Chant Down Babylon: Building Relationship, Leadership, and Power in the Food Justice Movement

A dialogue between: Nikki Silvestri, Malik Yakini, D’Artagnan Scorza

2014
Background
In September 2013, three grassroots organizations—People’s Grocery (Oakland, CA), the Social Justice Learning Institute (Inglewood, CA), and the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network (Detroit, MI) — convened in Detroit to initiate a conversation and develop action around collective leadership by people of color in the food justice movement. The executive directors of all three organizations have worked with and inspired WhyHunger in various ways over the years, and agreed to take the opportunity to participate in the Food Justice Voices series.

Introduction
On September 10th, during a warm Tuesday evening in Detroit, Malik Yakini, D’Artagnan Scorza, and I sat down and had a conversation about the future of the food movement, and the role of African Americans in the food movement. We discussed differences in gendered leadership, the spirit of song in the movement, expectations of leaders, and the complexity of African American communities—all while holding a sense of love for the work. The following transcript is an excerpt of the conversation and window into the minds of a few community leaders. Our hope is that this dialogue helps to humanize those working toward change in communities, and lifts up some of the unspoken dynamics at play in high need communities. Our hope is that this dialogue helps support the healing we need in the communities we serve.

Malik Yakini is the Executive Director of the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network. D’Artagnan Scorza, Ph.D. is the Executive Director of the Social Justice Learning Institute in Inglewood, CA.
Nikki Silvestri is a Social Innovation Strategist and former Executive Director of People’s Grocery in Oakland, CA.

— Nikki Silvestri
(at the time of the interview, Nikki Henderson of People’s Grocery)
The Spirit of Healing in the Food System

MALIK: [In response to the question: “What does "Chant Down Babylon" mean?”] Within the Rastafarian worldview and within many belief systems, people believe that sound and vibration have power. By chanting, you set in motion a certain word force or a certain vibration that can assist in the destruction of the forces that keep us oppressed.

NIKKI: That part of the health and healing and the race/class undoing racism work... a lot of that is the long-term work that is going to take decades to manifest, that we’re going to plant the seeds for and not see happen in our lifetime. So putting vibration out in the world is a great metaphor for what it is that we’re doing. And I would actually like it to be explicit. A lot of the health and healing work is about our vibration as people, and what we’re carrying – making sure that we’re carrying things that are going to powerfully hit people.

D’ARTAGNAN: What, exactly, would you like to be explicit?

NIKKI: I would like acknowledgement that spirit and soul work is always being done by grassroots groups [and is] part of our power and a part of our value in spaces...

"I would like acknowledgement that spirit and soul work is always being done by grassroots groups [and is] part of our power and a part of our value in spaces..." — Nikki Silvestri

Navigating Race, Place and Power

NIKKI: One of the conversations D’Artagnan and I got into was about people of African descent, and how the rhythm that we carry in our blood is intimidating for people because it awakens things that are really uncomfortable. It awakens the primal, and the visceral, and the deep.

D’ARTAGNAN: Those are experiences and forms of expression that people are not comfortable with, right? You know, it makes me think back to my time on the UC Board of Regents. When I served on the board it took me a while to adjust to the environment. And, you know, in the first four months everyone thought I was an angry black man.

NIKKI: For real? They thought you were an angry black man?

D’ARTAGNAN: Oh yeah. Yeah. Because I spoke with passion.

NIKKI: To keep it real... for just a second... I mean, anger is part of it. But any of us that have gotten to positions of power have learned how to not scare people. What we have learned how to do is turn our rhythm into charisma that is magnetic and irresistible in a lot of respects. And I know that it’s spoken about, but it’s not acknowledged in the way...
that it deeply affects the psyche of black leadership.

MALIK: You know, for most of my adult life, I’ve done a lot of speaking to groups. And most of the time I’ve been speaking to exclusively African American audiences. And in speaking to African American audiences the passion is a plus. People want to be hyped up, you know. But as I got more involved in the food movement and began speaking to more mixed audiences, or predominately white audiences, that same passion, again, was interpreted as anger. And so I had to consciously learn how to...

D’ARTAGNAN: ...code switch...

MALIK: ...how to code switch, how to tone it down a little bit. I had to think about my thinking, and think about my speech, in order to not intimidate people. I wonder if part of this, though, is just a characteristic of American society...this looking for icons and wanting leaders to be perfect, and not really seeing leaders as human beings. I wonder if that’s a cultural characteristic.

The Complexity of Narratives

D’ARTAGNAN: I’m now thinking about the expectations that we have, that are in some ways foisted upon us as black leaders. We’re expected to speak in a certain way; we’re expected to be charismatic; we’re expected to speak for entire groups of people. Like, Malik, when you leave Detroit, Malik Yakini is known for the food movement of Detroit.

MALIK: Yeah, that’s interesting.

D’ARTAGNAN: Nikki is known for the food movement of Oakland. D’Artagnan is somewhat known, right?...in the food movement of Southern California... In our role as leaders, in whatever movement we’re in (but specifically in the food movement) people attempt to play on these images of blackness in order to facilitate whatever their agendas may be. Sometimes they’re personal agendas; sometimes they’re more of a public agenda. But these expectations of blackness—that we be charismatic, that we be able to code switch, that we can’t speak with passion because it’s interpreted as anger, depending on the audience—those expectations can be destructive.

Some people in the movement, I’ve come to realize, rely on simple narratives in order to facilitate their own position.

"But we are expected to speak in a certain way, we’re expected to be charismatic, we’re expected to speak for entire groups of people."

— Dr. D’Artagnan Scorza

In Los Angeles, we have tons of fast food restaurants, but we also have grocery stores. The narrative is more complex. It’s not as simple as living in a food desert, or living in a food swamp, or some people not having access while others do. There are mobile markets that go out to our communities. Some people already had gardens before anyone even thought about funding garden builds, right? There is complexity that is not allowed in...
the construction of our identity as black people, but more specifically, as people who can be considered visible food justice leaders in the community.

Supporting these simple narratives and playing on images of blackness is counterproductive to the movement. Partly because the simple narrative is the same old narrative—and it’s not true. It’s not true. These dominant ideological frameworks are constantly at play. These expectations of how we’re supposed to show up with one another, or the belief that black people must have moral leadership, or the belief that there’s always an appeal to white America for freedom, or for changing things. These frameworks keep us in a relationship of struggle and fight. And I’m not saying that these things may or may not be true—that we should not go out and mobilize our people through direct action organizing to demand power—because I do recognize that power concedes nothing without demand. However, what I am arguing, is that these constructions lock us into dichotomous relationships; they lock us into relationships that do not advance justice. These constructions essentially hold the status quo in place.

"Supporting these simple narratives and playing on images of blackness is counterproductive to the movement."
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Integrated Leadership

D’ARTAGNAN: This conversation brings me back to this idea of expectations of black leadership. One of the criticisms I often get is that I’m doing too much. I’m constantly being told, “You’re doing too much.”

MALIK: Who tells you that?

D’ARTAGNAN: A lot of professionals who are out there in the world say, “You should just focus on one thing, and become known for that one thing. You should be the expert of that one thing. Be the guy, or the girl, for that thing. And that will get you places.” I reject that understanding of how the world works—that you can be reduced to “one thing.” I reject the idea that our beings, that who we are and the work we do can be reduced to one thing—that you’re just “Malik Yakini, the food justice leader in DBCFSN.”

MALIK: Yeah, I reject that too.

D’ARTAGNAN: You were a principal, and a teacher, and so many other things.

NIKKI: Yeah, and you know, that feels really fundamental to why I wanted to work with you two in particular, because SJLI isn’t technically a food justice organization. You work on transforming poverty at its core, and transforming the experience of the oppressed through multiple means.

[turning to Malik] And you are also an entertainer, and a principal, and have had a whole life before you did this, so you can’t just be "Malik, the food justice leader." And I’m looking for a way to actually be fully expressed in my leadership as a woman, because I know that I’m going to want to do other things. I don’t want to have to “quit my job” to go do these other things. I always want to be involved in making sure people get healthy food. It’s going to change, and it’s going to morph and it’s going to transform, but I want to find a sustainable way, nationally, to continue building my own personal and professional life.

I feel like this thing about being good at one thing, is in part for ego and notoriety, quite
frankly. If you’re known for a few different things, then you’ll never “be the best.” And at this point, screw that. I definitely want to continue speaking, and I definitely want to continue to be on stage, because I love it. Not because my goal is to win an award or to get into the history books. I want to raise my kids—and they will be badass human beings, who will raise badass human beings. And I know that, principally, is my work in the world. And I’m also doing a bunch of other things with my gift, which is my voice.

MALIK: ...that’s one of your gifts...

NIKKI: ...one of my gifts... but I don’t care if I’m written about. I care about whether I’m happy, not about whether I’m right.

D’ARTAGNAN: I hear you, and I think the challenge is that we are in positions of leadership in organizations. If we’re not being written about, then we’re not bringing visibility to our organizations and it’s harder to get funding... it’s harder to be considered thought leaders. There is a dynamic that, by choice, I think we’ve decided to take on and, now in these roles, have attempted to push back against. But it doesn’t, to me, mean that our identities should be reduced to one role. This dynamic lays out a set of expectations. When I talk to funders about what we do, they say, “Oh, you guys have these programs, and you guys have those programs. Wait a minute! How do you do that, AND this, too?” They get really confused! What I constantly bring people back to is the recognition that we’re doing work that our community has asked us to do.

You want to categorize it and call it these things and name it these things, but in our community this is just improving people’s lives.

“I don’t care if I’m written about.
I care about whether I’m happy, not about whether I’m right.” — Nikki Silvestri

Our community members don’t see our work as “health equity” and “food justice” and “educational equity” and “black male achievement.” That’s all language from a dominant perspective. For our parents, it’s, "Can you help my son go to school?" And, "Can you help my family eat a decent dinner?" For them, our work connects to their lived experience. And for us, that’s what it’s about, too. It’s about improving people’s lives at the core. And helping them build tools so that they don’t need us anymore. “We can help teach you how to build your garden, so that you don’t need to ask me to help you build a garden again. Once you learn how to do it yourself, ...Guess what?... I can go help somebody else. You’re good. And then you can go help your neighbor."
Reform and Revolution

NIKKI: I’m curious about this “working ourselves out of a job” thing. I think nonprofit people throw that around a lot. But there’s a part of me that feels like, until the revolution happens, and the American government is no longer functioning the way that it currently is, there’s going to be a need for institutions to support people. Or at least, what’s it going to take for black people to act the way other ethnic minorities do when it comes to taking care of our own? I feel like there are mechanisms with this system that are going to constantly steer people away from taking care of each other. And so there’s a need for folks that are holding the bottom line around care. And I think that this work is going to need funding for a while, until the whole thing crashes. But I don’t know that other people share that. That was actually a question I had for you two, do you believe in the whole “we’re going to work ourselves out of a job” thing?

D’ARTAGNAN: I wholeheartedly believe in that—the idea that we should work ourselves out of a job.

NIKKI: While the system is currently the way that it is, are we really going to work ourselves out of a job?

D’ARTAGNAN: I believe that, if I have to do this work in 15 or 20 years, all I’ve done is Band-Aid the problem. It’s not really revolutionary to wake up in 20 years and continue addressing the same problem over and over again. People talk about fighting, “until the revolution comes,” right? But the revolutionary thing to do is to make sure that I help usher in the revolution so that what I’m doing is no longer needed. One of the things I mentioned earlier, is that I want to be able to move on and do something else in this work, and not have to do this same type of work 10-15-20 years from now. And that not everything in the system that we have right now is all bad. So, I have an appreciation and a recognition of the promise and capacity our society holds to become better.

"It’s not really revolutionary to wake up in 20 years and continue addressing the same problem over and over again...the revolutionary thing to do is to make sure that I help usher in the revolution so that what I’m doing is no longer needed."

― Dr. D’Artagnan Scorza

And I’m not holding this system up as the best system, or the most ideal system. But when my grandmother was on her deathbed in our house, we had medical care for her that was paid for by the community we lived in. My sister, when she was nine years old, had a brain tumor. That was taken care of, and she was able to live. Now she’s 30 years old. She was supposed to pass by the age of 14. So there are things that are wrong with the system we live in, but there’s hope in the possibility of our lives being better. So if I hope that things can be better, and I don’t believe that my work will ever end, then how could I truly be committed to creating a better world? If I didn’t believe I could work myself out of a job, for me, I don’t think I would work toward creating long-term solutions.

MALIK: I will say for myself, I’m clearly working toward this long-term fundamental shift in power that some people call revolution... I don’t use that word a lot anymore because the images it conjures aren’t complex enough. But in the meantime, reform can be an important step towards building a revolutionary consciousness in people. But not necessarily, depending on how it’s done. If the reform is done in a way that helps people understand the root causes of their circumstances, then it can be revolutionary. If it is just helping people cope with their oppression, then that reform is not revolutionary. And I want to reflect...
on the statement that you made about the health care. Certainly this is one of the richest countries in the world. And even as an oppressed peoples inside of it, there is certain privilege that we have as a result of living in this society. But the richness of this country is really built on the exploitation of people throughout the world.

Building with Love

“In my own life, what I try to do is develop my own humanity to the fullest and to be an example, and I find that the more that I do that, there’s this almost invisible force that’s created that begins to call other people to move.” — Malik Yakini

MALIK: Another thing is that as I listen to you talk about teaching people to be liberated, and that might not have been your exact words—which I’ve found in my own life is that the more I manifest [liberation] within myself, rather than try to teach people [liberation], or convince people of it, the more we fully express our humanness. We create a spiritual force—almost a spiritual generator, I think—that draws people to us, and has people wanting to be more like us, or to develop the qualities within themselves that they see in us, rather than us trying to convince them that they should do one thing or another. For me it’s not even a rational thing, you know, because you can give people information all day long and that doesn’t necessarily result in a change in behavior. So, at least in my own life, what I try to do is develop my own humanity to the fullest and to be an example, and I find that the more that I do that, there’s this almost invisible force that’s created that begins to call other people to move.

NIKKI: And that is “Chanting Down Babylon,” to me, at its fundamental core. Which is why us, together, is really important. I wanted to be in partnership with folks who move from love and who believe in self - mastery as a spiritual force in the world. Because, just the three of us together is so irresistible, I think, as evidenced by our teams, right? What happened over these last two days was magic that could not have been controlled or created. It was just magic, because we are magic. And we’re even more magical together.

D’ARTAGNAN: And Malik I would actually say that because you teach African-centered education, in many ways there is a teaching, or re-teaching of liberation.

MALIK: Sure. I agree. And I don’t mean to reduce concepts, actually [laughter]. Because clearly, part of our job is teaching. But maybe I should say that the more impactful way...

D’ARTAGNAN: ...is to be the example.

MALIK: Yes. I read this book once that was called, Don’t Just Do Something, Sit There.


MALIK: I used to think, “Well the more I do—if I’m really active—it will transform things.” But it’s not always like that, sometimes the more still you are, and the more you focus on refining yourself and refining your own relationship to the universe, the more that changes things. That’s what I’ve found, at least. But it’s never either/or, it’s always both/and. So yes, we do need to teach. And we do need to...

D’ARTAGNAN: ...deconstruct...

MALIK: ...we need to deconstruct. And we need to do the self-work. So it’s all of those, simultaneously...
WhyHunger is a leader in building the movement to end hunger and poverty by connecting people to nutritious, affordable food and by supporting grassroots solutions that inspire self-reliance and community empowerment.

WhyHunger brings its unique assets and history to building a broad-based social movement to end hunger. Our set of core values rests on the understanding that solutions and innovation are often found in the grassroots. WhyHunger’s programs work to support these community-based organizations as they grow and develop, and bring new ideas and practices to creating a just food system that provides universal access to nutritious and affordable food.

Learn more at whyhunger.org

**Nikki Silvestri, Social Innovation Strategist and former Executive Director of People’s Grocery**

Nikki Silvestri is a Social Innovation Strategist and former Executive Director of People’s Grocery in Oakland, CA. Over the last ten years, Nikki has worked as an advocate for environmental and social equity for underrepresented populations in food systems, social services, public health, and economic development. As Executive Director of People’s Grocery in Oakland, Nikki led efforts to cultivate economic and environmental justice within the food sector. She holds a master’s degree in African American studies from UCLA, and is originally from Los Angeles.

**Dr. D’Artagnan Scorza, Executive Director Social Justice Learning Institute**

Dr. D’Artagnan Scorza is the founder and Executive Director of the Social Justice Learning Institute in Inglewood, CA. Scorza obtained a Ph.D. in Education from University of California, Los Angeles, along with a B.A. in the Study of Religion. He was a 2010 Education Pioneer Fellow and is currently a 2013-2014 BALLE Fellow. He also has a B.S. in Liberal Studies, with an emphasis on Business Management, from National University. Scorza is a former McNair Undergraduate Research Scholar, and a UC Regent from 2007 to 2009.

**Malik Yakini, Executive Director Detroit Black Community Food Security Network**

Malik Kenyatta Yakini is a founder and the Executive Director of the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network. He views the “good food revolution”as part of the larger movement for freedom, justice and equality. He has an intense interest in contributing to the development of an international food sovereignty movement that embraces Black farmers in the Americas, the Caribbean and Africa.

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