# “Food, Activism, and COVID-19”

Dialogue has been edited for clarity.

Aaron Applebey (AA): For Michigan State University grad students looking for ways to specialize their degree, GJEC or Gender, Justice, and Environmental Change, is a first of its kind program which explicitly focuses on the intersections of gender, environmental change, and social and environmental justice. My name is Aaron Applebey, I’m recording this from my bedroom in East Lansing and I’m an intern with the GenCen or Center for Gender in Global Context, the MSU Department administering the GJEC program sponsored jointly by the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources and the College of Social Science, a lot of things. In the wake of COVID-19, in a time where our patterns are uprooted and our most vulnerable populations are at heightened risk, some MSU students are looking for ways to aide, build networks, and pivot. Today, I’m excited to be joined by Vanessa García Polanco, a graduate student in the Department of Community Sustainability. Though not a GJEC student, Vanessa was enrolled in ANP859, GJEC Methodology and Application, with GenCen’s co-director Dr. Wenda Bauchspies this spring. Vanessa is partly responsible for Food TBD, an information and resource hub co-produced by the Lexicon of Sustainability. Food TBD is an online community platform for food system responses to COVID-19. Hi Vanessa, how are you?

Vanessa García Polanco (VGP): Hey! Thank you for having me and for the invitation.

AA: Of course, yeah! So, our audience can get to know you a little bit more I was hoping you could tell me a bit more about yourself and your research.

VGP: Yeah, sure, so I’m an immigrant and that’s really important to understand what I do. I bring my identity as a woman of color, as an immigrant to my research and the bulk of the activities. So, I migrated to the United States 9 years ago and did my undergrad in the States and a few years ago I moved to Michigan to do my master’s at Michigan State University. And my research has always focused around immigrants and refugees and people of color and food systems and agriculture and natural resources. My current research focuses on immigrants and refugees in Lansing, Michigan focusing on urban agriculture and engagement in agriculture and what are their motivations and desires to being urban agriculture. Some of my other research focuses on Dominican agriculture, Dominican food studies, and other food studies related to immigration and food culture in general.

AA: Before we explicitly discuss Food TBD and COVID-19, I’m curious why you decided to enroll in ANP859, Gender, Justice, and Environmental Change Methodology and Application, what about that course drew you to it?

VGP: I never thought about a gendered lens before, I mostly thought from a critical race point of view thinking about immigration and other epistemologies like decolonization, Native American perspectives, and other, so gender was definitely the last one I decided to explore. It definitely came from a lot of my peers who are in the GJEC specialization who have taken some of the classes already and the way they think about gender in everything is the same way I think about like critical race theory for everything and for me that was fascinating. I wanted to understand that deeper, like I wanted to understand what was common as epistemology, I wanted to understand how I might have been using it already but never really called it that. I think that was one of the things that pushed me to take the course. I would say in the first few weeks of the course I was really hesitant because I really had completed my research so I really had a lot of the frameworks, a lot of the theories in place while I was researching, I had collected my data, so I was actually in the writing phase of my research. I think it wasn’t until the third week of class when we were learning about like feminist political ecology that I was just like oh my god, this is so good, like this is really insightful reading about the things that I already care about: justice, power, and equality. That’s when it clicked to me that I probably was using a lot of the feminist epistemology principles for my own research because I’m always asking the questions: who has power in the food system and who do we appreciate in the food system and who do we highlight. So, I think, this class helped me conceptualize and reflect on a lot of that work that I was already doing.

AA: So, let’s dig into Food TBD. I think just a general description to help our listeners understand it. And then, how did you specifically become connected to the project and how does Lexicon of Sustainability connect to that as well.

VGP: Yeah, definitely. So, Food TBD started as a google document. Back in March, in the first few days of the COVID outbreak and pandemic, I started just collecting all the articles that I could see related to food justice and the pandemic. What was really important for me to remember around this is that a lot of the conversations we’re having around food right now—like people having food access, food workers getting sick in plants, and farm workers not having access to PPE—these are things that in my circles of food justice, we are always talking about these things, regardless of if there’s a pandemic or not because these are the natural conditions where migrants, farm workers, people of color are exposed to and involved in the food system. So, when this happened, I just started collecting all the articles, all the blog posts, even email responses from academics I’m around, just compiling it like people’s reaction to what we were seeing and people in media talking about it. And then the document grew to maybe 20 pages of different resources about the food systems and equity and highlighting how the pandemic was impacting the food system, mostly from an equity point of view. And I was approached by the Lexicon, Douglas Gayeton and Laura Howard-Gayeton, because they found my document because it was widely circulating the food system circles and networks and they were saying there’s 300 people seeing your document every day, imagine if all those people could talk to each other and could like exchange resources because the document right now you can just post stuff on it but you cannot really leave comments or talk to other people you can just like see the resources that are there and post more. The Lexicon was preparing a longer food systems project about food systems interaction and they approached me and say, what if we create a platform where people can talk and communicate about these resources you are sharing. And that’s when Food TBD was born. So, basically, they used the skeleton of the resources I had created in a google document and they put it in an online platform where people can actually comment on the resources and ask for resources and say like I’m looking for this kind of resource, I need this kind of resource, oh thank you for sharing this resource because I need it for x, y, and z. So, the platform now has been live for about a month and there’s a thousand people in the platform and people keep posting webinars, keep posting resources, keep posting articles, and I still keep the google document going so people may not want the interaction and just want access to the resources can still do it.

AA: And this is international? Like people all over the globe are part of it?

VGP: Yeah, definitely, we definitely aimed it to mostly just the United States first because that’s where like my work was, but we have people from Europe and Canada join and some other parts of the world too.

AA: That’s awesome. Could you briefly tell us about what specifically people are asking for? Like what is currently happening to food production in the United States during this pandemic and how are specific regions being impacted maybe if that relates to what you’re doing?

VGP: Yeah, definitely, so in a food system lens obviously it’s a little different because we have different seasons. In the South and in the Southwest and in the Pacific where a lot of like food production is happening they really have to what we call cull animals and cull food because a lot of the markets that food was destined too is no longer existent, so think like events or institutions or other feeding places where people consume a lot of food. So, like, those farmers had lost that market and point of sale.

AA: Yeah.

VGP: As we move hotter in the season or as most of the United States, the Midwest and the Northeast and the Pacific, start having their growing season we are trying to prevent was has happened in these areas to happen in those regions which is why I think like USDA is trying to step in and trying to find alternative ways to connect farmers to consumers that had lost their markets. We will have more information about those resources in the coming weeks about what programs they plan to implement. Moving on, when we think about people on the front lines, we have farm workers. Farm workers are really mobile, we have to think like they move across the country depending on what’s being harvested, depending on the seasons, and depending on states where’s there’s fruit production. Most farm workers are in fruit harvesting. We don’t know a lot about how COVID will impact the mobility of farm workers, if some states are gonna have labor shortages, we still don’t know about that but it’s making a lot of farmers think about how much they should be planting like if they know farm workers will or won’t be able to come to Michigan in July for blueberry harvest. These are the sort of things we’re thinking and planning ahead about for the future for the decisions for the food system. In places like Midland, it’s really interesting, most of the meat plant workers are actually immigrants or refugees, a lot especially from El Salvador and Haiti, and a lot of them have special protection status. While we don’t think about meat plants, it is like, they’re really in rural areas where there’s a lot of people of color living and we usually don’t think of like immigrants or refugees living in like rural America. They are in rural America, as farm workers, as meat packing plant workers, as farmers themselves. One of the concerns that we have is that a lot of the restrictions and programs that were already at those plants, they have always been really bad and in the past few years a lot of protections for workers like breaks and allowances to even wash their hands and go to the bathroom and how fast the line goes, they’re changing to improve efficiency but not to protect workers. So, right now, we know there’s around 300 meat plants with outbreaks around the United States. What concerns me the most is are we willing to sacrifice people on the front lines working in large meat plants with over a thousand workers just to have meat at the table. So, these are the sort of things we need to consider about like justice and our own consumption, like if we are willing to eat less meat for the next month it will actually allow us to close those plants more safely and protect those people working in the meat and factory plants.

AA: Yeah completely. I keep seeing images all over social about like potatoes being thrown out, piles of food being wasted…

VGP: We’re hoping that we don’t get to that, especially like culling animals because raising meat is really hard and takes a lot of resources. Wasting all that meat, by killing it and not having a market for it, is really sad and really environmentally bad. So, we’re really hoping some of these USDA programs that are supposed to be coming out in the following weeks will prevent that, actually taking the, not excess food but food that lost the market for it, to people who need it because we know that there’s increased hunger and people who need food right now.

AA: So, what do you hope to achieve with Food TBD? What are the next steps for the project?

VGP: We really hoped to see what kind of groups people created because we gave them the choice of what kind of groups you wanted to create inside of Food TBD. Right now, there’s around 15 groups with different topics. Some topics are food workers, there’s one on restaurants, there’s one that is just food and equity – that is the one I manage the most because it’s a topic of interest — but what we really hope to see is what topics people want to talk about moving into the future. The ones we’re seeing the most is agroecology and regenerative agriculture because we know that if we want to change the food system we have to start thinking about regenerative agriculture, we have to start thinking about agroecology and we have to start thinking about power in the food system like a lot of the problems we’re seeing in the food system that are being highlighted by the pandemic are because of consolidation and because certain companies have too much power and that’s what’s creating like bottlenecks and that’s why there’s less access to like meat processing. Food TBD will create a platform for people to organize and imagine a different food system, a post-colonial world.

AA: Yes, I think that’s a real strength of your project. I was doing some digging and I’m curious about Food is Never Just Food Project, is this an ongoing series? Can you just tell me a little about it and how it maybe connects to Food TBD or just your research?

VGP: Yeah, so there’s two projects I want to talk about. Food is Never Just Food is more like a training program that I created like four years ago now for immigrants, refugees, and people of color to learn how to use social media and other communication tools to tell their food systems story. Basically, it just has a lot of examples, and all the examples are from people of color, youth, and LGBTQ people, about how they’re engaging in food systems in a way that challenges narratives about food systems. Just to give you an example, I’m a woman of color immigrant in the food system. I do policy, research, and advocacy. Every narrative about what a woman of color in the food system should be tells you that I should be food insecure, that I should be working in a low wage job in the food system, but I am not. I am at a completely different point on the spectrum based on my experiences and my privileges. Food is Never Just Food is an opportunity for person of color, any immigrant, any refugee, any young person to see different examples of people like me and how they are changing narratives in the food system. A lot of them are like writing exercises, writing prompts, social media campaigns, and social media examples and just examples of people who are really putting themselves out there to change the idea of who should be the face of sustainable agriculture, of food justice, like look at the different experiences and diversity of people in the system. The other project I want to talk to you about is Food Justice Friday.

AA: Yeah!

VGP: Food Justice Friday started four or five years ago and it’s basically every Friday, I do a twitter conversation about a food justice issue that is happening in the United States or any topic related to food justice. It’s really engaging because a lot of organizations have started doing it and the goal is that if you do food systems work, I want you to think about what the implications about justice and inequality and racial justice in your work are at least once a week. That’s how this started, like you may be a person who is a consumer, an eater, a person who is working in the food system, but I want you to be thinking about some of the larger structural inequalities about food justice and the food system. So, once a week I do like a twitter thread reflection on a different topic.

AA: That’s great! Going back to Food is Never Just Food, are there any specific stories that jump out to you as being particularly interesting or inspiring or having an effect on your audience?

VGP: Yeah, definitely, one of the ones that is my favorites is Tender Table. Tender Table started as like a get together, poetry slam for POC and LGBTQ people. It usually happens once a month in Providence, Rhode Island or in Seattle, Washington, where it started, because the person who runs it moved from Seattle to Rhode Island. It’s basically a social and interesting space, the presenter invites different women of color who are also LGBTQ identifying to talk about their favorite dish. When talking about that dish, she’s also like in a slam poetry when they talk about some of the issues they’re experiencing as a woman of color, as an LGBTQ person, and their relationship with food. I think that’s one of the most interesting projects that I have seen because as a woman of color I have a really interesting relationship with food because, for me, it was always related to domestication and the home, but for a lot of those individuals who may also be LGBTQ and women of color and people of color, their relationship with certain dishes and certain expectations of gender may be completely different. So, that’s one of my favorite projects that I like to highlight because it’s a thing you can do that bring all your different identities into a project. Does that make sense?

AA: Yeah it does, thank you for sharing! What advice do you have for scholars engaging in topics relating to agriculture or food production during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond? And then I was wondering if you could use your experience in ANP859 with this question and also just I’m asking haha.

VGP: I mostly use ANP859 as an opportunity to reflect on my master’s thesis project with immigrants and refugees. I wrote a 25-page paper reflection on a lot of the scholarship and stuff. And it was great because a lot of that scholarship helped me to reflect a lot on why I’m a scholar-activist. My recommendation would be to other people is like don’t be afraid to be the dissenting voice in the room, don’t be afraid to the person who’s always highlighting how your research is actually part of a broader societal impact. I feel, knowing every space in academia, we see people be uncomfortable just not being as people of color but also as activists of color and I think it’s a lot by department or by college that you are and what do you feel comfortable as. I was recently told by a member of my department by a fellow student, that I am one of the most vocal grad students in my department and I was like “oh really you think so?” because I am always talking about what my research is and how the things I’m learning relate to bigger, structural inequalities. I would just say push yourself to not just be a scholar, also be an activist. Push yourself to see the broader impacts of what you are doing in society.

AA: That’s fantastic. For someone not coming from this field at all, I’m a media student and I focus on LGBTQ issues, this definitely was eye-opening and I appreciate you sharing what you’ve done with Food TBD and this project, that seems really exciting and really important during the COVID-19 pandemic that we’re currently in. Thank you, Vanessa, for making yourself available for this interview. Is there anything specifically you’d like to promote? Or like to discuss to the audience to get a message out?

VGP: I just want to remind people the pandemic, what is going on right now, is high lighting things that have always been there. These things that we’re talking in the media about farm workers, about people of color, women of color on the front lines, they’ve always been there, and we’ve always been talking about it and its part of a bigger struggle against inequality. And also, bygones of racism, sexism, and just overall structural inequality in our society. So, don’t think that when we stop talking about it because the pandemic is over that these things are going to go away. I think we need to start thinking about what the lessons are we need to learn during this pandemic to actually change our society and the systems that allow for those inequalities to exist.

AA: Yeah, that’s something to take home for sure. The MSU GenCen will continue to be here for you, the greater MSU community, during the COVID-19 pandemic. If you’re in need of resources, please visit gencen.isp.msu.edu and if you’re interested in Vanessa’s project…

VGP: You can go to my website <https://www.vanessagarciapolanco.com/projects> and find the information there

AA: Fantastic, alright, thank you Vanessa! To our listeners, stay safe, stay healthy, we wish you well.

*Outro music*