



Michael Brown, an unarmed Black teenager, was shot and killed on Aug. 9, 2014 by Darren Wilson, a white police officer, in Ferguson, Mo., a suburb of St. Louis. What does what happened in Ferguson and the subsequent response that followed have to do with the food justice movement?

[Risk Ratios](#) reveals that Black people were killed at 10 to 40 times the rate of whites or other minorities at the hands of the police. [Research also forecasts that Black and Brown children are now expected to live shorter lives than their parents, due to diet-related disease.](#) This special series of WhyHunger's Food Justice Voices is a bold attempt to explore the way in which police violence and institutionalized anti-black racism is deeply interconnected to food, land and Black bodies. What is the connection between the death of Black people at the hands of the state (police shootings) and the death of Black people at the hands of the corporate food system (diet-related disease/land displacement/redlining)?

To lift up critical voices of grassroots leaders, WhyHunger's Beatriz Beckford facilitated a national call with dynamic organizers and activists across the country to discuss the connection between the oppression that Black communities face at the hands of the state via police violence and at the hands of an unjust

food system. Based on this initial dialogue, *What Ferguson Means for the Food Justice Movement* series was born. Through this series, we'll release a powerful collection of articles featuring the grassroots voices of Black leaders working within movement building and food justice to create real social change. These are their voices and their solutions, rooted in their lived experiences.

The *What Ferguson Means for the Food Justice Movement* series is a collective interrogation of these issues from the perspective of Black activists around the country organizing around food justice. The series is rooted in the innovation happening in Black communities to resist state violence in all its forms while building our way into the society we have always dreamed of.

We hope you join us for this important conversation and contribute your thoughts. Read the [series introduction](#) by Beatriz Beckford to get started and follow the conversation with [#FoodJusticeVoices](#).

What Ferguson Means for the Food Justice Movement Issue 5

An Interview with Food Justice Activist **Tanya Fields**

Conducted by **Beatriz Beckford**, Director, Grassroots Action Network, WhyHunger

BB: How do we define food justice with a racial justice lens?

TF: It's important to include anti-racist work when we're thinking about food justice systems, where we are creating food justice and food sovereignty. When we're looking at the food justice system and the systems of inaccessibility, when you're thinking about the fact that just in New York state the very small percentage of farmers of color, specifically Black farmers in New York state, you're looking at a food system that mirrors the systems of

oppression that exist in society right now. What a lot of other folks have already said that came before me is, the current food system also mirrors problematic thinking within our community that is a reflection of customs, rituals and practices that have been stolen or forcefully taken from us. I am thinking about when I had a much more intimate connection with farmers who were doing this work, you heard a lot of farmers of color, particularly Black farmers, talking about how farming for many of our youth and a lot of our adults, as well, >>>

Tanya Fields also known as Mama Tanya is an activist based in the South Bronx. She is the Founder and Executive Director of The BLK ProjeK, an economic development enterprise that utilizes the good food movement to provide opportunities for marginalized women and youth of color in the Bronx. She is a well sought after public speaker often speaking on the intersections of race, gender and mothering. A sometimes blogger and published writer, avid amateur chef and fierce mama bear to 6 fantastic kids.



The BLK Projek

The BLK Projek seeks to address food justice and economic development by harnessing the local, good food movement and creating small business and career opportunities for underserved women and youth of color. Through culturally relevant education, beautification of public spaces, urban gardening and community programming, we create easily accessible resources and enrich the lives of women who are routinely overlooked and overburdened yet serve an important and critical role in the larger fabric of society. BLK Projek works to strengthen overall mental and public health, create viable pathways out of poverty, and support local growers thereby elevating the collective self-esteem of the larger communities we live in.

represented oppression to them. It represented this mentality of: 'Why do you wanna turn people back into slaves? I don't have any interest in farming. Like, why would I want to do that?' Because for them, it signified going backwards. They lacked an analysis around how the denial of land and the ability to grow our own food for our own neighborhood in fact represented liberation, it represented autonomy because they had no connection or knowledge of these practices outside of oppression. They don't know their very rich history as stewards for the land and as farmers. So for many of us doing this work now,

the fact that farming represents liberation and autonomy is a very revolutionary thought. But when you look at history, that wasn't revolution, it just was a way in which we lived that made sense. So I think that when you're looking at the work that we do in that way, it's also really important to have a historical context around systems of oppression and how they play out.

BB: Black womyn and more specifically Black mothers and families have always been involved in movements and, I would argue, the love of kin and the pursuit of a better quality of life for our loved ones is what often times pushes mothers and families into movement work. How does being a Black womyn and a mother in the food movement create both barriers and opportunities for participating in and leading social change efforts?

TF: You make the road by walking. When other moms, particularly low income Black mothers have seen Black women in this space as leaders, the reception is that people feel very inspired and motivated. If this mom with her whole gang of children can do this, in the spirit of creating a better world for our kids and everyone, it plants the seed for everyone else. When you step into motherhood, you don't stop being a woman but your focus changes. Most mothers will tell you that they put her children's needs before their own so it would be natural that mothers would want to be an integral part of social change. We want to clothe our children, feed our children and provide our children with the means to live a good life. We strive to enrich their quality of life.

"That's why I always say that mothers have to be on the frontlines in movement work because we are creating a world that's going to be safe and healthy and whole for our children and loved ones."

BB: Audre Lorde, a self-described Black lesbian, mother, warrior, poet said, "There is no such thing as single issue struggle because we do not live single issue lives." We see this intersectionality play out in our daily lives. Black communities that have been historically marginalized, both racially and economically, are often inundated with fast food and lack quality fresh food options. Add into the mix under resourced schools that perpetuate a substandard of soft bigotry, and the constant threat of violence by those sworn to protect, instead leaves Black communities heavily policed and Black family infrastructures fractured by high rates of incarceration. Considering the fact that our movements (food, labor, gender, etc.) are segmented and often divorced of a racial justice analysis, how do we create movement interdependency that can organize across issues that Black families face?

TF: What's key is relationship building. It is so easy to get overwhelmed but important to note that nothing happens in a vacuum. The way that housing, quality of education, and criminalization play a role makes it so that there is no way to effectively organize. There's no way to do all >>>

those things, but that doesn't mean I can't build meaningful relationships and build smart collectives and coalitions. We must come together to think: what are our common goals? Looking at Ferguson and the brutalization of black bodies, how do we create national and international coalitions and collectives to do power-building? We need to start creating some real power bases around how we affect policy. How do we affect things on a legislative level? How do we come to the table and not make so many concessions so that it doesn't look like anything that we're actually fighting for? It is important that we fight for resources to have real and autonomous change occur.

BB: Consider Ferguson as representative of the extreme violence of the system through extensions of the state like the police. What explicit connections can we make between mothering, families, food justice and police violence specifically from a SYSTEMS/STRUCTURAL perspective?

TF: This is such a good question. There's a lot there on both sides of the coin. Mothering is stigmatized to criminalize poor people. What comes to mind is the video of the boy who was throwing rocks at people and the mother comes and hits him — that went viral. I understood that fear because it's the thought that if I don't beat her/his ass, then the streets are going to beat his ass. It goes back to the days of slavery when we broke the spirits of our children in front masta and missus where we beat up our kids in front of them so they wouldn't kill them. It was thought that if you beat them and made an example of them in front of masta and the other slaves then he would know you were committed to correcting any "problematic" behavior and you could save your child from harm from white folks and white authority. In essence, you were doing something painful to "save your child's life." By continuing this legacy, there's this internalized brutality that has continued to be perpetuated. And I hear many parents still declare they feel that this is how we save our children's lives so they are not brutalized by the school system, by the police & state. In Black communities, overwhelmingly non-radicalized working class folks don't see anything wrong with beating their kids and that has external constructs and systemic institutions

in policing, food systems and capitalism and education. The amount of pressure that continues to perpetuate many of the things that we are trying to free ourselves from and when we do try to get out of these patterns, there's no community support so you feel trapped in a cycle that you cannot get out of.

BB: "We demand..." finish the sentence.

TF: We demand access to resources and capital and power that will allow us to manifest and actualize the best potential of our communities.

BB: How can we connect the organizing that has been happening, the innovation and future thinking in Black families and communities, whose histories are rich with tactics of resiliency, with the energy that has been generated through response and support of mass actions around policing and police killings in Black communities?

TF: That's really easy. We need to stop the respectability politics. We do not do enough to hold space for those who are the most negatively impacted: those who are "less radical, less educated, and less articulate." We treat them as props. We want to speak for them. Because they don't have the vernacular. Because they don't use language we deem as appropriate. What ends up happening is that the people who talk about police brutality and are "leaders" in the movement end up perpetuating many of the practices of exclusion. It can often feel like those who are fighting against white patriarchal hegemony merely want to replace it with their own brand of patriarchal hegemony that exists. So it must be emphasized that those that are the most affected need to be at the forefront. We must stop stigmatizing mothers and especially single Black mothers.

BB: How are Black mothers, families, and children being included and supported in movement spaces?

TF: They aren't. I am a black mother and even though people are telling me they support me, I have to fight for space and demand space for me and my children. We are seen as an inconvenience when we are in the room. We need to raise the money and do the leg work to create space so the babies are in the room

because intergenerational spaces are critical to continuing this work. If they are to understand the importance of the work we are doing they have to be included in the spaces. And when it isn't appropriate that they be in the room we need to make sure there is a space nearby where they too can be cared and nurtured and still be witness to the work being done. As cliché as it sounds, those young folks are our future.

BB: Yes, radical mothering. such a beautiful notion rooted in love and justice! To mother unapologetically and to nourish kinship through mothering in a way that heals, radicalizes and helps us to build the beloved communities we all deserve. I want to lift up you don't have to be a biological parent to mother. You don't have to give birth to someone to show them they are enough and that they deserve joy. To manifest joy in yourself and others by mothering yourself and others. Mothering in this radical way you have lifted up for us in this conversation evokes for me the idea that when we mother our bonds with our kin we show them that we value their lives and their presence. That their lives are valued and their gifts are needed in this world, even when extreme and everyday systemic violence seeks to counter that narrative by devaluing black lives in highly sophisticated ways. When I think of Trayvon, Michael, Ayanna, Sandra, Eric, and Tamir, I think of their mothers, their kin who hold their memories, who seek justice for their children, and who invite us all to seek justice for their children. That invitation is what radical mothering is about, it is an infusion of love despite trauma in our movements. Dr. Maya Angelou in speaking about her own mother framed her mother's love as liberating. She said "Love liberates; it does not bind."

"That is what radical mothering is about. It is about love, and it is liberating."

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's programs support community-based organizations and social movements 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