



Original Research Article

Food activism and negotiating the gendered dynamics of public cultures of careTeresa Lloro^{a*} and Frecia González^b^a Cal Poly Pomona University^b Institute for Public Strategies

Abstract

A growing and significant research literature utilizes feminist frameworks to study relationships with food from a variety of vantage points. In this article, we are especially interested in feminist food sovereignty, feminist political ecology, and feminist theories of care, both because caring labor has been historically undervalued in food systems and because neoliberal modes of commodification and marketization have interpellated activists, scholar-activists, and activist-scholars into new ways of self-care and caring for others. To begin, we provide a brief overview of the places where we work, including the city of Pomona, the Pomona Valley Certified Farmers Market, and the Pomona Community Farmer Alliance (PCFA), a community organization and local activist collective. We then draw on nearly three years of participatory ethnographic work in this community to explore and theorize care work in local food systems activism. Our conceptual framework, framed by feminist food studies and theories of care, illuminates how PCFA members conceive of their own caring work in practice, as well as how they negotiate the complexities of caring for others and self, while being left by the state to do this work. We also explore how activists' care practices sometimes lay bare structural inequalities and the failure of the state, while also reinforcing and challenging neoliberal ideologies embedded in volunteerism. To conclude, we discuss the gendered implications of our work for food systems research, specifically considering the complementarity of Progressive and Radical approaches to food systems transformation.

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Introduction

Pomona, California (U.S.) is a vibrant, multicultural city of approximately 150,000 that sits on the very eastern edge of Los Angeles County. Incorporated in 1888, after settlers forcibly removed the Indigenous Tongva peoples who had inhabited the area for millennia, Pomona quickly became a booming agricultural hub leading the industry in citrus production. Like many locales in Southern California responding to population increases, Pomona shed its early agricultural beginnings, fully establishing itself as a bustling suburb of Los Angeles. Yet in comparison to all of the cities that flank its immediate boundaries, Pomona has notably higher rates of poverty, and housing and food insecurity, and scores more poorly on environmental justice and health indicators (Los Angeles County Department of Public Health, 2018).¹ Perhaps because of these failings, Pomona has become a hub for grassroots food justice activism, urban agriculture, and pop-up food-based street vendors, with multiple activist, community, and non-profit organizations offering a variety of services and support.

This article focusses primarily on the work of the grassroots community organization, the Pomona Community Farmer Alliance (PCFA), which three women² formed in 2018 in response to what they perceived as profound structural inequalities impacting Pomona's predominantly low-income and Latinx population. Though PCFA founders recognized that inequitable systems affect access to employment, medical care, housing, and other resources, they chose to focus on building a safe community space in the form of a farmers market, while increasing the community's access to fresh, chemical-free food. The focus on food was chosen partly because residents disproportionately experience a high toxic waste burden in comparison to surrounding locales³ and because co-founder, Elena, strongly believes that increasing access to chemical-free food⁴ is an obtainable and tangible mechanism for improving health.⁵ Further, since these women collectively have a strong background in public health, nutrition, urban farming, and community organizing, their skills matched well with this kind of project.

¹ Indeed in 2018, the prevalence of food insecurity among households with incomes below 300 percent of the federal poverty level was 20 percent and the city ranked in the 0th percentile on the California Healthy Profiles Index Clean Environment Score (Los Angeles County Department of Public Health, 2018).

² One founder identifies as a woman; another as a queer, non-binary woman; and another as a bisexual woman.

³ "Chemical-free" in this context refers to food produced without the use of added fertilizers or pesticides, even those the USDA deems compatible with certified organic farming.

⁴ Pomona's class and racial dynamics have changed markedly over time, with White flight and structurally racist policies having a profound impact on quality of life. See Carpio (2019).

⁵ Future investigations will further explore how activists conceptualize notions of healthy living in the context of the work they do.

Rather than starting an entirely new farmers market, they collaborated with the fiscal sponsor (Inland Valley Hope Partners) and market manager of the forty-year-old Pomona Valley Certified Farmers Market to develop an entirely volunteer-run section of the existing market. One of the main goals of this new market model is to provide the community with fresh, local, chemical-free food at a greatly reduced cost while explicitly supporting local, chemical-free, regenerative farmers, especially those who hail from traditionally marginalized groups (e.g., women, queer, Latinx, Black, Asian American, and Pacific Islanders). Essentially, the PCFA accomplishes this goal by serving as an alternative distribution network (e.g., White, 2019), generating a kind of subsidy that benefits farmers/producers and the local community alike. Their work supports farmers by (1) reducing or eliminating travel expenses since producers do not have to come to the farmers market (PCFA members pick up the food at local farms or other farmers markets); (2) eliminating labour costs associated with the market since a PCFA volunteer sells the farmer's/producer's goods at the market; and (3) eliminating farmers' "losses" at the end of the market, which not only reduce revenue, but also contribute to food waste (Pomona Community Farmer Alliance, 2019).⁶ Since the launching of the PCFA-run farmers market in June 2018, the PCFA has expanded its work to include a variety of other programs, including operating a free community seed exchange and a food security program that delivers fresh produce, meats, and grains (free of charge) to families impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic.⁷

Currently, the PCFA functions with a core membership group of six to eight people (mostly women) and a cadre of volunteer activists from diverse age, class, ethnic, racial, and sexuality backgrounds. Two of the three original core team members remain, with one being highly active on-the-ground at the market since the inception of the PCFA (Elena) and the other, Alicia, contributing in an administrative capacity through her work at a local health-based non-profit. Many core team members and volunteer activists are highly educated and were first-generation college students, though there are exceptions. For example, shortly after the inception of the pandemic, high school students joined the PCFA as a way of having social interactions, since they could no longer go to school. The core team is distinguished from regular volunteer activists primarily through their collective decision making at monthly meetings, consistent participation at the market, and coordination of food pickups and drop offs.

PCFA leadership has actively resisted developing a mission statement, and has also maintained a horizontal leadership structure where the core team collectively makes decisions in order to subvert what some members call the "non-profit-industrial complex." The PCFA itself is

⁶ Most farmers with perishable items like produce incur losses at the end of farmers markets. The PCFA eliminates farmer losses by creating food baskets with excess produce and by working with another organization, Food Cycle Collective, to cook meals for people living in the streets. All food that is not consumable is composted at local farms and gardens.

⁷ The free community seed exchange is funded by grants Teresa and a colleague received from the California Humanities and Teresa's home institution. The site is also a seed distribution hub for the Cooperative Gardens Commission, which has provided a large quantity of seed donations. See Lloro (2021) for more on the PCFA and its work in the community.

not a non-profit corporation, but rather operates as a program within a parent non-profit, allowing activists flexibility in terms of how to conceive of and enact their work. Thus, the group is instead methods and goal-driven,⁸ which founder, Elena, contrasts with a mission or purpose statement required to register a nonprofit corporation. She comments, “Values and vision are defined to guide action. And the action is defined by the what (goals) and the (how) methods, rather than one linear mission...by defining goals and methods, we can better address the complexity of transformation in a way that invites creativity from people who might be participating” (Elena, personal communication, July 12, 2021).

Although like any organization there is a diversity of sometimes conflicting perspectives and viewpoints, ideologically, core members are united in their scathing critiques of neoliberal capitalism; commitment to generating access to chemical-free food, regardless of income; and in their desire to build a safe and welcoming community space in a city deeply impacted by high violent crime rates, homelessness, and the legacies of structural classism and racism (Los Angeles County Department of Public Health, 2018).

In this research project our aim was to understand how the activist collective, Pomona Community Farmer Alliance, brings low-cost organic/chemical-free food to the Pomona Valley Certified Farmers Market. We thus explored the following questions:

- What are the barriers and tensions associated with doing this work?

In what ways does this work simultaneously challenge and reinforce neoliberal logics interpenetrating food systems?

Conceptual framework

Several distinct, yet related traditions in feminism influence this study, including feminist food sovereignty, feminist political ecology, and feminist theories of care. Although we cannot exhaustively review each, below we provide a brief overview of the perspectives that inform our work. Additionally, we describe Holt Giménez and Shattuck’s (2011) four trends in corporate food regimes and global food movements (Neoliberal, Reformist, Progressive, Radical)⁹ as a way of framing the last part of our analysis that examines the PCFA’s potential to enact change at the structural level. There, we also draw out the gendered implications of the future of the PCFA’s work, especially as they relate to caring labor and food systems change.

Feminist Traditions

Austerity policies in the United States (U.S.) deeply imbricated with neoliberal ideologies have simultaneously gutted most social safety nets while concomitantly permitting corporations to abdicate responsibility for providing a living wage (Fisher, 2017; Kurtz et al.,

⁸ See PomonaCFA.org for more on the PCFA’s goals and work.

⁹ Consistent with Holt-Giménez and Shattuck (2011), we capitalized the letters of the corporate food regimes and global food movements when referring specifically to the movements. When discussing these concepts more generally, we refrain from capitalization.

2019).¹⁰ As Dickinson (2019) recently highlights in her work on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) in the U.S.,¹¹ the food social safety net has actually expanded and become increasingly tied to work requirements. In effect, this excludes vulnerable people (e.g., undocumented workers and the unemployed) from receiving assistance, while subsidizing low wage employment. The emergency food system has ballooned in response to these changes, placing the responsibility of “feeding America” on charitable organizations, many of which depend on women’s paid and unpaid labour, are ill-equipped to provide structural solutions to food insecurity, as well as predominantly rely on low quality food (highly processed, nutrient poor, calorie dense) donated by the very corporations that have helped to create the working poor in the U.S. (Dickinson, 2019; Fisher, 2017).

In tracing the concomitant rise of volunteerism and neoliberalism in the U.S., Hyatt (2001) contends that public discourses related to service and volunteerism have not only pathologized the poor, but “served to reconfigure the relationship between the entire citizenry and the state” (p. 203). While her writings are now two decades old, they still resonate with contemporary governance in the U.S. as neoliberal ideologies interpenetrate nearly all aspects of cultural, economic, and social life (e.g., Warf, 2021), forcing individuals to pick up where the shrinking state has left off. Hyatt (2001) also purports that, “the current emphasis on volunteerism as a necessarily and laudable public virtue has served to mask poverty as a site of social and material inequality and *to obscure the role that state action continues to play in reproducing such inequalities*” (p. 206; original emphasis). Although we agree and strongly align ourselves with similar critiques emerging from food justice and food sovereignty movements (e.g., Clendenning et al., 2015; Edelman et al., 2014), we complicate this argument here by demonstrating how activists’ care practices sometimes lay bare structural inequalities and the failure of the state, while also subverting some of the systems that cause structural inequalities in the first place. Our conceptual framework for analyzing and theorizing care work thus centres on distilling the gendered ways PCFA activists conceive of their own caring work in practice, as well as how they negotiate the complexities of caring for others and self, while being left by the state to do this work.

As Hankivsky (2014) highlights, care ethics can be divided into “two generations,” with the first focussing on women’s morality (e.g., Gilligan, 1982) and the second on care being both a moral and political concept (e.g., Tronto, 1993). In the latter view, which we embrace in this article, care is a “species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our environments, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web.” (Tronto, 1993, p. 103).

¹⁰ See Tung et al., 2022, this issue for a similar discussion in the Canadian context.

¹¹ In 1964, US Congress, with the support of President Lyndon Johnson, passed the Food Stamp Act. It has since gone through many permutations. The title officially became the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program with the passage of the Food and Nutrition Act of 2008 (United State Department of Agriculture, 2018).

Although Tronto's (1993) definition of care implies that the "environment" is included in humans' sphere of caring, ecofeminist (or ecological feminist) (e.g., Donovan & Adams, 2007) and new materialist feminist care theorists (e.g., Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017) have further developed these ideas since the 1990s, theorizing the complexities of caring for nonhuman living beings, as well as the nonliving material world. For all of these theorists, affect, emotion, and relationality are central to understanding how care is enacted in practice in gendered ways and within very specific sociopolitical contexts shaped by structural gender expectations and norms.

Self-care is perhaps more contested, as Foucault highlighted in his later works (Fornet-Betancourt et al., 1987). In a 1984 interview conducted shortly before his death, Foucault traces how self-care persisted during the times of the Greeks and the Romans, partly because of the emphasis on the relationship between knowing oneself and the practice of freedom. However, with the rise of Christianity, he notes that self-care became problematic because "In Christianity salvation is also caring for self. But in Christianity salvation is obtained by renunciation of self" (Fornet-Betancourt et al., 1987, p. 116). The idea that self-care is simultaneously indulgent but paradoxically necessary pervades contemporary neoliberal feminisms, which seek to interpellate women into "Accept[ing] full responsibility for [their] own wellbeing and self-care, which is increasingly predicated on crafting a felicitous work-family balance based on cost-benefit calculus" (Rottenberg, 2014, p. 420). In these formulations of self-care, the individual woman is a fully autonomous agent with the capacity, and indeed obligation, to simultaneously care for others and for self.

Intersectional feminists like Ahmed (2014) and Lorde (2017), in contrast, challenge the neoliberal co-opting of care, contending that self-care is (or should be) life-sustaining, particularly for women of colour and other vulnerable people. Their theories of self-care are inherently relational, as they emphasize the creation of community. Ahmed notes, "Self-care: that can be an act of political warfare. In directing our care towards ourselves we are redirecting care away from its proper objects, we are not caring for those we are supposed to care for; we are not caring for the bodies deemed worth caring about. And that is why in queer, feminist, and anti-racist work self-care is about the creation of community, fragile communities, assembled out of the experiences of being shattered. We reassemble ourselves through the ordinary, everyday, and often painstaking work of looking after ourselves; looking after each other" (2014, para. 39). Since research demonstrates how women typically bear a greater emotional burden than men in activist work (e.g., Kennelly, 2014), in this article we explore the gendered and sometimes relational ways PCFA activists conceive of self-care in practice.

Trends in corporate food regimes and food systems change

Holt-Giménez and Shattuck (2011) draw on work in food regime analysis (Friedmann, 1987; Friedmann & McMichael, 1989; McMichael, 2007) and Karl Polanyi's (1944) double-movement thesis on capitalism to explain contemporary relations between food production and

consumption. Since the 1980s, they contend that a powerful corporate food regime has dominated the world, which is “characterized by the unprecedented market power and profits of monopoly agrifood corporations, globalized animal protein chains, liberalized global trade in food, increasingly concentrated land-ownership, a shrinking natural resource base, and growing opposition from food movements worldwide” (Holt-Giménez & Shattuck, 2011, p. 111).

Holt-Giménez and Shattuck (2011) characterize trends within the corporate food regime as either Neoliberal or Reformist and those within food organizations and movements (that tend to oppose the corporate food regime) as either Progressive or Radical. The Neoliberal trend is corporate-driven, embraces economic liberalism and free market fundamentalism, and focusses on the expansion of global markets and technological solutions. The United States Department of Agriculture and the International Monetary Fund are two examples. The Reformist trend is similar to the Neoliberal trend in its approach, but it also embraces a cautious food security discourse, renewed public financing for agricultural development, state-sponsored safety nets, and certification systems like Fair Trade. Major institutions and organizations embedded in the Reformist trend include the Food and Agriculture Organization and Feeding America.

The Progressive trend in food movements is rooted in food justice discourses that emphasize empowerment of the poor, critiques of structural racism, local food, family farming, healthy food, and direct linkages in the food chain between rural and urban stakeholders (e.g., farmers markets), as well the prevalence of urban agriculture to establish local, community-based food systems. Exemplar institutions and organizations include community supported agriculture (CSAs), Alternative Fair Trade, and the Coalition of Immokalee Workers. Finally, the Radical trend is distinguished from the Progressive trend for its emphasis on “dismantling corporate agrifoods monopolies, parity, redistributive land reform, protection from dumping and overproduction, and community rights to water and seed” (Holt-Giménez & Shattuck, 2011, pp. 128-129). Institutions/movements in the Radical trend, such as La Via Campesina and the World March for Women also view the sovereign power of the state (versus capitalist markets) as a site of redistributive land reform and provider of social protections and safety nets.

Research Design

Methods

Participant-observation

Participant-observation, one of the primary tools of ethnographic research, involves immersion in the site being studied while writing jottings and later expanded fieldnotes that serve as a primary data source (e.g., Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). By becoming volunteers with the PCFA at the Pomona Farmers Market, as well as purchasing our own food from the market, we have been able to build relationships with a variety of research participants. We have also gained

familiarity with many facets of running the PCFA and the farmers market. Finally, we have attended City Council meetings, stakeholder meetings with city government officials, community organizing meetings, and other gatherings where important decisions about the PCFA and farmers market are made, contributing to these decisions in various capacities when needed.

Ethnographic interviewing

In ethnographic interviews, we focussed on eliciting what is important to study participants in relation to the study objectives, while also avoiding leading questions as much as possible. Interviews followed a semi-structured format, allowing for new questions, points of interest, and thoughts to emerge during the interview process (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). We crafted interview questions using previously published interview protocols (e.g., McCullen, 2008), our theoretical framework, and our early fieldwork experiences at the sites as a guide. Interview questions focussed on activists' roles and involvement with the PCFA, including their motivations for participation, challenges, or barriers to participation, as well as how the PCFA has met (or failed to meet) their needs and those of the community. Further, we inquired about how their participation impacted their social connections or networks, as well as how they thought the farmers market could better meet community needs (e.g., Julier, 2019; Steager, 2013). We also relied considerably on emergent questions during the actual interview process that responded to each research participant's unique experiences with the PCFA.

We conducted most interviews in an informal setting of the participant's choosing, and several interviews occurred via Zoom due to Covid-19. A total of twelve PCFA core team members and activists were interviewed, with one interview including three research participants, per their request. Eight of the thirteen interviewees were part of the core team, four were activist-volunteers, and one a PCFA-supported farmer. Nine participants were women, three were men, and one was non-binary. Since activist participation in the PCFA is in constant flux, these gender ratios do not necessarily represent the larger activist pool. Teresa (article co-author) approached activists with interview requests based on their length of involvement with the PCFA (at least two months), both so that participants had familiarity with the organization and so that she had time to build rapport with them. In many cases, Teresa spent months volunteering alongside research participants before conducting interviews. We audio recorded interviews that Teresa's undergraduate students and a community volunteer then transcribed. Teresa interviewed the majority of research participants (eleven), with her undergraduate student researchers conducting two interviews. All interviewees are referred to using pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality.

Data analysis

We reviewed all transcripts through several iterations in an effort to identify themes that surfaced during the interviews. Teresa, Frecia (article co-author), and Teresa's three undergraduate

student researchers collectively created a codebook to document identified themes, descriptions of themes, and direct quotes as examples exploring themes. We met to review several iterations of revisions until we agreed on code definitions and examples. Our initial codes emerged from the research literature and our conceptual framework, and we augmented the codebook based on codes emerging from our data. We started with approximately seventy codes and subcodes. Codes were words or phrases like, “access,” and subcodes included more specificity like “access to fresh food” or “access to fruits and vegetables” or “access defined by affordability.” During analysis, Teresa and Frecia added approximately twenty codes emerging from the data, which included words like “values,” “communication,” “Covid-19 accommodations,” and “giving back.” Since our research project is rooted in feminist ethnographic traditions, we focussed primarily on descriptive, emotion, and values coding to assist us in describing how participants view the role of care in their work with the PCFA (Saldaña, 2013). We then compiled participants’ responses, allowing us to distill common themes, as well as patterns in the data. In the following section, “Enactments of Care,” we present six major themes that coalesce around care for others and self-care within the PCFA.

Results: Enactments of care

Care for others

Within the first few months of her work with the PCFA, Teresa noticed public care work being performed mostly by women activists. The prevalence of women in urban agriculture contexts has been observed in prior research (Allen & Sachs, 2007; Martin, 2019; Trauger et al., 2017), despite the fact that women continue to be marginalized in farming more generally (Collins, 2018; Trevilla-Espinal et al., 2021; Portman, 2018; Shisler & Sbicca, 2019). We suggest here that the chronic failure of neoliberal capitalism to bring chemical-free, fresh, and healthy foods to low-income neighborhoods (Agyeman & McEntee, 2014) has resulted in the interpellation of a new, public form of food procurement that relies largely on gendered subjects to perform the majority of its unpaid work. Although in the western, North American context food provisioning is conceptualized more typically as provisioning for oneself or one’s family (Meierotto & Castellano, 2019), PCFA activists often refer to the community or the market as an extension of their family. Indeed, in many ways the organization uses strategies of the food cooperative model (e.g., Figueroa & Alkon, 2017; Moon, 2021; White 2019) through its establishment of complex, hyperlocal, and alternative food distribution networks that in some cases subvert neoliberal capitalism. For example, at the farmers market activists vend a variety of chemical-free foods (e.g., almonds, beans, grains, fresh produce, meats, olive oil) that would not normally be available in the city of Pomona. Due to the PCFA model that suppresses costs for farmers, these foods are offered at subsidized prices, making them more affordable for low-income residents.

Care as community access to chemical-free, fresh, healthy food

Many activists volunteer with the PCFA to provide the community with greater access to fresh, local, chemical-free food, as both Ana Maria and Nash articulate in their interviews. Ana Maria, a late twenties college educated Latina immigrant and founder of a community and urban gardening-based nonprofit that promotes food sovereignty, sometimes sells her produce at the farmers market, and has also served as a core team member and manager of the community seed exchange. She strongly identifies the community she serves as “low-income people of color,” (PoC) stressing that her non-profit is also PoC run, “I strongly believe that access to healthy local food is a right and not a privilege, so I want to make it accessible to everyone because not everyone can afford to go to Whole Foods or Sprouts all the time and get the best produce, but we have plenty of land, especially here in Pomona, where we can make it happen.... From my perspective, the role of the market is to provide the residents of Pomona with fresh and chemical-free produce.”

Even though Ana Maria does not use the word “care” in her interview, an ethos of care that directly challenges the neoliberal capitalist emphasis on markets is exemplified in how she describes the inaccessibility of high-end chains like Whole Foods and Sprouts. For Ana Maria, “hyperlocal” food networks, like her own non-profit, are a critical means for low-income PoC to “get the best produce” and experience “personal, social, and environmental health in our communities” (Growing Roots, 2017).¹²

Nash, a college educated White man in his late twenties, who at the time of his interview had only volunteered with the PCFA for two months, has now volunteered nearly two years, serving as a core team member for the last year. He currently participates by procuring food at other markets and farms, assisting with the PCFA’s food security program by planting and harvesting at a new local community farm, and by helping run the market most of the day Saturday. For Nash, care for the community is rooted in his belief that everyone, regardless of income, should have access to what he describes as “clean and healthy food” that prevents disease. In this excerpt, he specifically identifies women and children as part of the community he hopes to serve,

We're trying to give our local community, which is for the most part a low-income community, access to clean and healthy food...that doesn't have chemicals on it...to help fight things like cancer and other elements. We get exposed to a lot of foods that have things on them, that literally alter our DNA, like free radicals. As far as we know, if you have food that is grown without pesticides and is not transported very far distances, so you don't have to spray things on it to keep it safe, then it's clean right? We have the program [WIC] here, so we give incentives for the women

¹² As this excerpt and others throughout the manuscript illustrate, race also emerged as important in our data. However, we have insufficient space in this manuscript to give it the full attention it deserves.

and children program to spend their money here, and hopefully it's cleaner and safer for food [for them].¹³

Given that prior research demonstrates how women take primary responsibility for protecting their children from toxin exposure, sometimes at great expense (e.g., Kimura, 2016), Nash's assumption that WIC is an important part of the farmers market for this population points to the gendered nature of food procurement. This excerpt also demonstrates that Nash is concerned with the kinds of foods that women and children have available to them as he recognizes their greater level of vulnerability in the food system.

Care as building, growing, and supporting the community

To varying degrees, all activists we interviewed invoked the language of building, growing, or supporting community as central to their volunteerism. Jolie, a late twenties, gender non-conforming, and college educated Latina immigrant, has worn many hats in the organization. She frequently uses her ability to speak Spanish as a way to connect with vulnerable people, like non-English speaking and low-income elders. As a core team member, Jolie has maintained social media accounts, taken a leadership role harvesting produce at a local farm for food security baskets, as well as regularly volunteered the day of the farmers market to assist with set up, running booths, and managing finances. She passionately describes her various roles with the PCFA, conceptualizing the community she cares for as inclusive of activists and elders, “That connection between volunteers and the farm or at the farm [who harvest produce for food security baskets], I feel I help with that too. Seeing them later, checking on them like, ‘How do you feel? How was your experience with it?’ [is important to me]. And [I] address if they have concerns...so taking care of the volunteers in some way.”

Jolie goes on later in the interview, “So, when Covid happened—they [elders] are the most vulnerable for Covid. They are afraid; they are alone; and they were running out of food, so they got in contact with us. Someone gave them our number, and I would take the Spanish calls. So, I've supported the initiative [that way]. I've taken those Spanish calls and they were emotionally intense. So, I think I also supported the initiative by connecting with those folks.”

In Jolie's interview, her face welled up with emotion every time she discussed caring for the community—however she might define it and however that care might be actualized in practice. In the first excerpt, the community is inclusive of activists assisting with harvesting. In the second, community also includes all of the elders who have become part of the PCFA's outreach efforts. Due to her bilingualism and the vulnerability of the Spanish-speaking community the PCFA serves, Jolie has been encumbered with a greater caring burden than many

¹³ WIC refers to “The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children,” which the US federal government uses to ensure low-income pregnant, breastfeeding, and non-breastfeeding women, as well as infants and children up to age five, have adequate nutrition and health care (United States Department of Agriculture, n.d.).

other activists because she is able to connect to this isolated population, many of whom had recently lost family members, employment, or both, and lacked access to basic necessities like food and medical care due to structural inequalities the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated considerably (e.g., Montenegro de Wit, 2021).

Although Cooper, a gender non-conforming, college educated White individual in their late twenties, does not refer to intense emotional labor in the way that Jolie does, they similarly refer to care as it relates to their role in building community. Their participation at the market waxes and wanes due to school and work responsibilities, but they generally volunteer several Saturdays a month. Cooper is also an active member of a PCFA sister organization (Food Cycle Collective) that rides bicycles throughout the city every Sunday to deliver meals to the “neighbors in our streets,” a phrase that activists use to replace the term “homeless.” Meal preparation begins at the farmers market, where activists chop up edible, but discarded fruits and vegetables at the farmers market in an effort to reduce food waste and prepare meals. In the excerpt below, they contrast their role there with the dominant American ethos of individualism and caring only for oneself,

Well, my actual favorite part is the fact that now I've been coming here for so long, I know all these people. I can stop at any stall and be like "Eh yo wassup!" So, it's actually like creating a community, and you know, all those people like, "I'm so proud and 'Merica!" And it's just like, but, you only take care of yourself. What about the rest of America?... I know I see these people only once a week, and I only see them at the farmers market, like we never hung out...but it's still a community here, and we all see each other.

Alluding to supporters of former President Trump, who have been seen at protests, rallies, and the storming of the U.S. Capitol expressing pride for “Merica” and the American ethos of rugged individualism, Cooper conveys here that the PCFA and the farmers market are building a kind of community that centres care for others.

Care as “showing up for my friends”

Central to community-building within the PCFA and at the farmers market is the forging of relationships and bonds with fellow activists. Thus some study participants, like Jolie and Ned, explicitly express a kind of care for others rooted in expressing their solidarity with friends. In this excerpt, Jolie describes how she came to be an activist at the farmers market, “I remember a couple of times that I just showed up to get my veggies [as a shopper and not yet as a volunteer] and I heard Elena and she was stressed, and I remember thinking, ‘Okay I’m just going to show up for my friend.’ And I stayed for hours and then I was just doing more and more and... I think at that point it was, ‘I’m showing up for my friend.’”

Thus, Jolie was initially inspired to join the PCFA to help out a friend, Elena, not because of concerns with community food access. However, she became deeply concerned about food security shortly after deeper engagement with the PCFA. While the PCFA has no official

“leader,” many refer to Elena in this way because she takes on an unofficial and unpaid leadership role and is usually responsible for ensuring all of the booths at the market have coverage on Saturday mornings.

Similarly, Ned, an early thirties college educated man of Middle Eastern descent describes volunteering at the market as a “group effort,” “So, I love the idea that I’m helping to provide my community with fresh produce each week, fresh products not just produce. I mean my motivation has also changed. I’ve gotten to know people at the market; this is also a group effort. This is something I do with my friends now, like we all help to provide Pomona with these services.”

Although Jolie found herself volunteering out of a strong sense of obligation to help a friend, which later grew into a deep passion for food sovereignty work, Ned was initially more interested in the community food sovereignty aspects of the PCFA and found himself embedded in a “group effort” with friends. Further, he specifically refers to providing “services” to the community in a recognition that capitalist markets and the state do not ensure that low-income communities have adequate access to healthy food.

Self-care

In addition to expressing care for others, many activists also shared how they engage in forms of self-care. For some women in particular, physically being at the farmers market or doing farmers market-affiliated activities with others constitutes a form of self-care, both because they can obtain the highest quality food possible to nourish their bodies and because they form and maintain important bonds and connections with others, especially during a time of heightened social isolation brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic. As the excerpts below explicate, caring for others and self-care are not necessarily mutually exclusive and self-care is sometimes conceptualized relationally, which we will discuss in more detail in the Discussion section of this article.

Self-care as ensuring access to chemical-free, fresh, healthy food

Some activists drawn to the farmers market described themselves as eating healthily and sustainably prior to their work with the PCFA. They thus describe feeling a sense of belonging or community in a space that shared their same values. Others, in contrast, discuss how being at the market actually constituted a form of self-care that gave them access to a greater variety of fresh, local, chemical-free food and/or a community supportive of queer, non-binary, and non-traditional gender roles.

In their interview, Cooper (now a vegan) describes their family food history from the perspective of growing up lower-middle class and having a mother who placed greater importance on material goods than high quality foods. They sometimes did not have food and

when they did, it primarily consisted of refined carbohydrates, meat, and frozen or canned vegetables. They describe how the farmers market and its affiliated farms and programs have expanded their knowledge of plants, as well as changed their eating habits, “For one it expands the variety of [food] that I eat. I’m not a particularly creative cook. You know, I make some good dishes, but I generally just make the same stuff over and over again. But coming here, I see this red celery looking thing? Oh yeah that’s chard. You can make this with this. It’s like, oh, I thought chard was short for charcoal!”

While Cooper self-describes as someone already committed to the sustainability aspects of the farmers market like its zero-waste initiative, for them the opportunity to participate in the actual growing and harvesting of food at a local farm indelibly changed their food practices for the better.

Like Cooper, Ned also identifies as someone who cared about sustainability prior to coming to the market as an attendee and eventually an activist. Before stumbling upon the market, he was struggling to find the kinds of food that he wanted to eat at a price he could afford,

So as a student who doesn’t have a lot of money.... I don’t have family in the area.... I tried to eat healthy. Like on campus what were my options to eat? Carl’s Jr., Panda Express, the little snack shops that have like \$5 granola bars? There were two types of grocery stores that I could access within fifteen minutes of my house, and the products were very limited and I felt overpriced for organic.... So, it was just like I didn’t have access to the produce, which is a huge part of my diet. And I felt, like particularly for the community that could be served or needs to be served in my area, there really were just limited options for things for me to eat. We just had fast food, and that’s just not the way that I sustain my body and my health.

Having recently arrived in California to attend graduate school, Ned navigated unfamiliar terrain and was frustrated with the preponderance of fast and processed foods that he found in the area. Unable to care for his body in the way that he was accustomed, as well as the way that he believes community members around him should be able to care for their bodies, Ned describes finding the food that he needed at the farmers market.

Self-Care as finding a place to form important bonds and connections

Many research participants, as well as people we have encountered in our everyday volunteering at the market, enthusiastically characterize the farmers market as a place where they have made critically significant bonds and connections with people who share similar values. Although traditional western and contemporary neoliberal theories of self-care conceptualize the individual as an autonomous agent and self-care practices as those which occur within or for the self, relational theories of care challenge this reductionist approach. As Ahmed emphasizes, self-care

rooted in “queer, feminist, and anti-racist work” is deeply connected the creation of community, “assembled out of the experiences of being shattered” (2014, para 39). Below, Jolie, a Latina, gender non-conforming immigrant woman describes how the PCFA’s acceptance of and support for queer and non-binary identifying members is critical for her, especially because she didn’t find this acceptance in her family or religion, “So, we have teenagers that have shown up, queer teenagers that have just shown up, like high schoolers...many [members] of the core initiative are gender non-conforming, too, non-capitalist conforming, or fighting against that idea.”

She goes on,

Okay, that’s significant for me because...with my upbringing I was raised with three older brothers and I don’t know, like I have never fit with my girlfriends. I don’t like what they like.... Like for me a woman is...strong and independent. Like things that I just don’t associate with what people would associate with like a female. You know? So, and it just feels like I am not a good person. I don’t know. But then just to feel...just to find a place where those rules don’t exist, the rules that I’ve seen in my life, and my family, and my religious background, they...they just...they’re not rules anymore, they’re not signs of goodness, or anything. Like hairy legs and things I like, and that I’m comfortable with...just to find a community that doesn’t have those rules becomes very validating. Like not just a mental...if...if there’s a community that can accept who I am, then I can be who I am and explore who I am instead of feeling all the time that I can’t, that I’m wrong, so that’s why it’s so significant for me.

As Jolie poignantly relates here, being part of the PCFA and its culture of welcoming gender nonconforming and queer people, is a radical act of self-care insofar as it counters the rules and values about gender that profoundly shaped her upbringing. For her, an important part of self-care is relational in that it is tied to finding a group of people with whom she can form a community.

Likewise, Camila, a late twenties, college educated Latina, illuminates the significance of gender in the PCFA as it relates to her own family background and current wellbeing,

I guess being close to people I’m very fond of and learning from people at the market because their lifestyle and ways of doing things are very different than what I grew up with... Also being around a lot of women. I... I grew up with a lot of male friends. I was raised by my father for a significant amount of time, so I hung around with a lot of boys. And other than my mom and I have sisters, but I never really had a whole lot of positive female relationships in my life. And it’s been really interesting that the market has sort of filled that, I guess gap, in my life. It just...a lot of really strong, opinionated in a positive way not in a negative way, women. Women who are doing this and being out there.

Although Camila does not identify as gender non-conforming or queer, like Jolie she expresses how PCFA culture differs from more traditional gender roles she grew up with. In particular, Camila has found that having positive relationships with strong and independent women is so important that the market is filling a gap in her life that she did not necessarily know was even there.

Self-care as taking a break

Several activists raised the issue of needing to take a break from volunteering as a form of self-care, which a vast body of research has demonstrated is a significant issue in activist work, particularly for activists from marginalized groups (e.g., Kennelly, 2014; Márquez, 2021; Pepin-Neff & Wynter, 2019). One man, Ned, carefully selects his volunteer experiences so that he has adequate time for self-care,

I can't be a part of a volunteer effort where I am constrained or controlled as an individual. I don't feel like that's what volunteering is...when I first started volunteering, you know I didn't realize how much of a commitment I had to make. It was like I started and I felt apprehensive about starting. But then I was reassured by members...that like, "Hey, do not forget that you're a volunteer. You don't have to come next week. Like if you need time to go camping, go camping." So, I don't feel like there is anything that has impeded me from [participating in] the market.

In this excerpt, Ned enumerates how he was initially uncertain about volunteering with the PCFA, especially because of the time commitment. Reassured that he could take breaks when needed, he expresses that he is able to fully participate in the way that is comfortable for his lifestyle.

In contrast to the sense of reassurance that Ned felt, Alicia, a mid-thirties Latina and public health professional, offers another perspective that resonates with the gendered way in which women, and especially women of color, feel guilt for stepping away from activism (e.g., Gorski, 2019; Kennelly, 2014; Márquez, 2021),

I have backtracked some of that time at the market just for personal reasons and self-care, (laugh), but I am heavily invested and still supporting the group. I try to attend as—the planning meetings as much as possible. I, you know, see the email threads. I look for grants, you know.... Yeah, I think there is a certain amount of guilt that goes with actively trying to implement self-care in my life. And it's not just about the farmers market. It's even with family members and friends where, you know, I will, you know, not attend something, or not go to something because I really need that time.

Although Alicia clearly states the need to take a break not just from her activist work, but from obligations to family and friends, her feelings of guilt are manifested in her inability to

completely walk away from the PCFA. Resonating with Ahmed's (2014) and Lorde's (2017) conceptualization of self-care as "self-preservation," particularly for women of color, Alicia recognizes that she needs time to look after herself. However, despite coping with stress from school, work, and her personal life, she continues to provide support to the PCFA in other ways. In the Discussion section that follows, we consider these data in relation to our conceptual framework of care. We highlight how: (1) the failures of the neoliberal state are gendered regarding the care work activists enact and perform; (2) activists' gendered care practices lay bare structural inequalities tied to the failure of the state, subverting some of the very systems that cause structural inequalities in the first place; and (3) activists experience self-care as gendered and relational.

Discussion

Volunteerism, care, and the failure of the state

Hyatt (2001) convincingly demonstrates how the volunteer is a "political subject" who is called to fill state functions (e.g., feed the "deserving" poor) and help communities "heal from within" (pp. 205, 227). In this way, the state has both placed responsibility for ameliorating poverty in the hands of volunteers (mostly women), as well as normalized the withdrawal of public resources from all communities but especially those that are the most impoverished.¹⁴ Our data thus support Hyatt's claim that volunteers are not only political subjects, but that the people responsabilized to do the work of community healing through care work are disproportionately women. From Ana Maria's emphasis on increasing access to chemical-free food because it is a right and privilege for low-income communities, to Jolie's impassioned descriptions of caring for the elderly, volunteers, and friends, it is clear that women activists in the PCFA deeply and emotionally feel the burden of doing this work. Their descriptions of care contrast with Nash's, for example, as he frames caring in the decidedly more rationalist framework of science (e.g., eliminating free radical damage to DNA and fighting cancer).¹⁵

As our involvement with the PCFA grew, we became particularly interested in the gendered ways in which activists' caring labor might (1) lay bare structural inequalities and (2) the state's failure to address these inequalities. Although our data have nudged us in these directions, we suggest that there is much additional research needed. As we have discussed in this section, women in our study tend to feel an impassioned call to do this work and thus take on roles, like Jolie, that involve providing emotional support to others (e.g., non-English speaking, low-income Latinx elders, friends, and other volunteers), along with material resources like food.

¹⁴ Also see Tung et al., 2022, this issue

¹⁵ As feminist philosophers of science have demonstrated (e.g., Collins, 2008; Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1991), positivist science perspectives are often entrenched in patriarchal and capitalist worldviews that marginalize many social groups, including women.

Jolie's caring labor thus makes visible the failure of the state to provide adequate resources to its people on the basis of socioeconomic status and age (as in the case of elders), and emphasizes a dire need elders have to experience connection. In contrasting Jolie's care work with Nash's, it becomes clear that Nash similarly visibilizes some of these structural inequalities and the state's failure to address them. However, he does not necessarily illuminate a structural failure in the U.S. that centres on affectively caring for vulnerable populations (e.g., through the establishment of statewide programs and resources for elders or other marginalized groups that can assist in meeting their material and emotional needs).

To conclude this section, PCFA activists' care work thus sheds much needed light at the local level on multiple structural failures in the food system, though the way in which they enact and conceive of this work has gendered elements. Although they may not all invoke specific terms like the "state" or "neoliberal capitalism," activists, who are predominantly women in number, discursively, emotionally, and materially acknowledge that they do this work because the state, the food system, and/or corporate America has failed their community and they want to build something different. While volunteering at the farmers market, for example, I have heard activists and attendees of all genders in conversation about the impacts of structural racism and poverty on the food system, often vocalizing critiques of neoliberal capitalism, an act in and of itself that enumerates the failure of the state (e.g., Alkon & Guthman, 2017). These kinds of moves contrast with the "do-gooderism" of the alternative food movement and emergency food assistance system, the former of which is aligned with the Progressive trend in food movements and the latter with the Reformist trend in the corporate food regime. Neither tends to critique existing economic or social systems, but rather focusses respectively on the neoliberal values of individualism and managing poverty (e.g., Dickinson, 2019; Guthman, 2008).

Entanglements of care

For some women and non-binary activists, like Jolie, Camila, and Cooper, being part of the PCFA and volunteering at the farmers market constitute radical acts of self-care precisely because PCFA culture bends gender (and sexuality) norms in myriad ways, creating an affect and emotionally-laden space where they experience a sense of belonging and feel supported: "So at the market, I was able to make connections where I feel loved, accepted, I feel safe.... I'm not thinking it's an inherent quality of me to be alone in the world" (Jolie). In this way, the procurement and distribution of healthy, chemical-free food, as well as interpersonal and community relationship building, constitute gendered and intertwined acts of self-care and care for others, resonating with Ahmed's (2014) theorizing of self-care as radical and relational. For others, like Ned and Alicia, the very fact that they can "take breaks" allows them to engage in a form of self-care, though not without costs for Alicia. While Ned seems to truly experience these breaks as acts of self-care (e.g., going camping or taking a month off to visit family), Alicia's decidedly gendered response of feeling guilt (e.g., Kennelly, 2014) is unsurprising given the way social and cultural norms, especially those entrenched in modern neoliberal feminisms

(Rottenberg, 2014) relegate women to care for themselves and others, despite deep emotional costs to their own wellbeing.

Thus, the negotiation between caring for others and self-care emerges as explicitly gendered when self-care involves “taking a break” (Alicia feels guilt and Ned does not), but appears to be experienced by men and women alike when it entails nourishing one’s sense of belonging by being present at the market (Jolie, Camila, and Cooper). These findings suggest, like Jarosz’s (2011) study of women community supported agriculture farmers in the U.S., that care for others and self-care are not always mutually exclusive and that self-care, as Ahmed (2014) emphasizes, is indeed relational for vulnerable groups. In contrast to neoliberal feminist renderings of self-care (Rottenberg, 2014) that emphasize individualist forms of self-actualization, liberation (the self is autonomous), and consumption (anyone can buy their way to self-care), especially for women, these findings suggest that self-care is relational and intimately tied to a sense of belonging, the formation of relationships with like-minded people, and the building of community. This research also suggests that women continue to be interpellated into volunteerism in ways distinct from men, insofar as they experience guilt more profoundly when withdrawing to care for self (e.g., Kennelly, 2014).

Conclusion: Feminist care ethics and approaches to food system change

As our analysis demonstrates, PCFA activists most closely align their actual on-the-ground practices with progressive approaches to food system change, though their theoretical orientation (e.g., scathing critiques of neoliberal capitalism and emphasis on food sovereignty through the provision of a community seed exchange) is also very much rooted in the Radical trend (Holt-Giménez & Shattuck, 2011).

The feminist care lens invoked in this article uniquely illuminates potential relationships between Progressive and Radical trends in food systems change. As we have demonstrated, progressive-oriented PCFA activists manifest their care for others in terms of improving access to fresh, healthy food, building, growing, and supporting the community, and “showing up for my friends” (Jolie, 2019) Collectively, these findings suggest that activists see themselves as effecting change through food, and also reflect a deep orientation toward their most immediate relationships and surroundings, rather than the systems and structures that have created food insecurity in the first place (e.g., Guthman, 2008). However, juxtaposing their care work with their pointed critiques of neoliberal capitalism and structural poverty and racism, suggests that activists may have an orientation toward more radically-focussed work, if provided the right kinds of relationships, support, and tools. That is, we suggest that knowledge of failing systems and social inequalities might be necessary but not sufficient for radical change. Instead, activists are also compelled to carry out their work because they care. Understanding the processes in which activists come to care, as well as how their care manifests in practice in gendered ways provides important insight into their orientation toward change and how they might envision

change for the future (Neoliberal, Reformist, Progressive, or Radical). These insights could be particularly salient if, as Holt-Giménez and Shattuck suggest, the political amorphousness of progressively-oriented organizations means they can “turn towards reform and neoliberalism or towards radical, class-based engagement” (2011, p. 133). Further, they also suggest how more radically-focussed organizations can mobilize progressively-oriented activists—relationship-building at the local level that remains acutely attuned to the affective domain, especially for women and non-binary people who see their work as connected to a relational kind of self-care. For example, PCFA activists clearly care about food and structural injustices, which could be a starting point for engagement. Then, approaches rooted in critical food systems education and political education could tie activists’ knowledge of food systems to wider, systemic issues that impact them personally (e.g., homophobia, misogyny, racism, sexism) (Kerr, et al., 2022, this issue; Meek & Tarlau, 2016, 2020; Valley et al., 2020), while also providing resources for deeper, radical engagement and community-building.

And finally, we suggest that there is a great need for further research regarding the gendered dimensions of caring labor in differing approaches to food systems transformation, including how care work might subvert neoliberal systems that lead to structural inequalities. While we contend that care practices embedded in volunteerism can actually visualize systemic inequalities in complex ways, we also believe that care practices are still problematically gendered, especially in how they neoliberally induce women into feeling guilt when they do not pick up the slack for the failing state and corporate America.

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