Critical review

Why 'race' matters in struggles for food sovereignty: Experiences from Haiti

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The 2008 Global Food Crisis was a major blow to Haiti's already poor majority. On the cusp of the crisis, nearly 50% of Haitians were undernourished (FAO/UN, 2008; ActionAid, 2007), and the nation was extremely food import dependent – with food imports accounting for roughly 60% of national consumption. From October 2007-April 2008, price spikes on staple foods like rice, corn and beans pushed thousands of households below subsistence levels, so that by April, over 2.5 million Haitians were in need of food assistance (UNCT, 2008). Acute food insecurity was the driving force of widespread protest that erupted in the capital of Port-au-Prince against 'lavi chè' [the expensive life].

At the time of the protests, I was working in Port-au-Prince, my days mostly devoted to researching the implications of structural adjustment on Haitian peasants, and shopping for food in the local màche [open-air market]. On one hand, I was learning, as scholars and advocates have emphasized, that decades of trade liberalization, declining competitiveness of Haitian agricultural exports, and the rural exodus of peasant farmers were at the heart of the country's extreme food insecurity (Schwartz, 2008; McGuigan, 2006; Trouillot, 1990; Dupuy, 1989). On the other hand, I was observing that food preferences also seemed to amplify food import dependence. Specifically, I noticed that foreign foods tended to be held up as superior, while so-called 'peasant' foods were often disdained; food hierarchies mirrored social ones.

One particular incident was striking. One morning, I ventured to the màche on a quest for pitimi [locally grown sorghum or millet] and my request was met with giggles and surprise - "look at the blan looking for pitimi!?" the women laughed, calling her friends over to check out this curious foreigner. Since I was not unfamiliar with being a source of entertainment, I laughed along, bought a ti mamit [small can] of pitimi, and was on my way. However, I did not understand why my search for pitimi was amusing until I later

asked a friend what the fuss was about. Her response was plain: "Pitimi pa monte tab" - Pitimi isn't fit for the table. I was confounded. Pitimi pa monte tab? How could it be that people of such a hungry nation – infamous for being the poorest and most food insecure country in the Western Hemisphere – have such disdain for this inexpensive, energy-dense, locally grown cereal?

Food sovereignty movements and food justice advocates tend to assume that, given the choice, consumers will be inclined to choose traditional foods, foods that they have been raised on, foods that are grounded in local ecosystems. At the same time, it is often taken for granted that the root causes of 'poor' dietary choices are financial and time poverty. In this paper, I draw from the case of Haiti to challenge these assumptions, illustrating how food preferences do not always align with tradition, and that even the poorest members of society sometimes opt to pay more for prestigious foods in an attempt to improve their social standing. I ultimately argue that possibilities for ecologically integrated and pro-poor food systems demand that small-scale producers, and locally-grounded food systems are revalued.

There is a rich body of literature on the links between consumption, identity formation, and social mobility that point to various non-economic motivations for food choices (See: Appadurai, 1988; Mintz, 1985; Bourdieu, 1984). Recent literature in food studies has shed light on the relationship between consumer ethics and consumption patterns, with particular emphasis on the links between 'ethical consumption' of fair trade and organic food, identity formation, and social justice (Johnston et al., 2011; Goodman, 2004). In addition, a growing and promising body of research illustrates how consumers food choices are driven by a 'moral economy', which is in part geared towards understanding how ideas of health, environmental and labour practices, and cultural and religious values impact consumer choice (Morgan, 2015). The hope is that this research will spur new ideas for ecologically nourishing and pro-poor food systems. Indeed, there has been exciting progress in the world of food justice in the past ten years, with

'locovore' and food sovereignty movements gaining strength in many contexts. Tied to this is growing evidence that food choices driven by a 'moral' economy can facilitate powerful food justice movements, community and family cohesion, personal fulfillment, and a revalorization of small-scale agriculture and food producers (Morgan, 2015; Moisio et al., 2004; Kloppenburg et al., 2000). While this offers much reason for optimism, research that explores relationships between ethical consumption and alternative food movements tends to be focused on high-income countries, and there is need for broader examination of the links between identity formation, food choices and alternative food movements in the Global South.

To help scale-up the impact and alliances of food justice movements – and in the context of what is now undeniably a Global Food Economy (Weis, 2007) – food studies researchers need to conceptualize the link between food, identity and morality at a transnational scale. In particular, we need to consider how colonial legacies, and processes of globalization and Westernization in many contexts can influence food preferences in ways that perpetuate social inequality and undermine healthy and pro-poor food systems. For example: How do aspirations to 'Westernize' impact diets and agricultural livelihoods? What happens when a peasant doesn't want to eat 'peasant food?'

In this paper, I examine the relationship between food meanings, dietary choices and food insecurity in Haiti, drawing attention to how dietary aspirations biased towards 'foreign' foods exacerbate the political economic struggles of peasants and undermine Haitian food systems. I draw from ethnographic research conducted between November 2010 and July 2013 in Haiti's Artibonite valley, including over 200 food preference surveys with rural dwellers, which reveal clear food hierarchies that mirror social ones. My hope is that the case of Haiti will shed light on how *ideas* of food – food meanings – can be a significant barrier to healthy, ecologically rooted food systems, and will both help motivate more research around the relationship between social prejudice and food systems in other contexts, and will highlight the necessity for collaborative efforts to revalorize peasants and the food they produce.

Scholars have long emphasized the link between consumer consumption and identity construction, shedding light on how people consume not only to service biological needs, but to portray ideas about themselves, and to enact a superior social position (Bourdieu, 1984). Dietary practices, too, are constituted by the world of ideas: food consumption is a means of self definition, and is used to legitimize social difference. In Haiti, as elsewhere,[1] improvements in social status are often sought through the consumption of prestigious goods, including food. As might be expected, food hierarchies tend to correspond with price, with expensive foods carrying more social value. However, in Haiti, prestigious (and conversely, disdained foods) are also impacted by the perceived status of the location of production, and the social standing of the producer. In the collective imagination, prestigious foods are foreign foods and are associated with the lighter-skinned urban elite, while people turn their noses up at foods associated with Haiti's black peasantry.

There has been much debate around the complexities of race and class-based social divisions in Haiti, and while ideologies of racism remain "deeply interwoven into the fabric of the society" (Thomas, 1988, 19), it would be inaccurate to claim that the principle dividing line in is based on colour, especially considering the gaping economic disparity between Haiti's urban elite and peasant masses. Yet, there is no question that skin colour influences status and that phenotype corresponds with wealth: while the 'lighter-skinned', deep-pocketed elite generally live in the capital, and

concentrated in the mountain suburbs of Petionville and Kenscoff, poorer and 'blacker' segments of society – those where nearly 90% are below the poverty line – live *andeyo* [in the countryside] (IFAD, 2014). While the nature of race and class relations are thorny, there is a strong collective sentiment that being Haitian means being "black", while being lighter-skinned gains one symbolic affiliations with *lòt bo* [literally: 'the other side', or overseas, and generally used to describe Miami, New York or France]. As Trouillot (1990, 38) tells us:

> To be Haitian in Haiti means to be black, and the more 'black' one is, the more Haitian one can be. On the other hand – and much like the colonists – Haitian elites up to the present implicitly claim the right to prescribe limits to their local identity, modulating it according to their particular emotional and intellectual attachment to France.

Decades ago, scholars like Fanon (1963) and James (1964) stressed how the race-based social hierarchies imposed during colonial slavery – including the degradation of 'black-ness' – has created persistent ideas of inferiority among many post-colonial populations. In Haiti, this has two important scalar dimensions. At the regional level, the internalization of inferiority has resulted in outward-looking attitudes, including a fixation with Western culture and ways of being, and broad aspirations to Westernize (Mehta, 2009; Allahar, 2006; Bellegarde-Smith, 1980). At the domestic level, the social hierarchy is tied to the class/colour continuum, with Haiti's black peasantry irrefutably perceived as the most inferior members of society (Steckley, 2015; Schwartz, 2008; Dash, 2001; Trouillot, 1990). In an economic climate where meaningful opportunities for upward class mobility (i.e. education, jobs) are scarce, and in the absence of possibilities to shed ones skin, although skin whitening cream's are not uncommon, peasants often seek opportunity for symbolic mobility, often by imitating the styles, habits and values of the elite.

The practice of mimicry as a means to climb the social ladder is widely recognized, and have drawn attention to the pervading practice among post-colonial people to emulate the style, language, and habits of the white planter class in an effort to erase, or downplay any signifier of 'black' origin (Doumerc, 2003; Bhabha, 1994; Glissant, 1981; Trouillot, 1990; Naipaul, 1967; James, 1964). In Haiti, commodities associated with the wealthy and lighter-skinned elite – including both the domestic elite, and foreign classes of urban society – can carry remarkable social purchase. At a broad level, consumer preferences for elite, foreign foods have emerged in two principal ways. In part, the penetration of North American ideology, values, and culture through foreign media, and corporate food chains has elevated the social value of foreign foods – this is akin to dietary Westernization in many other low-income countries (Weis, 2007; Watson and Caldwell, 2005). However in Haiti, the emergence of Western food marketing and transnational food chains are being transposed onto a cultural landscape in which "white", foreign ways of being – including foreign tastes – tend to be held up as superior in the collective imagination, so that food preferences are also a consequence of colour-coded class hierarchies that were imposed during the colonial period and persist today.

To illustrate, *Soup Joumou* [pumpkin soup] is a good place to start. *Soup Joumou* is a widely celebrated national dish. In commemoration of Haitian independence, *Soup Joumou* is consumed throughout the country on January 1st. It is a national symbol of liberty and freedom. Whether fact or fiction, one of the widespread conceptions of *Soup Joumou* is that during colonialism, it was a dish reserved exclusively for the white planter class. After a long and bloody struggle, Independence was finally proclaimed on January 1st 1804, enabling culinary liberation, and the consumption of

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[1] In post-colonial states for example, aspirations to 'Westernize', influence a range of behaviours and consumer preferences, from clothing and film preferences, to dietary ones (Mehta, 2009; Orlove, 1997; Watson and Caldwell, 2005).