Service that Mississippi was on the list of states to be surveyed. Whitten immediately saw this decision as a potential “smear campaign against Mississippi,” and worked to remove Mississippi’s name from

the list. As a result, Mississippi was removed from the list and would not be a part of the hunger survey, which further exacerbated conditions of blacks in the Delta. “This kind of bureaucratic-congressional maneuvering, exercised between the lines...in the quiet process of hidden power,” Kotz remarked, demonstrated the food power wielded by Jamie Whitten in the USDA.⁸⁶

Whitten’s power prevailed throughout the late 1960s into the 1970s and Mississippi remained absent from any government-based intervention plans. His ability to control local, national, and state politics ultimately contributed to the failure of the War on Poverty in the Delta.⁸⁷ Moreover, his devotion to undercutting any programs that would help the poor, especially poor blacks was aligned with the tactics of the White Citizens’ Council. One could argue that Whitten initiated a “cold war” against black progress even before the start of the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement. In response to his influence on the lives of Black Mississippians, activists like Fannie Lou Hamer sought to advance an agenda toward community sovereignty, which recognized that the only true way to change the conditions of blacks in the Delta would have to come from the communities themselves.

Conclusion

As stated at the outset of this paper, the story of Mississippi’s war against the War on Poverty is instructive. It illuminates the often-overlooked relationship between food, white supremacy, hunger and poverty during the American civil rights era. Yet, this relationship receives much less attention across scholarly and public conversations on the movement. These conversations tend to focus on civil rights activism and render strategies employed by white opponents invisible or peripheral. As a result, relatively little is known about the use of food power as a strategy to maintain white supremacy. This strategy was designed to undermine post-1965 civil rights activism that sought to address the economic and food realities of poor rural blacks. While national

actors of the civil rights movement faded in to the periphery of the Mississippi struggle after the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, local opponents of the movement took center stage. Led by the political maneuverings and food power wielded by congressmen Jamie Whitten, James Eastland, and John Stennis, opponents successfully dismantled anti-poverty programs designed to mitigate poverty and hunger in poor rural black communities. Such efforts at all three levels of government revealed a new wave of white resistance to the movement beyond the usual tactics of media manipulation, violence and economic intimidation.

Therefore, to understand this new wave of white resistance in the post-1965 civil rights struggle, new frameworks are needed to understand and analyze the many facets of white supremacy during the civil rights era. By shifting our gaze to the politics and strategies employed by white supremacists, I shed light on critical elements—such as the use food power—of the civil rights era that helps us fully understand the struggles of the past. In this way, food power could also be used as a framework to reveal unexplored aspects of the civil rights era and illustrate how food, and the control over access to food mattered to both proponents and opponents of the movement. However, more scholarly work is needed to gain an understanding of the legacies and implications of the relationship between food power, white supremacy and the civil rights movement. To do this, scholars will have to read the politics of white supremacy as an integral part of not only the civil rights struggle in Mississippi but of the larger black freedom struggle and the political history of the United States.

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PAPER THREE: BUILDING EMANCIPATORY FOOD POWER:

FREEDOM FARMS, ROCKY ACRES AND THE STRUGGLE FOR FOOD JUSTICE

Abstract

In narratives of the food justice movement, the concept of food power is often understood in the context of inequality and oppression. As a result, many food justice activists produce an analysis that focuses mainly on strategies to dismantle oppressive forms of food power, while placing the goals of the movement to create sustainable community-based interventions in the periphery. Yet, the pursuit of food justice must involve a dual process related to power: the dismantling of negative, oppressive forms of food power, and the building of positive, emancipatory forms of food power. In this paper, I juxtapose the historical case of Freedom Farms Cooperative in Mississippi and the contemporary case of Rocky Acres Community Farm in Central New York to explore this dual process. This inquiry reveals a neglected way of thinking about the concept of food power that illuminates the importance of *emancipatory* food power, both in historical and contemporary contexts. Furthermore, this different way of thinking about food power helps us see that project of dismantling oppressive policies and structures of food power must be accompanied by the project of building emancipatory food power. This dual move has deep roots in the arc of the long Black Freedom Struggle, which deepens the historical significance of community agency, resilience and autonomy in the struggle for food justice. It also provides insights that illuminate the possibilities of the movement in the future that includes issues of rights, land, self-determination, autonomy, agency, economic democracy and participation in the act of accessing food and beyond.

Introduction

In the summer of 1968, civil rights activist Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer was asked by the Wisconsin-based magazine *The Progressive* to discuss the relationship between food, hunger, race, and politics in Mississippi (White, 2017a). At the time, Hamer was known for her work with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and her speech during the 1964 Democratic National Convention. However, following the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, Hamer turned her attention to addressing the food needs of poor displaced black sharecroppers in the Mississippi Delta as a way to extend the civil rights agenda. In the interview, she articulated how food had become a critical weapon used by the white power structure to maintain white supremacy and keep blacks from seeking political power through civil rights activism. As the reporter surmised from her words, “If you are a negro and vote...to win some measure of freedom in white controlled counties, you go hungry” (ibid.). The use of food deprivation as a weapon was an old tool used by white slave owners during the Middle Passage to control slaves (Covey and Eisnach, 2009) or in times of war, but by the beginning of the 1960s there was a resurgence of this tactic in the Delta. Led by efforts of members of the White Citizens’ Council and their affiliates, food became a political weapon in the struggle to sustain white supremacy. In this instance, food was taken beyond its traditional role of sustenance and nourishment and transformed into a tool to maintain a larger of agenda of racism, inequality, oppression, and marginalization. Such instantiations can be largely understood as what some historians, legal scholars and political scientists describe as “food power.”

Traditionally, the concept of food power has been theorized as an oppressive power or weapon in the context of inequality, global politics and national security. Paarlberg (1978) defined food power “as the manipulation of international food transfers in the effective pursuit of discrete

diplomatic goals” (p. 538). Wallenstein (1978) argued that food power should be understood as the use of food as an economic weapon to achieve political goals. Drawing on the work of Wallenstein, Gross and Feldman (2015) argued that “food is not merely an economic commodity, not only because of its essentiality to life, but also because of its significance to human existence: our cultural experiences, our family and communal lives, our pleasures, and our bodies” (p. 433). They suggest that food power can be “exercised not only through direct control over food supply and food availability, but also by impacting people’s access to adequate food” (p. 380). Similarly, McDonald (2017) argued that food power can be “deployed indirectly, in the form of trade or humanitarian assistance, or directly, in the form of giving or withholding food in times of crisis” (p.3).

Together, these notions suggest that food power is a mechanism that creates uneven access to food (Howerton and Trauger, 2017) within social, political, economic, and cultural contexts. For instance, food power in the global context has maintained what sociologist Phil McMichael (2005) described as the “corporate food regime” and led to the corporatization of agriculture throughout the world. This corporatization depends on production methods employed by large farms and technologies developed by large agribusinesses (Lyson, 2004). As a result, access to the means to grow, consume, and distribute nutritious foods are impacted by the maneuverings of the corporate food regime and shape the narratives around local food and food justice in the United States today. Moreover, these conditions are perpetuated by various forms of inequality such as racism and classism (Alkon and Agyeman, 2011). While there is no consensus definition of food justice, Hislop (2015) describes it as “the struggle against racism, exploitation, and oppression taking place within the food system that addresses inequality’s root causes both within and beyond the food chain” (p. 24).

As an extension of Hislop’s description, most narratives suggest that food justice rises as “a direct response to the elitism and classism inherent in consumer-based food movements” (Minkoff-Zern, 2017, p. 161). Some scholars have argued that the movement rises “in response to both the whiteness of community food security and its privileging of producers’ needs” (Alkon and Guthman, 2017, pp. 7-8). Others have even argued that food justice, in the context of black communities, rises in response to the state-sanctioned discrimination and racism against black farmers in the south (Alkon and Norgaard, 2009). While these reasons are important and help us understand how food power impacts access to adequate food in both urban and rural areas, they simultaneously suggest that food justice rises solely in response to food power that sustains oppression in the food system. Similarly, many food justice activists produce an analysis that focuses mainly on strategies to dismantle oppressive forms of food power, while placing the goals of the movement to create sustainable community-based interventions in the periphery. Yet, the pursuit of food justice must involve a dual process related to power: the dismantling of negative, oppressive forms of food power, and the building of positive, emancipatory forms of food power.

In this paper, I juxtapose the historical case of Freedom Farms Cooperative in Mississippi and the contemporary case of Rocky Acres Community Farm in Central New York to explore this dual process. While Freedom Farms was created over forty years before Rocky Acres in a socially and historically distinct context, they share similar attributes: both created autonomous rural farm spaces for marginalized communities to grow food, resist inequality, and cultivate community agency. This inquiry reveals a neglected way of thinking about the concept of food power that illuminates the importance of *emancipatory* food power, both in historical and contemporary contexts. Furthermore, this different way of thinking about food power helps us see that project of dismantling oppressive policies and structures of food power must be accompanied by the project

of building emancipatory food power. This dual move has deep roots in the arc of the long Black Freedom Struggle, which deepens the historical significance of community agency, resilience and autonomy in the struggle for food justice. I begin by briefly describing the research approach I used to generate data for this analysis. Then, I offer the case studies of Freedom Farms and Rocky Acres to explore how emancipatory food power is articulated to cultivate food justice efforts. Lastly, I conclude with a brief discussion on what the cases of FFC and Rocky Acres reveal about rethinking food power as mechanism of emancipation, empowerment, and resistance, and its implications for scholars and activists who work on issues of food justice.

Research Approach

The data on Freedom Farms Cooperative was collected during the period of summer 2017 to spring 2018 and came from primary archival materials, selected scholarly secondary sources, and fieldwork in Mississippi. First, I conducted extensive archival research at the Mississippi Department of Archives and History in Jackson, Mississippi as the Medgar and Myrlie Evers Research Scholar-in-Residence. Specifically, I collected and analyzed the records of FFC in the papers of its founder civil rights activist Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer. The Hamer papers at MDAH include—along with her speeches, personal writings and newspaper clippings—detailed reports, internal documents related to organizational day-to day operations, budgets, background information, and correspondences associated with the development of FFC. Second, I connected my archival research with several scholarly secondary sources on Mrs. Hamer and FFC, including two key biographies of Hamer—Kay Mills’ (1994) *This Little Light of Mine: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* and Chana Kai Lee’s (2000) *For Freedom’s Sake: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer*—and other key scholarly works: Asch (2008), Nembhard (2014) and White (2017a). Third, I participated in a series of events and talks to commemorate the 100th birthday of Mrs. Hamer at

the Council of Federated Organization's (COFO) Civil Rights Education Center at Jackson State University. These talks were attended by many activists and scholars who knew and worked with Hamer. I also traveled to the original location of FFC in Ruleville, Mississippi and spoke with several key people who knew Mrs. Hamer while visiting the museum dedicated to her located near the Fannie Lou Hamer Memorial Garden Park. These experiences allowed me to meet with many people and have conversations about Mrs. Hamer and Freedom Farms which helped develop this case.

Data on the Rocky Acres Community Farm was collected during the period of spring 2016 to spring 2018 and came from participant observation, informal interviews and conversations, and one formal oral history interview conducted on the farm. Prior to and throughout conducting this research, I worked with Rocky Acres owner Rafael Aponte on several community food projects, programs, and events throughout Tompkins County, served alongside him on the county's food policy council, and volunteered on the farm regularly. We also are involved in other activist circles in Ithaca where we meet regularly to discuss community programming around employment, food and political education in communities of color. During my volunteer experiences on the farm, specifically, I assisted the farm in the building of infrastructure, planting vegetable crops, and participated in farm tours. In 2017, we received a grant from Cornell University to conduct community-based food justice research on his farm along with another community partner. Through these experiences, I developed a working research relationship with Aponte and obtained permission to document his vision for his farm and how he uses food justice to address the food needs of marginalized communities in Ithaca. I conducted the oral history interview in the Spring of 2016 at his farm and spent the day there with him and his wife. During the interview, we discussed his journey to the farm from his upbringing in the South Bronx, NY to the pastures of

Tompkins County and his farming experiences. After the interview, I connected the data generated with my own experiences working on the farm and research on local food systems in the county to help frame the case.

The Politics of Land, Food and Race in Sunflower County: Fannie Lou Hamer and the Freedom Farms Cooperative

During the 1960s, Sunflower County was an epicenter for hunger, racism, malnutrition, diet-related illnesses and poverty. For instance, by the late 1960s the county had the one of the highest infant mortality rates in the United States, over 4,000 black families in the county lived below the poverty line, less 0.2 percent of blacks owned land, and rates of diet-related illnesses continued to increase (White, 2017a; and Lee, 2008). The majority of blacks in the county were employed by the agricultural industry. Due to mechanization, they worked as low-paid day-laborers. It was a struggle for them to secure enough income and credit to access food. Their conditions and issues reshaped how poor rural blacks viewed land. Many saw it as a site of oppression and exploitation. However, civil rights activist Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer thought that if blacks could reimagine their relationship with land, in the context of freedom and economic independence, it would create a form of resistance that would empower them to survive. Building on her civil rights experience and strong belief in black self-determination, she founded the Freedom Farms Cooperative in 1969. At the core of this cooperative was an analysis about the importance of land, as she articulated this in her famous 1971 speech “If the Name of the Game is Survive, Survive,” delivered in her hometown of Ruleville:

Land, too, is important in the ‘70s and beyond, as we move toward our ultimate goal of total freedom. Because of my belief in land reform, I have taken the steps of acquiring land through cooperative ownership. In this manner, no individual has title to, or complete use of, the land. The concept of total individual ownership of huge acreages of land, by individuals, is at the base of our struggle for survival. In order for any people or nation to survive, land is necessary (Hamer, 1971).

By linking land and freedom, Hamer conceptualized a framework of cooperative ownership at the intersection of collective action and community resilience (White, 2017b) through FFC that opened “the door to many opportunities for group development of economic enterprises which develop the total community, rather than create monopolies that monopolize the resources of a community” (ibid.). In this way, cooperative ownership opposed the “individualistic notion of economic development, freedom, or progress” (Nembhard, 2014, p. 178), while allowing poor rural blacks to use their own land and knowledge of agricultural practices as a means to grow their own food, build community on their own land, and resist oppressive sociopolitical structures.

The core of FFC was a food-provisioning program that sought to create a reliable source of local protein and nutritious vegetables throughout the year. To accomplish this, FFC used funding from membership and individual contributors to maintain a community-led and supported “bank of pigs” and vegetable operation that fed over 1000 families throughout Sunflower County (Freedom Farm Corporation, 1973). The bank of pigs began with a donation of fifty pigs (45 pregnant females and 5 males) from the NCNW’s program of women’s self-help and empowerment (White, 2017a; and Nembhard, 2014). The purpose of this particular program, as stated by President Height, was to help “people meet their own needs, on their own terms” (Nembhard, 2014, p. 180). Aligned with Mrs. Hamer’s survival plan for rural blacks and philosophy of self-sufficiency and determination, NCNW’s donation yielded over 2000 pigs within three years that provided sufficient protein to displaced families and community members in Ruleville. Each family that participated in the program received a pregnant female pig to care for and maintain. Once the gilt gave birth to usually about nine to twenty baby pigs, the family was required to give the mother back to the bank and raise the rest of the pigs for consumption.

However, once two female pigs from the litter became pregnant, the participating family was then required to donate them to another needy family (Lee, 2000).

The vegetable operation began when FFC purchased their first forty acres of land west of Ruleville. Within the first two years, cooperative members produced thousands of fresh culturally appropriate vegetables to poor families including collard greens, field peas, corn, sweet potatoes, butter beans, okra, tomatoes and string beans (White, 2017a). Due to the high volume of vegetables produced, FFC often had surplus which were sent to many poor families in urban areas such as Chicago. By 1972, FFC acquired 600 more acres of land and expanded their operation to include cash crops such as cotton and soybeans that could be used to offset some of the farm debt (ibid.). They also dedicated land to be used for catfish raising and cattle grazing. As a result, FFC created an alternative food system that not only meet the food needs of poor rural blacks, but also allowed this population to use their own knowledge of agriculture to produce the food. To this end, poor rural blacks used food power to create an autonomous agrarian space to meet their needs and sustain their community.

Hamer Biographer Chai Kai Lee (1999) posits that “the guiding philosophy of the Freedom Farm was empowerment of a long-term nature” (p. 153). While this case focused on FFC’s elaborate food provisioning program, the cooperative also provided subsidized housing, education and social services to sustain poor rural blacks and whites as well (Asch, 2008). For instance, during the same year FFC purchased land to develop their vegetable operation they also developed their subsidized housing program. This program helped over forty families purchase homes with profits from FFC’s cash crops and small loans from banks willing to support the cooperative (Lee, 1999). By 1972, FFC extended their housing program and built seventy homes for displaced sharecroppers and farmworkers. As it relates to the education and social services, FFC generated

revenue to support the establishment of a grant and scholarship program. As a result, at least twenty-five high school students received scholarships and educational grants to “pursue college studies and vocational training,” and FFC assisted hundreds of needy families with what they called “Out Right” grants, according to a 1973 FFC status report (Freedom Farm Corporation, 1973). The “out right” grants were given “to families in need of financial assistance to purchase food stamps or medicines, clothing, and other necessities” (ibid.).

However, according to historian Chris Myers Asch (2008), “grand visions did not translate into lasting change” (p. 259). By early 1973, FFC began to experience financial troubles with keeping up with land payments and the board of directors decided to “separate the farming operation of the program from the social service activities” until the profit from “the farming can support the social programs” (Freedom Farm Corporation, 1973). This was caused by the fact that FFC, in part, “was more of a service organization than a profitable enterprise,” political economist Jessica Gordon Nembhard (2014) explained, “partly because of its ambitious goals and partly because it was trying to sustain a farming operation during a stretch of particularly poor weather” (p. 184). Hamer biographer historian Kay Mills (1994) added that “the greatest problem seemed to be management” that caused problems at FFC. Although Mrs. Hamer’s philosophy shaped FFC and she was the cooperative’s public face and foremost fundraiser, she was not a farm manager and was often not involved in the day-to-day operations of the farm. When farm manager Joseph Harris died in 1974 and Mrs. Hamer died in 1976, the farm and fundraising efforts of FFC suffered greatly.

Taken together, these dynamics caused FFC to collapse and sell all its land in the late 1970s. However, the significance of FFC’s ability to last almost a decade without any government support in its context is important to our understandings of emancipatory food power; it was one

of the most innovative food justice projects that was born out of the black freedom struggle during the American civil rights era. FFC was more than just a farming cooperative that provided a reliable source of local, nutritious foods to poor rural communities in Ruleville and the greater Sunflower County area. The analysis at the core of the cooperative was linked to a philosophy of self-determination, community action and resilience. This analysis created a space for communities to be in charge of ensuring their own liberation from oppression, exploitation, racism, poverty and other forms of inequality. Despite its ultimate closing, the vision for FFC lives on today through farm projects like the Rocky Acres Community Farm Cooperation in Central New York.

The Politics of Local Food and Race in Tompkins County: Rafael Aponte and the Rocky Acres Community Farm

Just south of New York Route 34B, in the small village of Freeville on the outskirts of Ithaca in Tompkins County, lies ten acres of land with a 19th century red barn on it with the words “ROCKY ACRES” painted across it in large white letters, visible from the main road. Next to the barn stands a white farmhouse where black farmer-activist Rafael Aponte and his wife Nandi can be found discussing the future of their farm. When most people drive by they assume that the Rocky Acres Community Farm is a standard part of the bucolic imagery of Central New York like the rest of the farms in the area and that the owners are dedicated to sustaining an agrarian lifestyle. While this is true, the owners of the farm look very different than most farmers in the area. Rafael, who grew up in the South Bronx’s Millbrook Projects and Nandi, who grew up in Charlotte, North Carolina, place the food and community needs of black and brown low-income communities throughout the county at the center of the farm’s philosophy and program. To do this, Rocky Acres creates a farm space for people “who normally aren’t part of that picture, both historically and

culturally,” as Rafael told me when I interviewed him about his farm. “For people of color, that history is full of exploitation and trauma.” The exploitation and trauma Rafael states are directly connected to instances of racial violence toward people of color, sanctioned by systems of domination organized around race, class, food, and agriculture. These systems of domination have penalized and disempowered, for example, black farmers (Green, Green, and Kleiner 2011) and Native Americans (Norgaard, Reed, and Van Horn 2011) in the United States, which impacted their respective relationships with land.

For black farmers, land historically provided a sense of security that went beyond farming as a means of food security that included economic security. In the case of Native Americans, land is historically and culturally embedded in the sacred relationship between nature and humans, linked to food provision and land stewardship. However, due to state-sanctioned land dispossession and genocide, some members of these communities now view land cultivation as a source of trauma linked to inequality and slavery (Alkon and Norgaard, 2009; Norgaard, Reed, and Van Horn, 2011; Green, Green, and Kleiner 2011; and Daniel, 2013). Drawing on this historical understanding of land relations, Rocky Acres converts the farm into a classroom to help communities realize and reclaim their own critical agrarian power in the context of race, history, culture and land (Carlisle, 2014). Conversations on the farm during workshops, especially with marginalized communities, usually include a discussion about the common capitalistic critique of how the “broken” transnational US food system has shaped their access to food. However, Rafa posits that the current food system

works extremely well. It is effective at turning out extremely high agricultural production to the point where we waste a lot of it and it's also very efficient at turning out inequities...What we have to do is create an alternative to that system while dismantling that machine that's running so efficiently because it's grinding both people and the planet up... Part of the problem that we are in now is that we're

so invested in capitalism that we uphold businesses, the concept of being an entrepreneur, having a business, and hold that as a value.

The critique outlined by Rafael is similar to a statement made by Historian Karl Polanyi in his most famous treatise *The Great Transformation* (1944/1957). Polanyi wrote:

To allow the market mechanism to be sole director of the fate of human beings and their natural environment indeed, even of the amount and use of purchasing power, would result in the demolition of society...Nature would be reduced to its elements, neighborhoods and landscapes defiled, rivers polluted, military safety jeopardized, the power to produce food and raw materials destroyed...no society could stand the effects of such a system of crude fictions even for the shortest stretch of time unless its human and natural substance as well as its business organization was protected against the ravages of this satanic mill. (Polanyi 1944/1957: p. 76)

The commodification of agriculture and food in which Rafael suggests is grinding up people and the planet is linked to the market mechanism Polanyi discusses and strongly supported by what I refer to as the dominant US corporate agriculture movement. While many scholars refer to corporate agriculture as a hegemonic market-based structure or regime (McMichael, 2005), I use the term movement to capture the actors of the system who ensure that it is sustained. These actors include such as agricultural colleges, government agencies and large transnational agribusiness organizations that support commodity or conventional agriculture (Lyson, 2007). This type of agriculture “is grounded on the belief that the primary objectives of farming should be to produce as much food/ fiber as possible for the least cost. It is driven by the twin goals of productivity and efficiency” (Lyson and Guptill 2004, pp. 371-372). As a result, the movement is often criticized by proponents of alternative agriculture for manipulating the factors of production (land, labor, and capital) to meet its goal of efficiency and productivity while ignoring the destructive effects (degradation of the environment, marginalization of small-scale farmers, conventional farming, unhealthy foods, processed foods, cheap foods) of this process on people and the environment.

This analysis is also at the core of the educational programs and workshops at the farm designed by Rafael, which seeks to provide a way to help communities understand the structural barriers and systems that impact access to food while also recovering “the forgotten agricultural history of people of color” (Bowens, 2015) to which Paulo Freire would describe as a form of “cultural emancipation” (Freire, 1974/2005). Recovering this forgotten story, specifically, illuminates how “communities in Africa which I’m descended from or in the Caribbean or in the Native American tradition,” Rafael explained, used agricultural knowledge in the past to create and sustain community. “Instead of coming at agriculture or some of the social issues from a disempowered place, I’m the owner here. We’re able to talk from a different place. It doesn’t start from the trauma and exploitation.” However, this analysis does not leave out how trauma and exploitation shape access to food and land, which is critical in creating a more complete picture and understanding of the food system in global and local contexts.

The power to facilitate the land conversation at Rocky Acres, moreover, represents Aponte’s ability to exercise an *emancipatory* form of food power and his “right to land,” representing what Kerksen and Brent (2017) describe as “land justice—the right of underserved communities and communities of color to access, control, and benefit from land, territory, and resources” (pp. 285-286). Land, as the foundation of all farming and agricultural practices, is always a struggle for food justice activists in both urban and rural areas. However, while Rafael has multiple enterprises and off-farm income that allows him to be able to maintain the land, he still struggles to address the food needs of low-income communities of color in a place like Tompkins County through Rocky Acres.

Since the early 1970s, the county’s largest city, Ithaca, has been an emblem of the alternative agriculture movement and nationally known for its devotion to the production,

consumption, and distribution of local, nutritious foods. This devotion is visible through a number of places like the Ithaca Farmers Market, the vegetarian-based Moosewood Restaurant, GreenStar Natural Foods Co-Op Market, Groundswell Center for Local Food & Farming, Cornell Cooperative Extension-Tompkins County, and the Cornell Small farms program. Additionally, the Ithaca farmers market offers five access points across the small city and some in the greater Tompkins County area. However, in a place like Tompkins County where all people should be able to access local food based on its availability, many low-income people and people of color still struggle to access it. For instance, approximately 14% of the county's residents are food insecure (Gundersen, et al., 2017), 17.1% of children are food insecure (Gundersen, et al., 2018) and 20.1% of all residents live below the poverty line (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016).

As an effort to address the social and economic realities of food insecure populations in Ithaca and neighboring towns, the Rocky Acres harvest box program is a prominent example of its food justice work. Started in 2015, the harvest box program “came about from conversations with Dennis Derryck who runs the Corbin Hill Food Project,” Rafael told me,

He aggregates a lot of produce from farms in upstate New York down to people in New York City. He had the understanding that the CSA model didn't work for everybody, so he started to think about what could. People were asking for certain things and wanted produce that they wanted at a price that they could afford. He thought it was important to put that at the center and working from there, he would go back to the producers and ask, hey can you do this?

Taking his cue from Derryck, Rafael partnered with the Youth Farm Project (YFP), a small farming program for youth ages 14-18 to learn how to grow food for their community, to create the harvest box. Through this program, Rafael and YFP aspire to place community agency at the center of the farm planning process and work toward the removal of “physical, cultural, and financial barriers to healthy food by providing produce at an affordable price while respecting the dignity and agency of its membership” (Youth Farm Project, 2018). As Rafael put it, the program

“is about meeting people, more so meeting people where they’re at, giving them control over something that they should have control over—their food system.” Even before a seed is placed in the ground each year, community participants fill out a brief questionnaire asking them to indicate the types of vegetables they would like the program to produce and the price point in which they would be willing to purchase them. Then, their recommendations are integrated into the larger growing plan of the farms alongside staple crops such as collard greens, cabbage, kale, watermelon, and even fresh herbs. While all community food needs are not met through this one program, community members are able to choose the types of food they would be willing to purchase in their box.

Each harvest box includes a weekly share of 5-8 pounds of local, fresh and nutritious foods at \$12 per box, unlike the Community Supported Agriculture model which provides seasonal shares that are paid for prior to the growing season. Participants can access this program at locations where low-income people and people of color are usually found, such as Pete’s Grocery and Deli, John’s Convenience store, the Southside Community Center, Titus Towers and the McGraw House in downtown Ithaca. For communities outside of Ithaca in the greater Tompkins County area, who lack the infrastructure or transportation to access local fresh foods, the harvest box is also accessible through the YFP’s mobile market stand. By bringing food directly to these communities, Rafael and YFP seek to provide a sense of dignity for participants and reflect a type of emancipation from the county’s local food scene to which McMichael and Moranji (2010) describe as “not simply about access to resources, but also the terms of access” (p. 240).

As a result, the harvest box program is “not quite a CSA,” but re-imagines how the CSA model can work when community agency is placed at the center. The program enables the community to use their agency in deciding what foods they want, where they want to access them,

and how much they are willing to pay for it. All funds generated by this program come from “the economic power of the community and based on the principle that everyone should have access to healthy, affordable food of their choosing and have the ability to make decisions on how that food is produced” (Youth Farm Project, 2018). Moreover, the program provides an avenue for low income people and people of color to actively resist the dominant local food movement in the area, not through direct confrontation, but through alternatives that reflect their needs and realities. In this way, by placing community food needs at the center of the farm and the farm planning process, the philosophy of FFC echoes through the food justice work of Rocky Acres.

As the Rocky Acres Community farm approaches its fifth growing season, the owners plan to increase their on-farm programs and continue to use food as an entry point to discuss issues of access linked to the experiences of those marginalized by the county’s vibrant local food scene. To do this, Rocky Acres will continue to use food justice and food sovereignty as guiding principles that are articulated as a vision and strategy of resistance to power struggles intertwined with structural of inequality that perpetuates inadequate access to food and agriculture. This vision includes a historical analysis that positions people of color in the context of land relations that provide beneficial outcomes and empowerment. As a case, the work of Rafael and Rocky Acres provides a way for food justice activists to think about their own local food systems in the context of race, history, culture and inequality.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have explored the dual process of dismantling negative, oppressive forms of food power and building positive, emancipatory forms of food power in the struggle for food justice. The food justice movement is a site in which activists must engage in this process to build a sustainable framework and organizing model. This intervention is important given that most

scholars and activists have tended to solely focus on the critical move of dismantling oppressive forms of food power while placing the constructive move of building emancipatory food power in the periphery. In contrast, the cases of Freedom Farms and Rocky Acres presented here demonstrate how activists at the farm level can develop a food justice analysis and agenda that critically engages with this dual process. Moreover, the cases illuminate the importance of emancipatory forms of food power, both in historical and contemporary contexts. Success in building these positive, emancipatory forms of food power in the past have been limited, as the Freedom Farm case shows. Yet, there are many new large efforts emerging today in urban places like Detroit, Michigan (White, 2011) and Jackson, MS (Akuno, 2017) and rural areas like Tompkins County, NY through the work of Rocky Acres Community Farm.

The cases of Freedom Farms and Rocky Acres also reveal how engaging in this dual process can push the food justice movement beyond issues of food access and better attend to issues of community agency, resilience and economic power in the movement. Although the Freedom Farms and Rocky Acres cases are situated in two socially and historically distinct contexts, they both position emancipatory food power within a larger struggle to achieve social, racial, economic and political justice. Moreover, the cases provide insights on how the food justice movement also rises in response to emancipatory food power wielded by marginalized communities. Here, food power is not understood as a mechanism that creates uneven access to food but as a form of emancipation, empowerment and resistance. It is sustained through the development of autonomous farm spaces and shaped by an analysis of land, race and liberation. This analysis could enable marginalized communities, especially black communities, to reimagine their relationships with land and reclaim their historical agrarian power. However, in order to sustain such politics and autonomous spaces, food justice activists and scholars will have to take

on the challenge of recovering the historical and contemporary significance of land access, self-determination and economic power.

Land access and economic power, specifically, are critical to the sustainability of the food justice movement and its ability to achieve its goals beyond ensuring access to nutritious food. As Mrs. Hamer said “Give us food and it will be gone tomorrow. Give us land and the tools to work it and we will feed ourselves forever” (Freedom Farm Corporation, 1973). Here, Mrs. Hamer suggests that food provision is only a temporary project if communities do not have the resources like land, which provides a way for us to think about how to sustain the movement going forward. Even though Mrs. Hamer’s Freedom Farms Cooperative could be viewed as a failure due to its ultimate closing, when positioned next to Rocky Acres, the case reveals that food justice work can be located within the larger historical arc of the long Black Freedom Struggle. In this way, Freedom Farms should not be viewed as unsuccessful or useless but as a key moment in a long tradition of resistance. This tradition of resistance goes back centuries and could be used a source of empowerment and learning in the future.

While this article is one attempt to demonstrate and document the importance of this dual process to the food justice movement, there is a need to explore and expand the food power analysis and investigate other cases, both historical and contemporary, to build additional forms and understandings of emancipatory food power. This type of food power has been overshadowed by oppressive forms of food power and neglected by both scholars and activists. As a result, in part, the food justice movement is currently at an impasse (Minkoff-Zern, 2017) and actively engaged in many conversations about the future of the movement (White, 2017b). Activists such as Rafael, alongside others like Karen Washington of Rise and Root Farm in Upstate NY, Malik Yakini of D-Town Farms in Detroit, and Leah Penniman of Soul Fire Farm in Grafton, NY are fighting to

ensure that the movement is not co-opted by powerful local food organizations that seek to remove racial inequality and self-determination from food justice conversations. Some activists are raising “questions about using resources and unearthing missing voices in agriculture,” sociologist Monica White (2017b) argues. Therefore, to contribute to these conversations, I propose that activists and scholars position an analysis that considers this dual process at the core of the movement’s organizing framework. This dual move related to power gives a way to not only understand contemporary instances food justice but also the long history of the movement in marginalized communities, especially black communities in the US. Thus, this new way of thinking about food power illustrates the use of food power as an analytic to understand and interpret contemporary and historical instances of food justice; extends narratives of the movement beyond a sole focus on oppressive forms of food power; and provides insights that illuminate the possibilities of the movement in the future that includes issues of rights, land, self-determination, autonomy, agency, economic democracy and participation in the act of accessing food and beyond.

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