



Decolonizing the Food System Webinar

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Notes



Host: Jennifer Navarro-Marroquin, Shape Up SF Coalition Co-Chair and Co-Founder of Community Well

Moderator: Shakirah Simley

Panelists: Dr. Rupa Marya, Esperanza Pallana, Anjali Prasertong

Read bios at www.shapeupsfcoalition.org/cbat/decolonizingfoodsystem.

Shakirah framed the conversation about what decoloniality in food and agriculture means:

This is not a new conversation, but it is an urgent one. If we are going to move to a safe, just, sound, non exploitative, delicious equitable food system, that means decolonizing our relationship to the land and to our diets. In order to do this, we must:

- Center food within the decolonial struggles and strategies in production, consumption, circulation, preparation, and representation within a global capitalistic economy. ([Berkeley Food Institute](#))
- Center indigeneity and solidarity with indigenous first nations people and make sure we uplift the bio, cultural, linguistic, and cognitive diversity across the planet. Uplifting a different way of knowing and being. ([Melissa Nelson](#))
- Liberate our diets from colonial relationships of ownership, production, and consumption both in the way we think and what we do. ([Decolonizing Your Diet](#), Calvo and Esquibel)
- We must have a serious conversation, direct action, and policy/organizational shift for redistribution of land, food sovereignty, and how we redefine our relationship to the land, to nature, and to each other. ([Rohini Walker](#), [Raj Patel](#))

Rupa, talk about the ripple effect of colonial capitalism on our bodies and the planet.

Decolonization is systemic change. Need to rearrange the structures of power that were put into place 400-600 years ago through a mindset that separated people from one another.

Inflamed - damaged relationships to one another and the web of life have resulted in chronic inflammation. It's not just a metaphor. The immune system's reaction to the threat of damage/chronic stress, intergenerational trauma, and PTSD, is an SOS response and that response is supposed to go quiet when a wound is healed. But when the stress response is ongoing, the body and immune system create collateral damage and we see that in the form of chronic inflammatory disease. We see traces of stress from all sorts of diseases (cancer, diabetes, chronic kidney disease, depression, anxiety, etc.) in our cells. But what is *more* predictive than your genome is the sum of your lifetime exposures, known as the [exposome](#). The exposome includes everything from breathing toxic air in east Oakland, exposure to racist police violence, access only to processed foods, or food insecurity... all of these things are more



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predictive of chronic inflammatory disease than your genetics. But this isn't taught in med school. If these diseases are being caused by a toxic exposome, in order to change the outcomes of these diseases, we need to start working on the level of the exposome, and that is systemic and structural change.

The exposome that was created at the dawn of colonial capitalism, a system of extraction, and cultural erasure has caused devastation not only for cultures and their relationship to food systems around the world but also to entire ecosystems. Societies that live with exposomes that aren't related to colonial capitalism have almost invisible rates of chronic inflammatory diseases. Tribes in the Amazon - these communities have no diabetes, no cancer, no age-associated hypertension.

How can we change a food system that has been structured under colonial capitalism to promote whole-systems health and whole-systems nutrition?

The work of the [Deep Medicine Circle](#) advances a replicable food system model and addresses climate, justice, health justice, economic justice, and social justice through *Farming is Medicine*.

Working on a 30-acre farm in San Gregorio (Ramaytush territory) and a 1-acre rooftop farm in Oakland.

There are 4 parts to DMC:

1. **Land back** - giving land back to native people and reasserting their sovereignty in their homelands and partnering together to advance their cultural and ecological restoration agendas. Care for the earth and the people while producing food. This is what always happened on the Ohlone territory. There wasn't hunger. People were not unhoused. No signs of that in the archeological record. The desperation we see today has been engineered by capitalism. We can engineer different ways through care.
2. **Frame all of our farmers as stewards of our health** bc our health starts in our soil and in how we grow our foods. DMC produced over 36K pounds of organic foods last year and is on track to double that this year through both their farms, and they do so by *restoring*, not extracting from the soil.
3. **Decommify all of our food** - Colonial capitalism has taken away the local relationships of food. Restore that relationship by creating urban and peri-urban corridors of connecting people and their foods to the people who create the foods.
4. **Food is Medicine** - When food has been liberated from the market mentality of capitalism, it can be a medicine. We can restore our relationships to our foods, through these acts of care. *Healthcare dollars can go straight to farmers to create health for everybody.*

What is philanthropy and funders' role in promoting and affirming the need for decolonizing our food and ag system? When talking about decolonization, what does that mean?

Esperanza - When we are talking about decolonization, we are talking about returning to the understanding that bodies are sacred. Our bodies are not separate from earth as a body and we are all interconnected. So when we think something is disposable, for example plastic, we find it embedded in our own bodies. We can talk about "returning" to an ecological relationship but in truth we are always in it. So by decolonization, we are talking about becoming intentional in our actions within that ongoing relationship.

What's the role of philanthropy - the practice of giving, reciprocity and caring for our vulnerable communities has been established across this land and is within many cultures, but the practice of ownership, taxation, tax breaks, etc. was not part of this land and came with [English Poor Laws](#) in the 17th century. Churches became defined as parish leaders and were mandated to provide relief and were tax-exempt within the colonies.

As the US was leaving the colonial structure and becoming an independent nation, there were also laws restricting White women who were part of families that had amassed unprecedented levels of wealth on this land [through stolen land and stolen labor], so they had no power to control those assets. However, White women could assert control and be "employed" through charitable orgs. There was a development of programs and institutions to condition populations to act within a colonized framework, such as hospitals, boarding schools, orphanages. Vulnerable populations were being directed or in the case of boarding schools abducted and forced through the institutions and their education programs to fracture their ties to their own communities and condition them to act within the colonized framework.

When we are talking about decolonizing, you have to look at where these practices have been embedded, such as public health. It's an area to disrupt those practices and utilize the platforms available to us to return back to our cultural and healing practices, our bodies and be in a conscious relationship with this planet.

Philanthropy can disrupt those practices. Move away from a charitable framework that is really about providing some relief from the harm caused by damaging systems rather than by disrupting the harm, which results in a narrative that the harm is a necessary outcome in order to deliver these services to those in need. If we are looking for equity and justice, we are looking for a different system and we have to look beyond charitable practices.

1. **Grant money should maximize risk.** Try all the things that haven't been tried. Shift power!
2. **Shift leadership to the communities** most impacted by systemic inequities. Reclaiming democracy by instituting **community-led processes**, where power is held by the community - not just getting community input and doing the work, but by truly shifting the power.
3. **Get out of the way!** Give the land back. Lift up the narratives and policy priorities coming from within and led by communities.
4. **Create pathways for community-controlled capital.** Ex. soda taxes - when it's coming from our pockets, it should really be led by us. It should be community-controlled capital.

Summary:

Philanthropy is derived from capitalist structures. Beyond charitable giving, it's also about doing less harm and mitigating the harm that has been done, and acknowledging that harm done within our capitalist structures.

When we talk about decolonization, we are talking about decarbonizing land, stepping out of the way, and shifting power. It's not just about giving money or time, but shifting priority setting, leadership, and voices, and ceding that to those most impacted by the problems we are trying to solve.

Institutions like education, medicine, and healthcare, were used to dismantle our cultures and diminish our belief systems. The federal government issues warnings that indigenous food practices would lead to lazy and morally defective children. The separation of our beliefs and land-based spirituality has impacted our self-care, our mental health, and well-being.

These structures operate outside of us and within us. We see that within the role of dietetics.

How can we unpack nutrition and dietetics and how it has been deeply impacted by racism and colonialism?

Anjali - Many similarities between the origins of philanthropy and modern dietetics which started in the 1800s to professionalize housework and have a profession for middle-class white women. [Eugenics](#) was also becoming very popular and tied into diet and food: the idea of controlling your environment to better yourself and better your race, with an emphasis on whiteness and white diets. There was also a valorization of science - an emphasis on nutrition as a scientific practice meant there is only one way of eating and being.

For example the Mediterranean diet is held up as the ideal way to eat but it doesn't acknowledge that the science backing this claim is done on primarily white men and is the most studied diet. There are many diets around the world based on grains, vegetables, fruit, and lean proteins, but since they don't have the money and scientific backing that the Mediterranean diet does, they don't have the same cultural cache. As a result, there is a historical bias for this one way of eating and it is pushed today on all sorts of people no matter what their cultural food preferences are.

How do we also address fat phobia in the context of dietetics and nutrition when it comes to decolonizing our bodies and whose bodies are accepted?

[Euthenics](#) is control of the environment. [Healthism](#) - our personal health is a full measure of our well-being and our personal responsibility. Therefore, if you aren't achieving the highest optimal health, then you have failed, rather than acknowledging the larger systemic forces that have an impact on our health.

There are echoes of healthism around personal food choices. So much stigma around being fat or having a different body. Fat phobia is not grappled with yet in public health systems. Imp to accept all different diversity. One way that healthism and stigma about different bodies and choices show up is the emphasis on nutrition education.

"Imagine If all the money that we put towards trying to educate individuals in the choices we think that they should be making, what if we instead reimagined what a body could look like?"

What is healthy? And what if well-being was more than just personal health but really the communal and community health of all of us?" - Anjali Prasertong

Shakirah: Organize at intersections. organizing needs to be inclusive and based on dismantling oppression, and recognizing who's in the room, and who gets to speak for whom. **If we decolonize, we are moving toward liberation. How do we emancipate ourselves from exploitive economic models within food, nutrition, and agriculture?**

Rupa Marya -

"When you start to look through other people's eyes about the land that we are on, and our places as people on that land, we can start to reorient ourselves into what it can be outside of the mentality of private property, outside the mentality of "ok, you're unhoused." We have millions of square feet of shelter that are vacant in SF right now. And how many people are still left outside on the streets? It's not just our food system. We are living in a toxic culture that will leave people disposable."

"To emancipate yourself, I see it as just starting to commit ourselves to the radical act of just noticing other beings, noticing where we are... This mentality of ignoring each other and treating each other like disposable is relatively new. We can actually undo that."

"Farmers and stewards of our land should be paid to be supported in their livelihoods to take care of all of us. When they are cared for, and the earth is cared for, we can all be well."

Esperanza Pallana -

"Our society needs to go through a transmutation of taking all of that harm that has occurred and feeding it through the filter of the land to basically become compost. Take all that nastiness and allow it to be a generative source. Let's put it back where we need it. But to do that, you have to recognize what it is. That's where we get stuck in naming what it is and where it belongs."

"Reindigenize the land and our cultures and look at what our land-based practices have been. Look at those stories, reconnect to those narratives, and breathe life back into them."

Anjali Prasertong - Need to divorce capitalism and "buying our way to health" and a good planet.

"What if food is a right that everyone had access to and expected that we would all live in a world where children in schools were served food that is free and everyone enjoyed the same things?"

In the current system, everything is stratified and everyone seems okay with that stratification. If you could afford it, then you can and should do it. Instead of just making it a right for everyone.

As a mother of two young children, the actual labor and time into feeding yourself and your family - what if that was communally shared rather than individually expected? What if food was available for all and didn't rely on the labor of mostly mothers to get it in front of you?"

What are tactical ways, models, and policies to move us to emancipation and liberation?

Food for All only happened in the middle of a pandemic and community-led infrastructure fed people during this time when the institutional systems failed.

The folks who control our food are fewer and fewer as corporations consolidate and control our waterways and our land. **How do we decommodify these places? Where do we target?**

Esperanza -

- Support regional food systems In CA, our central valley farms are being flooded. The more we support healthy agriculture practices, we ensure food in the long term. Cooperative models and collective action.
- Support shifting away from individual acts and looking at the individualized understanding of nutrition and support and create efforts that ensure nourishing food within communities. Disrupt predatory marketing and predatory placement of fast food companies. Disrupt that cycle to support the presence of institutions that do care and work with farmers supporting the regional foodshed.
- Visit cooperative community-led markets like [Mandela Grocery Co-op](#) - their shelves tell a story of what the folks who run the co-op want for their community. No high-fat or high-salt foods in their store. Support the existence of these structures that will foster the next generation within the community.

Anjali -

- Support efforts to improve school, prison, and congregate eating for seniors.
- Support local businesses that are trying to change things for the better for the community.

Shakirah -

- Support local organizing work to make food a human right on local and state levels. California has the fourth largest GDP and is one of the largest food exporters in the world, yet 1 in 7 Californians suffer from food insecurity. Needs local and state policy change with the voice of the community front and center. Local policies and laws are being moved to democratize the process for fruit and vegetable supplement for local farmers, food as medicine, and how MediCal can be part of that process.
- Advocacy to make food a human right. [People's Food and Farm Project](#) - released a vision of a fair, equitable, and decolonized food system

Rupa -

- In CA - stop all fossil fuel-based inputs in farming systems. We are destroying our soil.
- Break up large farms into smaller systems to heal the land.

- Advance [Care Economics](#) - move policies like [Food as a Public Utility](#). Right to universal basic nutrition. Not just any food but food that is grown locally through urban and periurban farms.

What is possible? What keeps you grounded? What gives you hope? How does decolonization show up in your personal lives beyond food?

Esperanza - Asking myself how it shows up in my own sense of my body, in my relationships, in my work. Every time it comes is an opportunity to decolonize. It's an opportunity to ask myself what needs to be composted and how that process can be used for healing. What makes me think this change is truly possible is that those practices and opportunities are embodied by the people I am in community with. It's happening now. I witness the beauty of it, the healing, the grieving. All of that is happening in real time.

Anjali - Gets hope from being in community with others. Being in nature. Hearing stories of people doing it elsewhere in the world.

How can food banks decolonize and contribute to decolonizing our food system?

Rupa - *"Food banks are part of the market failure of capitalist agriculture. They can't be decolonized. They can abdicate their role and give all their money to farmers who have been historically marginalized in the food system to just feed the community. That's what we want to see happen is moving those funds - the funds that go to mitigators of capitalist violence directly to farmers in the urban and periurban and rural communities to feed the people and heal the land."*

How can we do this work in a non performative way?

- Anjali - Take action - getting out of the way. Cede power. When something is performative, it's about you and how it makes you appear. True change comes from being in proximity to those most impacted and doing what you can to support them in bringing about the change. It's not about you.
- Shakirah - "Sometimes that change hurts. It's messy. It's not polite. It's disruptive. But sometimes that's what's needed to get towards justice."
- Rupa - Show up for injustices of colonization that are happening every single day. How to repair the ways that we have failed to care for our fellow human beings? Repair those severed connections to cease the performative actions.

Resources

- [Grantee Partners - Food and Farm Communications Fund](#) - visit the grantee list to be inspired and get involved.
- [Food and Agriculture Action Coalition Towards Sovereignty \(FAACTS\) political action dinner](#) - May 19
- [Deep Medicine Circle](#) - looking at how to build out more rooftop farms and grow free food for the community.
- [Inflamed](#)
- [Offshoot | A Growing Culture | Substack](#) - stories of hope and different food systems

- [CSPI Indigenous Communities and Food Justice](#) Panel by CSPI: May 16, at 12 PM PST
- www.native-land.ca
- www.sogoreate-landtrust.org/shuumi-land-tax/

Books about the intersection of body size, eating behaviors, and colonialism:

- [Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia](#) by Sabrina Strings
- [Belly of the Beast: The Politics of Anti-Fatness as Anti-Blackness](#) by Da'Shaun Harrison
- [It's Always Been Ours: Rewriting the Story of Black Women's Bodies](#) by Jessica Wilson

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