



Sell-out crowd at the Brower Center for “Active Optimism in Anxious Times”. *Photo courtesy of Maywa Montenegro.*

Active Optimism in Anxious Times: Celebrating Food First's New Leadership

There was an air of excitement and enthusiasm as a crowd of over 100 Food First supporters bustled into the David Brower Center in Berkeley, California. They came to listen to an inspiring line-up of food and social justice speakers with deep roots in the food movement. There was Food First's founder, Frances Moore Lappé, prolific writer and food activist, Mark Bittman, John Vandermeer, a Food First Fellow and professor of ecology at the University of Michigan, and of course, Food First's new Executive Director, M. Jahi Chappell. The entire night was facilitated beautifully by Dr. Maywa Montenegro, a longtime friend of both Food First and Jahi.

The theme for the night was Active Optimism in Anxious Times. Despite the incredibly turbulent and very anxious times we are living in, it is important that we remember to celebrate our past victories and accomplishments, while also celebrating the joy and hope that roots our social movements and organizations.

Food First Board member, Shyaam Shabaka began the evening by recognizing that we were gathered in Berkeley on Ohlone land. Shyaam also shared the story of the “Elaine Massacre” that took place in Arkansas, 100 years ago. The massacre took place when white authorities discovered that over 100 black sharecroppers were planning to unionize. They quickly alerted a white militia, who attacked the gathering, murdering well over 200 men, women, and children. As we were at a gathering rooted in food, Shyaam urged us to remember this massacre of those who worked the land, like the indigenous people before them who were also pushed from the land.

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Food First is a “peoples’ think tank” and
education-for-action center. Our work
highlights the root causes and solutions to
hunger and poverty, with a commitment to
fighting racism and establishing food as a
fundamental human right.

Our Master of Ceremonies, Maywa Montenegro, a long-time friend of both Jahi and Food First, followed Shyaam. She started by sharing how “Food First for almost 45 years, has been not just a think-tank, nor even a think-and-do-tank, as it self-describes—for many of us, Food First has been a hope-tank.” Maywa went on to say that Food First has combined critical theory with practice in order to shed light on better ways of doing things. She commended the legacy of retired Executive Director, Eric Holt-Giménez, “whose shoes will undoubtedly be hard to fill.” But Maywa quickly followed that “Jahi won’t try to fill shoes. The point here is, as Eric was fond of saying, to continue to make the path by walking. And Jahi will continue to walk this path that Eric trod.”

Maywa ended her talk with a personal and amusing story about her and Jahi. It was 2008 and Maywa was a journalist at the time, looking for some insight on the emerging food crisis, and wanted to know how we were going to “feed the world.” At the time, she believed that GMO crops and the second Green Revolution were our only hope. Maywa called Jahi for an interview one day, and Jahi “refused to hang up the phone until he planted a seed of doubt in [her] head.” Over time, Jahi worked to convince Maywa that another way was possible, which was a significant part in leading Maywa into the work she

is doing today as a professor teaching agroecology!

Frances Moore Lappé shared a brief history of how Food First emerged and initiated the work of fighting the myths surrounding hunger’s causes and providing evidence that the ability to end hunger is already in our grasp. Frankie spoke of the challenging task to transform agriculture from one of the largest contributors of greenhouse gases to one of its best solutions, informing the audience that “Food First will be a major contributor” to this important task. Frankie ended her talk by discussing how the “genius” of Food First has developed over the years, naming three main aspects: “close-up and on-the-ground research combined with scholarly research and analysis; sharing of this deep reframing of activist scholarship; and mobilizing these with campaigns and conferences that bring key voices to the table in order to affect policy outcomes.” She pointed to how Jahi’s past work is tied to these three pillars of Food First, while reiterating how Food First’s bold analysis and vision is absolutely essential to counter the rising authoritarianism threatening our society.

Mark Bittman began by telling the crowd that if we want to solve our food and climate crisis, we must solve our democracy crisis. Mark made it



Frances Moore Lappé shares the history of Food First and more. *Photo Courtesy of Ahna Kruzic.*

clear that it is one thing to “get rid of Donald Trump, but that we should remember that Barack Obama was pretty much ineffectual. [...] The key is in replacing neoliberalism with something more beneficial to humans, and most of us know or have seen that only by organizing mass movements could this become true and meaningful.” But he also stated that it is our job to ensure that food remains a primary focus within these mass movements struggling for a better society, saying that “we all ignore food, and agriculture, at our own peril.”

Mark also covered issues of racism and white supremacy in our food system, strongly stating that “anti-racism is not adjacent to food system work, it is food system work.” He also reiterated Food First’s key message that the “food system is not broken. It is working perfectly for those who benefit from it.”

Following Mark was Food First fellow and former board member, John Vandermeer, a professor at the University of Michigan. John emphasized what it meant for Jahi to leave his position as a secure, tenured professor at a prestigious university in the United Kingdom in order to become the new Executive Director of a progressive “think-and-do tank” like Food First, speaking volumes to Jahi’s commitment to the food and social justice movement. John continued by sharing how Food First is rooted in a set of values that push for a “science for the people” and use “science as a way of challenging the myths of those in power.” John finished his talk by discussing how breaking down myths is a form of “intellectual self-defense,” and that this “has been the core of Food First since Frances Moore Lappé and Joe Collins.”

Next, was Jahi himself. Befitting of his jocular nature, the first portion of his talk was filled with stories and jokes that had the crowd laughing. But he then pivoted by reflecting on the anxious times that we are living in, which have left many feeling understandably hopeless and exhausted, with no end in sight. But he followed by making the

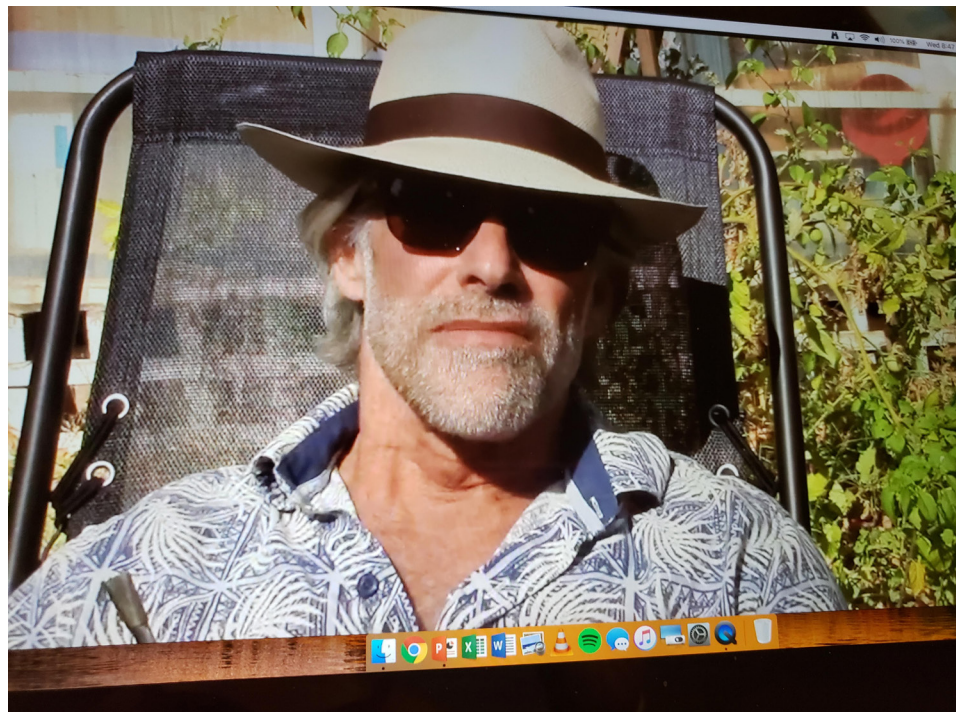
case that perception and reality are not always in sync. In fact, the history of social movements’ achievements reflect justice happening in fits and starts, taking decades of organizing work and movement building just to finally arrive at that pivotal moment where change occurs. Jahi spoke to his own work in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, to show how, even in times of right-wing insurgency, the radical work to end hunger continues. These pockets of hope are exactly what we need to remember that political and social struggles should be understood as part of the much longer road towards justice.

We ended the night by celebrating Food First’s former Executive Director, Eric Holt-Giménez and his wife, Leonor Hurtado, for their amazing thirteen years of service in the fight against the root causes of hunger! As a full-time volunteer and Fellow, Leonor managed an expansive translations team while also contributing terrific amounts of artwork and videography for Food First. As we know, Eric worked tirelessly by contributing numerous talks, workshops, books, articles, and so much more during his tenure at Food First, consistently digging deeper into the root causes of hunger and pushing the food

movement to grasp how capitalism, racism, and other forms of oppression drive our food system. As a solution to these issues, social movements were always front and center in his analysis. Eric will now join his wife as a Fellow of Food First. While they could not be present at the celebration, Eric delivered a humorous video full of laughs, advice, and encouragement. Needless to say, it looks as if Eric is enjoying his retirement.

Food First Joins Coalition of Farmers, Activists, and Advocates

In late September, farmers and advocates descended upon rural Wisconsin for Farm Aid 2019. Farm Aid originally began in 1985 during the farming crisis which reshaped US agriculture as we know it. At that time, farmers found themselves deep in debt due to high interest rates, low prices, and pro-agribusiness policies. They couldn’t cover their cost of production, leading to an unprecedented wave of farm foreclosures that rattled the social fabric of rural communities throughout the United States. Farm Aid was established as a benefit concert to support struggling farmers and bring awareness to the dif-



A retired Eric Holt-Giménez joins the celebration via video.

difficulties faced by farmers nationwide. But Farm Aid is much more than a concert, and still holds relevance today as farmers continue to find themselves in difficult times, facing low prices and high expenses. To this day, Farm Aid remains a vital space bringing together many farmers, advocates, and activists from different strands of the food movement to share experiences, build solidarity, and strategize for the future of food and farming.

Food First's Executive Director, Jahi Chappell, and Communications and Publications Officer, Erik Hazard, traveled to Wisconsin as part of the three-day series of events preceding the concert. The first day consisted of thought-provoking panels, speakers, group discussions, and more. The second day was filled with farm tours and celebration, while the final day was the concert event. While each day was important, we found the first day to be the most exciting and impactful for the food and farm movement.

While many people may, at first, think of a gathering of farmers in Wisconsin to be overwhelmingly white, the panel discussion event on the first day poked holes in those stereotypes. The farmers and activists on the first panel were members of different indigenous nations and organizations from the Wisconsin area. The theme repeated consistently was the crucial role that indigenous nations have in the protection of the environment. Expanding

indigenous sovereignty and honoring Federal treaties that have been consistently broken are essential to promoting a sustainable, equitable, and sovereign food system. It was extremely encouraging to see how the discussions that ensued throughout the rest of the day, and the weekend, showed a great deal of attention from non-indigenous farmers about the urgency of struggling with indigenous communities for climate justice and sovereignty. We could see solidarity being built between white, settler farmers and indigenous farmers. This is what movement building looks like.

The second panel was centered on what creating a more just and sustainable food system looks like in practice. While there is an abundance of analyses on the problems of the food system, we often overlook the many examples of communities building power and creating change from the ground up. Venice Williams of *Alice's Garden Urban Farm* discussed the importance of connecting soil health with racial justice and equality. Another issue she tackled was the looming crisis of retirement among farmers and questions surrounding who will take up their work? One solution offered was to better connect urban farmers of color with rural farmers whose families are no longer able or willing to farm. Venus ended by telling the audience that we must "shift the conversation from crisis to solutions," and that we should not "dismiss urban farming."

Also on this panel was Dr. Monica White, a Food First Fellow, professor of rural sociology, author of *Freedom Farmers*, and contributing author to Food First's Land Justice. She continued the message from her book: "Food is a strategy of resistance." Monica stressed the importance of creating alternatives to our oppressive food system through collective action, sharing Dara Cooper's (also a Food First contributor and racial justice activist) words, "Alone we are vulnerable. Together, we have strength."

After it was all done, we left Farm Aid with good reason to be hopeful about the future of the food and farming movements here in the United States. While there are enormous obstacles ahead, Farm Aid is just one example that shows the deep organizing happening across the country to bring about justice in the food system.

Where we have been lately

- Pesticide Action Network's 35th Anniversary
- Sustainable Economy Law Center's 10th Anniversary
- A Conversation with African Activists on the Fight for the Future of Food
- Youth-led Climate Strike in September

Why Did You Receive These Publications?

This publication was sent to you because of your generous support of Food First in the past. Created in collaboration with farmers, organizers, and researchers, these publications are a piece of how we share and envision our strategies and solutions for a just food system. We hope you consider renewing your membership with Food First to continue supporting justice-centered research and analysis for all. This work is only possible because of you.

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