



Field Gems Photography

**why.**

WhyHunger

# Pathology of Displacement: The Intersection of Food Justice and Culture

By:

**Shane Bernardo**

Storyteller, Healing Practitioner,  
Anti-Oppression & Food Justice  
Organizer

2017

## Food Justice and Culture

Food Justice is a seemingly all-inclusive term that speaks to the intersections of many different issues such as the rights of Mother Earth, the rights of peasant farmers and landless peoples, migrant farm worker and restaurant worker rights, and environmental justice issues, among others. What is often lost within these very important conversations about disparities of power, though, is the intersection between food justice and culture.



Sinigang, a quintessential Filipino dish flavored with tamarind, prawns and bok choy.

Food and culture is not just another illustration of intersectionality, but a critical point that speaks to the lived experience of those of us often found on the margins of well-intended, mainstream food justice movements. Examining this intersection further is part of an ongoing practice of what long-time Detroit-based movement elders James and Grace Lee Boggs called "moving away from protest politics and towards visionary organizing".

**"Food and culture is not just another illustration of intersectionality, but a critical point that speaks to the lived experience of those of us often found on the margins of well-intended, mainstream food justice movements."**

It is here where we start looking inwards, unearthing and reclaiming how our ancestors cultivated a repository of strength that came from an intimate relationship with the soil and our immediate environment. This intimate connection gave birth to our traditional teachings, belief systems, customs and rituals. In transforming our definition of food justice to be more expansive and rooted in this place of strength and identity, we can transform our movements to be more humane, resilient, and powerful in response to the systems of imperialism and settler colonialism that these ancestral practices preceded for millennia before being displaced. ►



Giving a tour at Earthworks Urban Farm/ Capuchin Soup Kitchen (Detroit, MI).

**why.**

WhyHunger

**Pathology of Displacement**  
By: Shane Bernardo

**2**

## Living with Trauma within the Diaspora

I am the second generation of my family living in Detroit, MI. My ancestors are from the Ilocos Norte region in the Philippines. I come from a long line of craftspeople, fisher folk and subsistence farmers. We live close to the Earth, forage, hunt, fish, raise animals and grow our own food. Where my family comes from, working a "9 to 5" job is not commonplace.



A family portrait of my Lola (grandmother), her parents and siblings in the Philippines.

When the U.S. passed The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, my parents were heavily encouraged to leave their villages and used their hard earned college degrees to seek out the so-called "American dream". They planned to help support our family "back home" with remittance payments like so many others who went abroad to earn a living. This practice was *made* widely commonplace when our people and indigenous way of life was displaced by war, military and foreign occupation, deforestation, mining and what I call the "plantation economy".

When our native ways of subsistence were no longer able to support our way of life, many people were forced into urban areas, city centers and overseas to sell the only thing that they had left to offer, their labor, skills and bodies. We went from being self-sufficient and living off the land to becoming service labor, wage earners and consumers in cities. We were left with no other option but to leave our ancestral ways of living behind. As we migrated into unfamiliar lands, our relationship to the Earth and Earth-based traditions dramatically changed and became endangered and under threat of being lost forever. ▶



Fists up in solidarity with Anishinaabe Water Protectors at the Allied Media Conference (Detroit, MI).

This is the story of my family and millions of others within the Filipino diaspora. There are many of us attempting to heal ourselves, restore our sense of identity and what it means to reclaim traditional and cultural foodways on a landmass that we are not native to. The legacy of western imperialism and settler colonialism displaced my family and people from our first mother, our ancestral lands that provided us with physical, emotional, mental and spiritual sustenance for millennia. There remain a lot of unanswered questions but what I've found is that food justice is so much more expansive, deeply spiritual and part of a long journey of healing from intergenerational trauma.

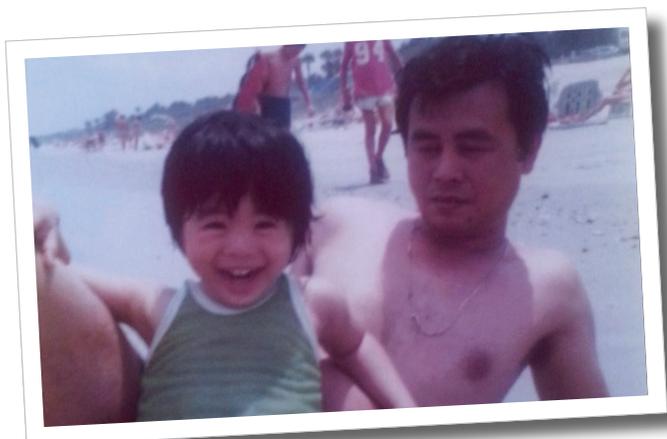


At D-Town Farm's Annual Harvest Festival facilitating a "Building a Food Justice Movement" workshop.

## Chronic Health Disease and our Proximity to Land

In 2010, my family experienced a profound sense of loss. We lost my father due to chronic health disease and my childhood home on Detroit's eastside due to foreclosure. I didn't find out until much later how interrelated these two events actually were.

In the year 2000, my father suffered a debilitating stroke. He lost his coordination which inhibited use of the whole left side of his body. He was no longer able to independently



A photo of my late father, Edgardo Bernardo and I at Point Pelee in Ontario, CA.

feed, clothe and bathe himself as he had been accustomed to. He was a very proud person whose sense of self and masculinity came from being able to provide for and take care of his family and household. In the years that followed, my father experienced a deep, agonizing depression and often spoke about wanting to die. Looking back, his spirit had died long before his physical body did.

In the years prior to his stroke, my father enjoyed working the Earth with his hands and spending long hours in our backyard garden. It was his primary outlet for working out stress. He would come home from working all day in our family's grocery store and work in the garden until it got dark - not because he had to, but because he wanted to. It was liberating. ▶

**"We were left with no other option but to leave our ancestral ways of living behind. As we migrated into unfamiliar lands, our relationship to the Earth and Earth-based traditions dramatically changed and became endangered and under threat of being lost forever."**

When I was growing up, we ate fresh opo squash, bitter melon, yard long beans, Chinese eggplant, bok choy and tomatoes from seeds that we saved. We grew food in our backyard before it was called "urban gardening". For us, retaining our relationship to these foods is a cultural expression and a way to cope with being in a place we are not familiar with, or welcome, for that matter.

When my father became ill, our family of five went down to a single income. We quickly found that we couldn't keep up with the subprime home equity loan when the balloon payments kicked in. During the infamous housing and mortgage crisis, we lost our home on Detroit's eastside in less time that it took my parents' combined efforts to initially acquire. Despite being previously paid off; our home, the land it



In my backyard garden harvesting an opo squash (bottle gourd).



A photo of me in our small family grocery store located on Detroit's northwest side.

was on and our backyard garden that my father spent countless hours in were all gone.

Where my folks come from, we don't have the same level of chronic health disease that we have here in the U.S. Here, we became dependent on the western diet and were far removed from the subsistence lifestyle of hunting, fishing, raising animals and growing our own food. As my father battled the "hat trick" of obesity, diabetes and heart disease, I saw how our proximity to land-based subsistence living and the Earth greatly determined our physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual health. For those of us whose ancestors lived close to the Earth, our overall health was deeply and dynamically interconnected with our relationship with our immediate natural environment as well as our Earth-based traditions, rituals and customs. Our health is connected to a sense of sacredness and reverence. ▶

**"We grew food in our backyard before it was called 'urban gardening'. For us, retaining our relationship to these foods is a cultural expression and a way to cope with being in a place we are not familiar with, or welcome, for that matter."**



An illustration of the Battle of Mactan (1521) depicting Native Chieftain and National hero, King Lapu Lapu who bested Ferdinand Magellan despite having less sophisticated weaponry.  
**Credit:** Carl Frances Morano, Creative Commons.

To cope with my father's transition to ancestorhood, I started doing research on how we came to be here on this land mass that Indigenous folks refer to as Turtle Island. My curiosity about my family's ancestry led me to a history and legacy of settler colonialism that spans nearly 500 years in the Philippines and the U.S. and connects the ongoing colonial oppression of my ancestors with those of Indigenous folks of the Americas. We share the same colonizers.

Not unlike the housing and foreclosure crisis, my ancestors were displaced en masse from their land. We were sold into bondage or forced to migrate into cities and abroad where we did not have as intimate a connection with the land. Even though there were many attempts to rebel and resist, many had no choice but to participate in their own continued oppression and become wage earners and consumers. Our people became dependent on the benevolence of the same people that displaced us. Through force and literal starvation, our colonial oppressors and missionaries positioned themselves to serve as gatekeepers to food, shelter, education, security, income and our most important and basic need, our own humanity.

When we lost our home and my father, it reinforced this long-standing historical link between being displaced from our home and the

kind of trauma and chronic physical ailments that endure long thereafter as a result.

In the field of somatics, this phenomenon is known as generational trauma. Unresolved conflict from the past, either within your own or your ancestors', can be inherited and passed onto you and/or your progeny. This can have severe impacts on one's health including how nutrients are metabolized by the body causing one to mimic addictive behavior and crave high calorie foods. You and your descendents may suffer chronic health conditions due to experiences that happened in generations that preceded them. The emotional, psychological and spiritual trauma of being displaced from what indigenous ancestors considered our mother, the Earth, can continue to victimize those of us in following generations even without having first-hand knowledge of it.

The danger is that physicians and patients alike may do further harm by emphasizing other hereditary factors that are more symptomatic in nature and place an undue amount of blame on the victims' consumptive habits alone without looking at the historical context in which these decisions are made. When we look at the health disparities suffered by Indigenous peoples (especially those that have been forcibly displaced or kidnapped from their ancestral lands), we can see quite clearly how these events can have long-lasting impacts over multiple generations without being properly diagnosed as a legacy of post-traumatic stress disorders. Indigenous people appropriately call this "blood memory". ▶

**"The emotional, psychological and spiritual trauma of being displaced from what indigenous ancestors considered our mother, the Earth, can continue to victimize those of us in following generations even without having first-hand knowledge of it."**



Fishing the spring run of silver bass as they migrate up from Lake Erie to spawn.

## Decolonizing of Food Justice Movements

Today, I am attempting to heal from intergenerational trauma and what I refer to as the "original grief" of being displaced from our first mother, our ancestral lands, by reclaiming traditions, rituals and ceremonies that come from a deep place of knowing from within. By honoring this deep wisdom, I am attempting to heal myself as well as those that came before me, my ancestors, my father, my grandmother. I am a living embodiment of their dreams and intentions.

Through reclaiming our subsistence practices and Indigenous foodways like fishing, growing culturally relevant food, carving wooden utensils and bowls, making baskets that carry crops, or weaving fiber from a pineapple tree palms, we are also reclaiming the source of our ancestral identities of being mutually, intimately and inextricably connected to the land. This reclaiming is also known as decolonizing, a process of being reacclimated with a way of being that existed before empire and settler colonization and systemic and historic oppression. Decolonization is about healing one's self and ancestors by reclaiming ancestral practices that nourish us in similar ways that food does. In addition to nourishing our bodies, we are also nourishing our minds, hearts and souls.

It is here where the intersection of food and culture is most evident. This intersection clearly demonstrates how the practice of ancestral foodways can be as healing and nourishing as the food that we eat. In the era where people have transitioned into urban areas to become consumers and wage earners and have left their subsistence ways behind, we lose our connection to our traditions that come from living in close proximity with the Earth. We lose our identities and connection to our ancestry as our traditional ways of knowing are lost to the ways of mass consumption. ►



Posing with Lumad (Indigenous) activists from Mindanao visiting Loyola University.

When you start to consider the impacts of warfare, deforestation, mining, natural disasters due to climate change and unfettered exploitation of the Earth, we are left to analyze the legacy of western imperialism and settler colonialism and how the internal legacy struggles we inherited from our displaced ancestors mirror the violence outside of ourselves.

Indigenous-led movements like that of peasant farmers and landless peoples highlight the power of ancestral wisdom in facilitating transformational social change. As movement-oriented food justice practitioners, how can the process of reclaiming the practice of our own ancestral foodways help unearth the wisdom of our own traditions and ancestors?

In the same ways that we can inherit intergenerational trauma, we can also inherit ancestral wisdom embedded within our own bodies. In the same way that reclaiming indigenous foodways and subsistence practices can heal ourselves from intergenerational trauma, we can also transform the way that we organize around social justice and food justice issues.

Many of these indigenous foodways and subsistence practices have stories embedded within them that tell us about our ancestors'

struggles and lives. These stories are food for our spirits and are essential for rooting our movements in a sense of identity that predates contemporary forms of imperialism and colonialism of Native peoples here on Turtle island or within the diaspora. Decolonizing is part of the process of reclaiming these ancestral traditions, rituals and customs.

Our greatest challenge to decolonizing and healing is not just being displaced from our ancestral lands and traditions. As long as western imperialism and colonialism is seen only as happening within the past tense, the human and environmental cost will continue to impact countless generations. If the neocolonial expressions of military occupation, deforestation, mining, industrial farming and climate change facing the Lumad (Indigenous) Philippine people of the southernmost island of Mindanao today is any indication, we have every right to be concerned. ■■■

**"Decolonization is about healing one's self and ancestors by reclaiming ancestral practices that nourish us in similar ways that food does. In addition to nourishing our bodies, we are also nourishing our minds, hearts and souls."**

## Shane Bernardo

Shane Bernardo grew up working in his family's small ethnic grocery store on the west side of Detroit, Michigan. For over 13 years, Shane's family helped cultivate a nourishing environment for the South East Asian, West African and Afro-Caribbean cultures through culturally relevant foods, recipes, stories and traditions. In addition to food staples, Shane also developed a heightened awareness of shared social, economic, political and historical conditions that his family had in common with others within a geographically, racially, ethnically and culturally stratified community.

Shane is also a long-life Detroit resident active in grassroots efforts within the food justice movement in Detroit as the outreach coordinator and farm stand manager for [Earthworks Urban Farm](#), a program of the Capuchin Soup Kitchen, and as a facilitator for [Uprooting Racism Planting Justice](#), fellow with the [Detroit Equity Action Lab](#), an Exchange fellow with the [Stone Barns Center for Sustainable Agriculture](#), core working group member for [Groundswell](#) and a founding member of Swimming in the Detroit River, an environmental justice storytelling collective. ■■■

---

To request permission to reprint content please contact [why@whyhunger.org](mailto:why@whyhunger.org)



Speaking at the Detroit Ecumenical Theological Seminary on Earth Day.



Helping sketch out a mural honoring a movement ancestor, Shedly R.

The Right Brothers

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](http://whyhunger.org)

"In the same way that reclaiming indigenous foodways and subsistence practices can heal ourselves from intergenerational trauma, we can also transform the way that we organize around social justice and food justice issues."

**Pathology of Displacement:**  
The Intersection of Food Justice and Culture

By: Shane Bernardo