8 **Cultivating community resilience: working in solidarity in and beyond crisis**

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I live in Michigan's Upper Peninsula on the shores of Lake Superior, and so I waited until mid-March 2020 to start my tomato seeds and the beginnings of the garden I would plant in early summer. As other gardeners can tell you, it is easy to start too many; the seeds are so small and there are so many contingencies. What if some of the seeds don't germinate, or the soil gets a fungus, or the plants are damaged in the process of repotting and replanting? I didn't yet know that I'd share these extra plants among friends, neighbors, and students as they, too, started gardens, many for the first time.

As I tended these seeds, cities and states in the United States initiated voluntary and mandatory stay-at-home orders in response to COVID-19. Soon after, stories about food supply chain fears and the unsafe working conditions of food laborers filled the news. Grocery store shelves emptied. Families lost childcare, jobs, and, in too many cases, lives.

In the spring of 2020, Women, Food and Agriculture Network (WFAN) began to virtually organize members in response to the developing crisis. In addition to being a gardener, I am also a rural sociologist studying agriculture and food. My work is informed through my relationships within the Women, Food and Agriculture Network (WFAN), a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization with a mission "to engage women in building an ecological and just food and agricultural system through individual and community power" (WFAN, n.d.). I also serve on WFAN's board. WFAN began as, and remains, the only national sustainable agricultural non-profit organization organized by and for those identifying as women and as non-binary. Started in Iowa in the mid-1990s, the organization now has national reach and includes those working in sustainable agriculture, food systems, food justice, and community health and nutrition.

WFAN's COVID-19 organizing began by emphasizing "community-centered tools which are significant in ensuring that community health is a critical priority, not just now, but always," as described by staff member Amy Kousch in WFAN's Profiles in Resilience (Kousch, 2020). Then-staff-member

Moselle Singh invited WFAN members to join a virtual discussion about localized mutual aid efforts and encouraging knowledge-sharing across the network. Together, staff members Kousch, Singh, and Almitra began what would become known as WFAN's Growing Community Resilience program.

I took part in these calls, adding updates to shared spreadsheets and reporting from my own community. The discussions, initially held weekly, evolved in their format from free-form forums to inviting members to volunteer to share more specific examples of grassroots community collaboration. For example, board member Sarah Carroll shared her efforts to organize mutual aid by knocking on doors within her Minneapolis neighborhood: "It has been heartwarming and securing to know that we actually have many of the resources we need right here in our neighborhood" (WFAN, 2020a). The early calls lasted a couple hours each, as we compared notes on what was happening where we lived and created a space of care and support despite the escalation of cases reported each day in the news. This was needed space to share strategies and resources as we worked through the beginnings of a global pandemic event many of us continue to experience in isolation.

In late April, WFAN's Kousch (2020) had written the following in a blog about the Growing Community Resilience meetings:

I think our power in adapting, despite harm, for generations, is serving us during our current public health pandemic and paradigm of trauma – and perhaps in ways that we might not readily name. I suspect, though it is far too early to make any prediction, but my guess is that when we collectively begin to sift through the processes that authentically serve communities in an equitable way, we will find that these undervalued tools of listening to hear, acting with understanding, and creating intentional spaces of discourse – these tools that are often forged by trauma (whether individual or collective), resilience and vulnerability – these will be the tools that we will critically rely on to rebuild from a well-spring of respect for living systems.

Her words foretold a year in which the shared violence of the pandemic and white supremacy would push us to hone those tools.

In late May, I finally planted my tomato plants just as protests and vigils began to fill our communities. That same week, a police officer in Minneapolis killed George Floyd over an alleged counterfeit US\$20 bill; the tragedy brought renewed attention to the murders of Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor earlier that spring. WFAN's Growing Community Resilience meetings refocused to identify how the pandemic's food crisis intersected with our nation's racial justice crisis, and what WFAN members could do to educate themselves and take action on both fronts. Soon

after, WFAN shared a Statement in Solidarity with the Movement for Black Lives (WFAN, 2020b), collaboratively written by staff and board members to acknowledge WFAN's position as a majority-white agricultural organization in a food system rooted in Indigenous genocide, enslaved labor of African Americans, and the continuous exploitation of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, people of color). In the statement, WFAN committed to prioritizing anti-racism and challenging members through shared learning and hard conversations not only about the patriarchal control of resources and land in agriculture, but white settler control. At the same time, WFAN as an organization matched the financial contributions of WFAN board and staff members to BIPOC-led food and agriculture groups.

As WFAN organized the Growing Community Resilience across the national network, I organized locally with community partners where I live. I had planned to spend the summer engaging in community-based research with the Western UP Food Systems Council (WUPFSC), studying our regional food systems knowledge-exchange networks and planning feasibility studies for future collaborative infrastructure through interviews and listening circles. The pandemic shifted our plans as project partners and I did not want to place more burden than was already mounting upon our communities during the pandemic.

Quickly, we pivoted from planning interviews and listening circles to creating biweekly virtual grower meet-ups and a listserv for farmers' markets, farmers, and community gardeners to share information and questions about what the summer season would look like, resources needed, and how to move forward. What did our community gardens need to organize for the coming season? Where could people find seed, soil? Should the farmers plant planning for the summer farmers' markets to still take place? How would we support those most vulnerable in our community, for whom food is already difficult to access even in non-pandemic times? Since our season starts so late, we had the advantage of time on our side to learn from others downstate and across the country who were already actively coordinating gardens and farmers' markets. We were also lucky that we'd already been organizing locally over the past two years as a grassroots group of local farmers, gardeners, teachers, food advocates, planners, public health representatives, and members of the Keweenaw Bay Indian Community's Natural Resource Department.

WUPFSC's is located within a region of Ojibwe homelands and territory extending into northern Wisconsin; that I have the privilege as a white settler descendant to work and live on these lands was made possible through the Treaty of 1842 between the United States and the nations of Keweenaw Bay, Lac Vieux Desert, La Courte Oreilles, Lac Du Flambeau, Red Cliff, St. Croix, and Sokaogon Mole Lake. The Keweenaw Bay Indian Community

and Lac Vieux Desert Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, both located within the contemporary boundaries of the Western UP, lead and inform different parts of the WUPFSC's efforts, sharing teachings, and building community through food sovereignty events and other opportunities to learn from our more-than-human relatives what it means to take care of our shared home.

The Great Lakes region is a place of food abundance. Wild and foraged foods and medicines, gardens, fish; the gifts of these lands and waters have fed people since time immemorial. And yet, the copper boom and subsequent deindustrialization of these lands, along with the continued contamination of its waters, has resulted in high rates of economic instability and food insecurity. Informal food exchange in the UP, including gifting and bartering, are important, though often devalued, forms of food access among both the Ojibwe and the immigrant/settler descendants. We centered these traditions in our local food organizing in response to the pandemic. Our organizing intentionally worked to avoid the stigmatization of poverty, insisting upon fresh food as a right and emphasizing reciprocity and mutuality, as shared through the teachings of Keweenaw Bay Indian Community Natural Resource Department collaborators.

An emergent group from WUPFSC started a program they named "Growing from the Heart," to remove the stigma from food assistance in this time of crisis by inviting anyone from our communities to grow and safely share fresh produce with our neighbors via existing food service programs, pantries, and front-porch steps (WUPFSC, n.d.). Students involved in this effort started a student-run collective growing gifted seeds and plant starts on three different private properties. Members of this Down to Earth Garden Collective included LGBTQIA and BIPOC students for whom gardening was new; together they prioritized food sovereignty as a form of healing with one another and the Earth. Their leadership in our now-virtual food systems organizing pushed WUPFSC to more intentionally acknowledge not only settler colonialism but also anti-Black racism in our communities.

In the summer of 2020, as we began to try to navigate what the pandemic would mean for our communities, we also began to incorporate discussions about racial equity within our WUPFSC meetings. We'd taken for granted that because our group was comprised of Ojibwe and white settler descendant members that we must already be paying attention to race; we learned, though, that we were not being intentional about (un)learning the ways in which anti-Black racism shaped our food system. We began and continue to discuss together what it means to engage in food-systems work on treaty lands and in this acute moment of crises; to this end, we have devoted part of our biweekly planning meetings to collaborative learning, our members rotating to lead different discussions or reflective activities about power and justice.

WFAN's Growing Community Resilience meetings transitioned to take place biweekly and then monthly; their format evolved, too, moving to a more structured space including prompts and readings to inform collective discussions. The meetings began to break out into caucus or affinity groups for a good portion of the time together, white folks meeting with white folks and BIPOC folks meeting with BIPOC folks in Zoom break-out rooms. The purpose of these spaces was to intentionally cultivate communities of support and also actively engage white people in critical examination of how whiteness and gender have worked together to maintain the status quo in agriculture and food systems. As a white woman, I attended the white caucus groups, and often volunteered as a board member to facilitate one of the white caucus break-outs. After intentional discussion in our caucus groups, we would rejoin at the end of the meetings with the other groups to debrief together.

Offline and in safely-masked distanced communion with members of my community, I took to the streets of my small town as so many did across the country and globe. In addition to marches, I joined one of my departmental colleagues in a weekly vigil on the bridge downtown to hold signs for justice for Breonna Taylor and George Floyd. The students from the Down to Earth Garden Collective joined her, too, and so the vigil for racial justice became a part of the tending to the gardens, a place and space both to bear witness in our majority-white community to the continued harm of white supremacy and to organize resistance as we worked together to feed our neighbors.

As we know too well, there is so much work to do – even among those already committed to food justice and equity in agriculture – to connect how our relationships with the land are mirrored in our relationships with each other. The continued police brutality targeting Black lives and the health inequities exacerbated by COVID-19 are preexisting conditions of our larger economic system. Similarly, the recklessness of Tyson, Smithfield, and other agrifood corporations in failing to protect their workers during this global pandemic are externalized costs in a system of food production and national food policy that prioritizes cheap food and commodifies the lives of agricultural and food laborers (Davis 2020; Douglas 2020; Valdivia 2020). This continued violence is not accidental, but the outcome of hundreds of years of white supremacy created to power capitalist expansion; first through plantations and now through corporations.

Monica White's (2018) *Freedom Farmers: Agricultural Resilience and the Black Freedom Movement* analyzes how Black agrarianism has created, and continues to create, alternative systems and community transformation. White writes:

Community resilience is a way for a community to absorb a disturbance and reorganize itself while undergoing change. White resilience

as a concept often does not take into account structural approaches and community engagement that includes indigenous knowledge and emotional experiences, and the kind of interracial and intraracial exchanges that we need to adapt.

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Across the country, in cities and in rural communities, people are calling attention to the consequences of white resiliency and pushing for accountability and change. The WFAN staff had not read White's work when they first began to facilitating the "Growing Community Resilience" efforts ("it's on order!" one shared with me when I asked), yet their organizing aligns with White's call for structural change, critical reflection, and community engagement, as well as valuation of the knowledges already held among the many diverse members of our communities, in the shared work toward transformation. White's emphasis on interracial and intraracial exchange, as well as WFAN board member Sarah Carroll's point that the resources and knowledge we need to attend to these crises are "right here," in our own communities, empowers and compels us to begin the hard work of transformation now as we learn from and care for each other.

WUPFSC's plans for the summer of 2021 look a lot like they did last summer; the virtual planning is already underway. The programs we started a year ago will continue and, hopefully, grow stronger. In our own local food organizing in the western Upper Peninsula, even across Indigenous-settler community divides, the pandemic highlighted the work we must do to begin to dismantle the ways white supremacy shapes our collaborations.

WFAN's Growing Community Resilience calls have been underway for one year and now take place monthly. Attendees shift from month to month, though some attend every meeting. In late February 2021, I helped to facilitate an affinity group discussion with other white women about our connections to land, engaging in a reflective exercise in which each of us examined how our race/ethnicity, gender identity and expression, sexuality, and access to healthcare, education, and networks influenced our connections and/or access to land. We discussed the Justice for Black Farmers Act and how to develop understanding for and support of reparations in our communities. I remain humbled and inspired by the depth of engagement possible with people previously strangers who are similarly committed to change and are in different places in the work of organizing in and with their communities. WFAN is working now to integrate these critical conversations about whiteness, power, and racial justice underway in the Growing Community Resilience program across all its programming.

It is now March 2021 and we are a year into the pandemic. I have three jars left of the tomatoes I canned from my garden last year; time capsules

of a summer of uncertainty and grief, but also of sunshine and long days here in the north woods and the energy of that summer spent organizing locally through WUPFSC and remotely through WFAN. The headlines this week bring stories about accelerated vaccine production as well as photos of the concrete barriers and barbed wire erected by the City of Minneapolis around the courthouse where, later this month, a jury will sit to listen to the opening statements of the former Minneapolis police officer charged in George Floyd's murder. Meanwhile, across the world, some 250 million farmers and rural people in India are organizing the largest ongoing protest demanding the repeal of three Farm Acts passed by the Parliament of India in 2020. Agricultural organizations, such as WFAN, that released statements in solidarity with BLM, now are posting statements in solidarity with India's farmers and rural people. As we engage more deeply in our own neighborhoods, so too must we connect across movements and geographies, and keep pushing our networks and organizations to provide not just words but real change in the work we say and do support. Some of us, especially white folks, have had a crash course in community care; it is time to reorient and recommit our work for the long term.

"The pandemic is a portal," Arundhati Roy wrote presciently in her April 2020 essay of the same name; "it offers us a chance to rethink the doomsday machine we have built for ourselves." We've been in pandemic mode now for a year in the United States, and working our way through and out of white supremacist mode now for more than 245 years; and yet, as Kousch reminds us, the tools we forge through trauma are powerful testament to our individual and collective power. At local and national levels, our networks engage in critical examination, reflection, and interracial and intraracial exchanges described in White's conceptualization of community resilience as necessary in the formation of a prefigurative politics and transformation. We are, as individuals and as collectives, remembering and recommitting to transformative acts of care for ourselves and others that will, eventually, dismantle the machine.

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