

An alternative to the alternative food
movement: an exploration of
processes and practices of Latina
em(power)ment in the US

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Eating Healthily conference

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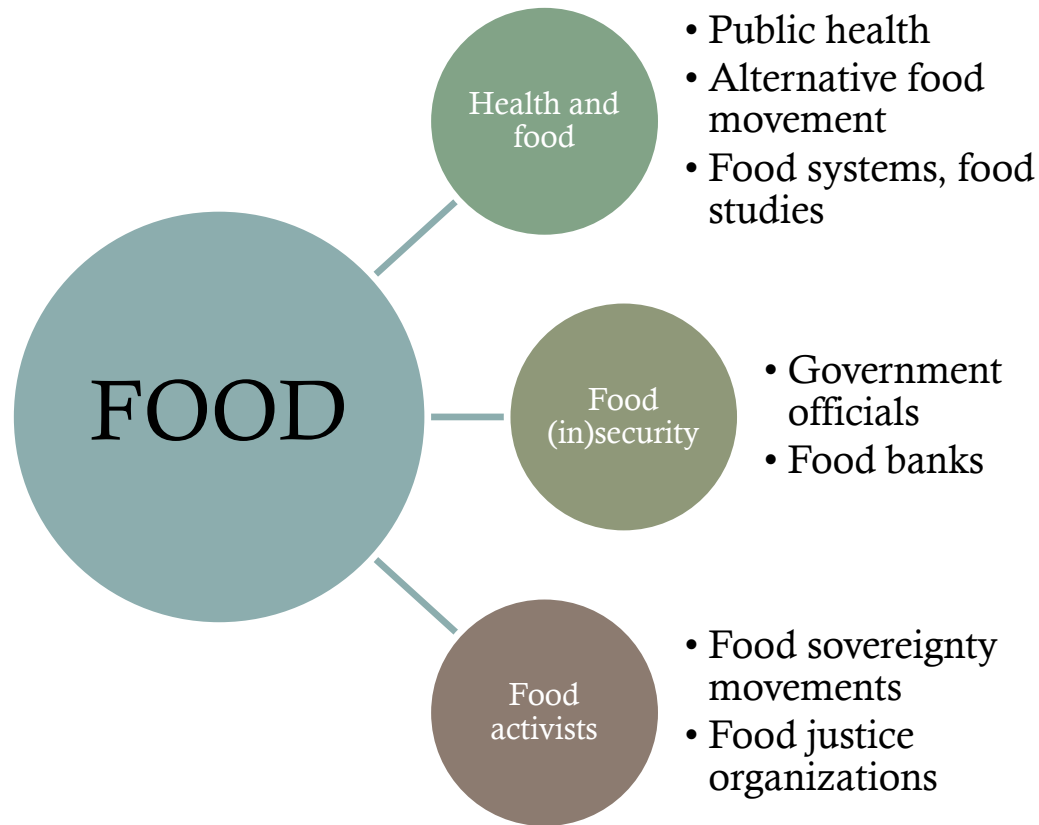
Case Context



- Case study of the GrowHaus, an organization founded public health discourse of “healthy eating”
- Organization situated in the most polluted zip code in Colorado
- Offers food education, distribution and production (at cost and subsidized)
- Offers microfarming, permaculture, nutrition, dental hygiene, cooking and microbusiness courses
- Created by middle/upper-class White men in a predominantly Latino neighborhood
- Based on two consecutive years of interviews and (non) participant observation
- Narrative, feminist framework
- Main research question: How are Latinas empowering themselves in food organizations in the US?
- Phenomenon: Latinas enacting the mission of founders- and a whole lot more



Approaches to food



The GrowHaus

The GrowHaus is a nonprofit indoor farm, marketplace and educational center in Denver's Elyria-Swansea neighborhood. Our vision is a **world where all communities have the means to nourish themselves**, and our mission is to **create a community-driven, neighborhood-based food system by serving as a hub for food distribution, production, education, and economic development.**



From health to (economic) empowerment discourse

It came organically as people were like, 'This is all great and all, but I still need to make money to be able to feed my family, and pay the rent, and all of that good stuff. All this is fine and dandy, but if it's not putting food on the table, then what are we getting out of it?' (Flores Amaro)



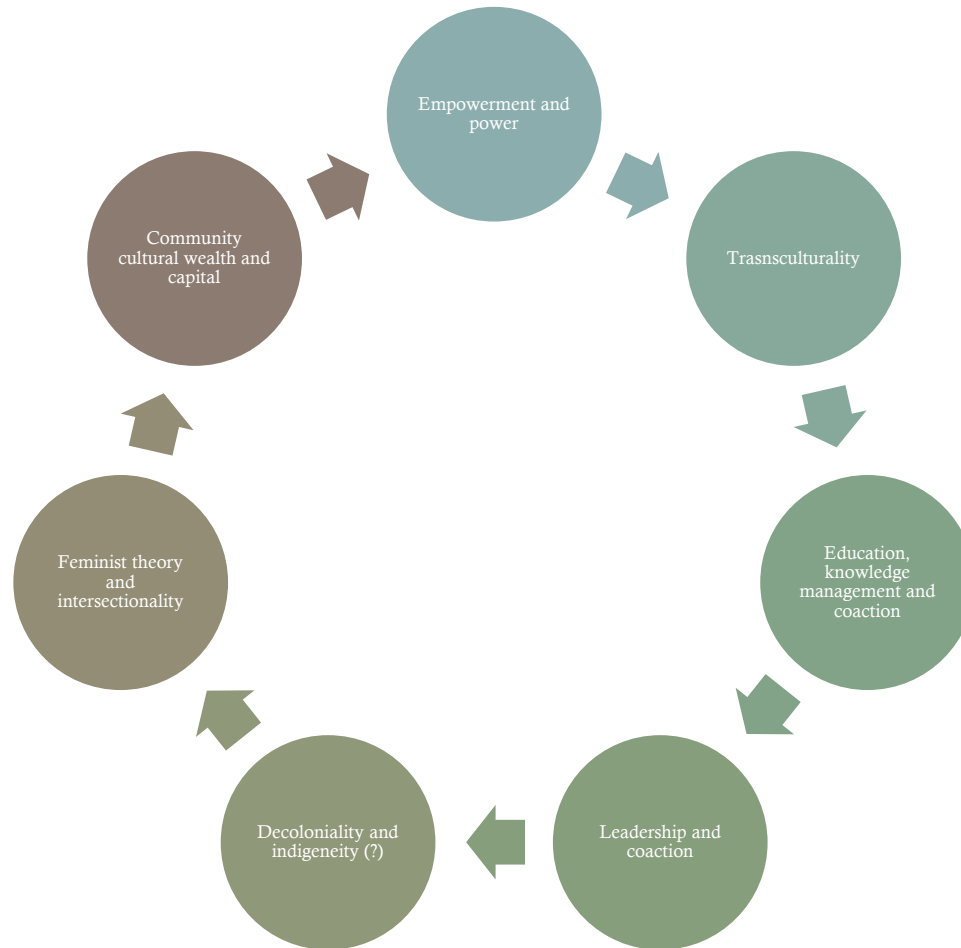
Empowerment as defined by participants

Participants say they want to be self-sustaining, to grow and find food and herbs themselves. To increase their level of education. To open their own businesses.

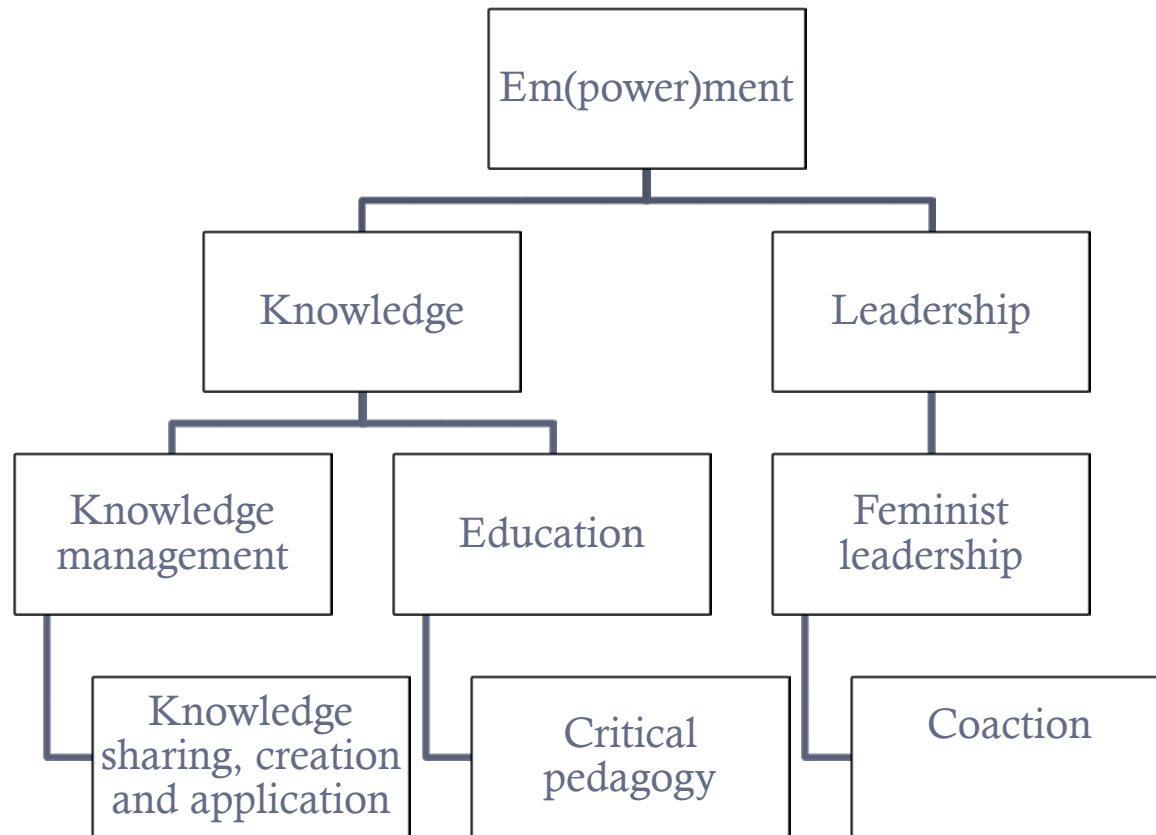
According to Natalie Porter and Jessica Henderson Daniel, “empowerment, self-determination, and self-sufficiency” are related to autonomy and decision-making (254). Latinas are taking control of their own growing and preparing of food, thus empowering themselves and their families in a food culture that offers many unhealthy and prepared options.

“When I say empowerment, I feel that [Latinas are] building community here. They're building a network of support for each other. They're able to call each other when in an emergency.”

Fields of literature



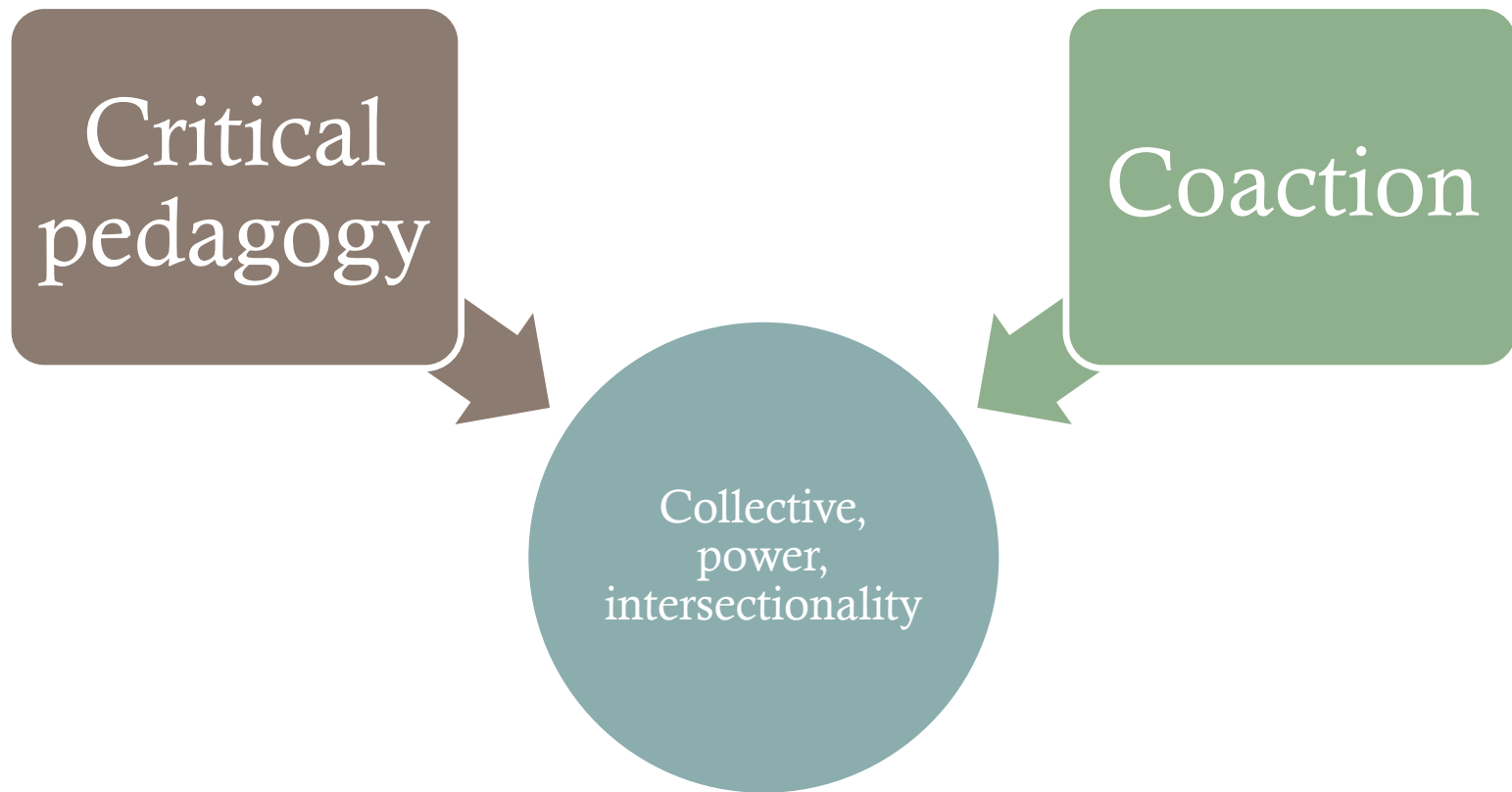
Overview of literature and concepts



The long road to (defining) empowerment

- Precursor to empowerment was “**conscientization:**” Paolo Freire in 1968 referring to the “process by which an oppressed person perceives the structural conditions of his oppression and is subsequently able to take action against his oppressors”
- This was followed by a large number of texts being written about empowerment in the late 1980s and 1990s, particularly as it related to **gender**, and development
- The 1990s saw the concept of empowerment increasing adopted and coopted by **international organizations**.
- The term then took another turn and become equated with “**empowerment of the poor**” and the elimination of poverty.
- At present, the term is widely used by **corporations** attempting to sell “empowerment” in the form of myriad products (Tolentino) as well as innumerable other settings, yet most **often lacking definition** (Calvès).
- Many scholars, including feminists, argue that the concept of empowerment has been “taken hostage by development agencies” **and its most important tenets removed** (Calvès).
- This paper, therefore, intends to return these three elements to the definition of empowerment: **collectivity, the articulation of intersectionality, and a focus on power**. As such, this project honors the return to a definition that has more impact, considers the definitions of empowerment as defined by the stakeholders (Batliwala 2007) thus framing it as fluid and non-essentialized, and aligns with the feminist reclaiming of the concept (Pereira 2008, Stuaddt, Rai, and Parpart 2003).

The concepts in a feminist empowerment framework



Power

“Domination theorists”

power over (domination)

“Empowerment theorists”

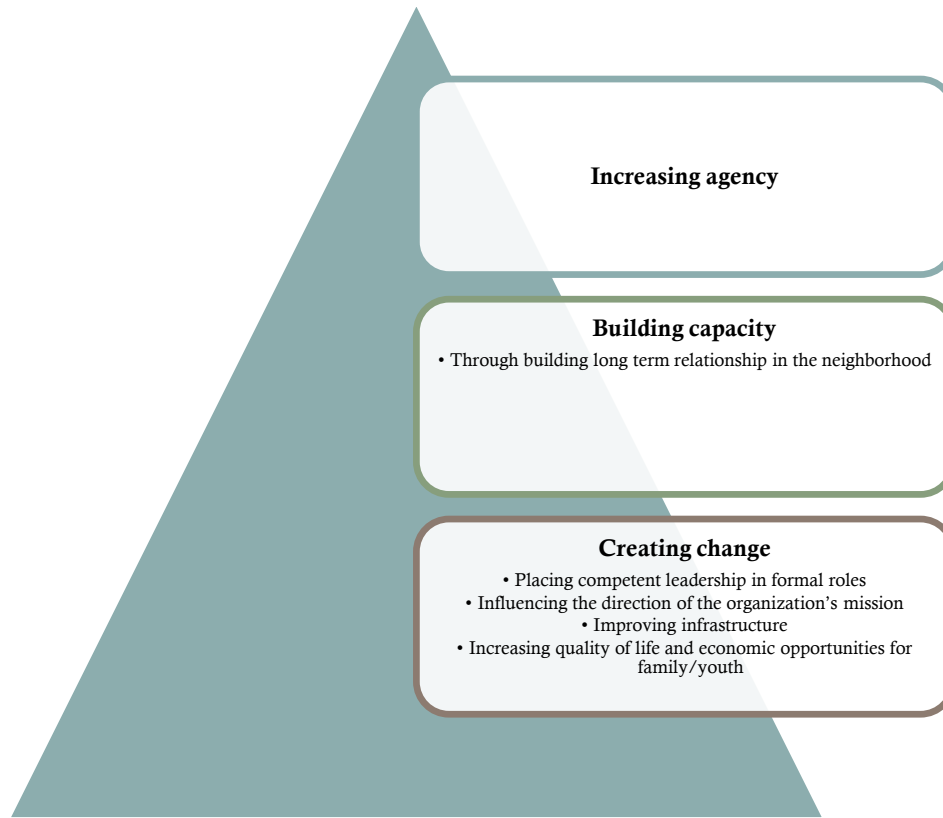
power to (the “creative power that can be used to accomplish things”)

power from within (self-confidence)

power with (collectivity)

Amy Allen (1998) presents a new model in which she calls for “an analysis of power that can *simultaneously* theorize both the domination relations that create and sustain certain groups as subordinate and the possibilities for resistance to and subversion of those relations” (456).

Examples of “power to”



Visible types of empowerment



Economic empowerment

- Starting own businesses- tinctures, catering, seedlings, worms, teaching
- Saving money by growing own vegetables, raising chickens and rabbits, and enhancing own soil
- Creating own permaculture and microfarming materials
 - Larger effect: decreasing dependency on capitalism, creating an alternative economy on their own terms, self-sufficiency

Increasing and redefining wealth

Isabel is operating outside of a financial capital model by suggesting that money is not the most important form of wealth, but redefining abundance as something that people can generate themselves. Further, once the women learn how to grow herbs, the GrowHaus buys their harvest from them.

Isabel is espousing a discourse that parallels a *community cultural wealth* model. Wealth in this context is defined as being larger than economic capital, but rather as “the total extent of an individual’s accumulated assets and resources” (Yosso 78).

Leveraging community cultural wealth

Yosso defines *community cultural wealth* as “an array of knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed and utilized by Communities of Color to survive and resist macro and micro-forms of oppression” (77). In this light, Colin speaks concretely of wealth and forms of capital that people in the neighborhood possess: “A lot of people identified cooking, food production, as points of pride and talent” (Smith). Further, “People have been selling their food to their friends, and their family, and neighbors for decades without permits, without licensing...” (Smith). By capitalizing on community strengths and building on existing skillsets, the cooperative has taken off with tremendous energy and aims to be a long-lasting, self-sustaining model.

Political empowerment (public power)

- Bringing multi-issue claims to court
- Making decisions at an organizational level (formal leadership)
- Making decisions at a community level (community leadership)



Visible influence/power Latinas have

- Creating alternative healthcare system
 - Growing herbs, batching tinctures, sharing with one another
- Creating professional and social networks
 - Increasing social capital and “people power”
 - Across class and ethnicity
- Deep listening to help define community needs, containing and reflecting collective stories to a larger audience (promotora model)
- Increasing class offerings (microbusiness class, community classes)
- Breaking from gendered expectations of the past
 - Larger implications: shifting power hierarchies on the societal, organizational, and familial levels
- Changing from power over to power to/power with
- Becoming formal leaders (often through formal leadership training)
- Disrupting domestic gender roles
- Increasing financial and business skills
- Inspiring children and partners by going back to school
 - Larger implication: changing conjugal roles from patriarchal to egalitarian
- Increasing confidence, public speaking, interpersonal skills
 - Related to creativity, inspiration and optimism

The invisible made visible

“Web of knowledge,” “Web of community”



Increasing social capital

In a traditional sense, *social capital* is “made up of social obligations (‘connections’), which is convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital” (Bourdieu). Yosso broadens this definition, stating that social capital can be seen as “networks of people and community resources. These peer and other social contacts can provide both instrumental and emotional support to navigate through society’s institutions” (Yosso 79).

Cross-pollination (of ideas and gardens)

Seedlings



Seed swap



Image source: The GrowHaus Facebook

On a metaphoric level

Seeds= tolerance, community, youth (Ortiz Roa), success and self confidence (Moreno)

“[Planting the] initial seeds in people’s minds.. questioning everything they have been doing” (Moreno)



Processes (of resistance)

- Reciprocal empowerment (learning and inspiration)
- Round circle/dialogue/exchange of knowledge
- Creating conducive learning environment
 - Holding, adopting one another's children, making sure childcare is available
 - Creating materials for all learners (illiterate, bilingual)
 - Placing ads and going to where people are
- Learning to organize and taking over ownership of knowledge that belonged solely to organizations
- Creating community and a sense of home/belonging
 - Building a safety net for one another
 - Creating a safe place for undocumented immigrants
- Using power analyses
 - Acknowledging multiple systemic oppressions
- Envisioning a world outside of hierarchical, monocultural, heterosexual models
- Creating and acting from collective identity
 - Outcome: increased participation and belonging
- Calling on values and spiritual power to encourage action
 - Counteracts messages of worth and skills coming from a "racist dominant culture"
- Knowledge snowballing
 - Increasing own knowledge, learning to teach, increasing level of difficulty in tasks undertaken, recruiting others
- Questioning
 - Food options, education options, ways to raise kids
- Reconnecting to soil, one another, ancestral knowledge
 - Larger implications: place making, memories, and home
- Activating and building on prior experience and knowledge
 - Validating what Latinas know, informal education
- Self-naming
 - Immigrant knowledge
 - Naming own needs, dreams, cries, wants
 - Naming oppressions (first step to change)
 - Naming women as leaders
 - Increasing vocabulary to explain and transform their lived realities
 - Self-narration
- Emboldening each other to become leaders through storytelling
 - Larger effect: movement from Object to Subject, self-defining
- Activating aspirational capital
 - Larger effect: act of resistance in a society in which POC are oppressed

Vignettes from the field

Taking into account cultural backgrounds, prior and ancestral knowledge



Activating (and building on) prior knowledge

Angela gives an example of women seeing marigolds growing in the community garden; she could not remember the name of the flower in Spanish, but one woman said, “Oh that is the flower we use for El Día de los Muertos,” and as a result there was a collective understanding of what the flower was. Angela then built on this activated prior knowledge, sharing with the women that marigolds keep pests out of gardens. In this way, Angela and other Latina instructors at the GrowHaus are inviting residents to actively participate in the learning process by bringing in their ancestral knowledge and life experiences to increase their understanding of the ways in which different plants can be used.

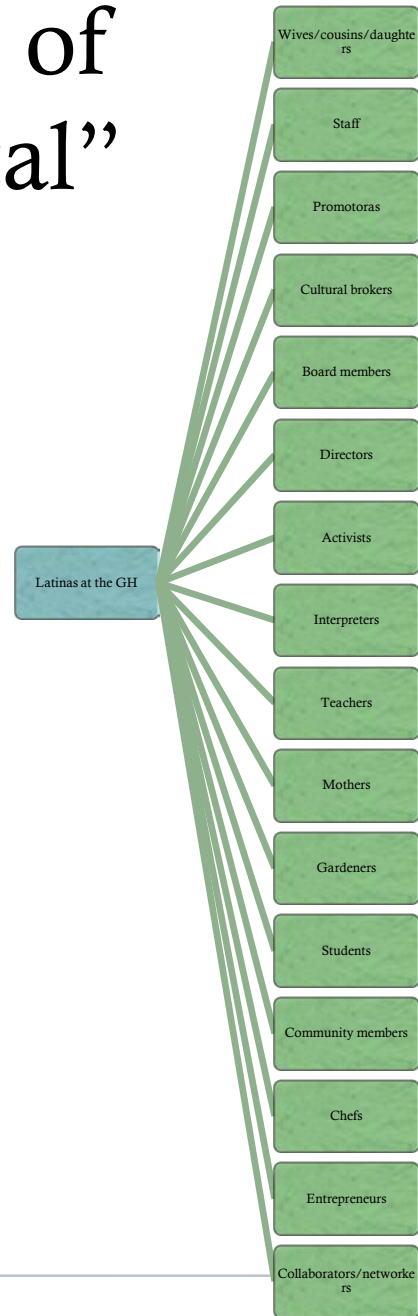


Empowerment through ancestral knowledge

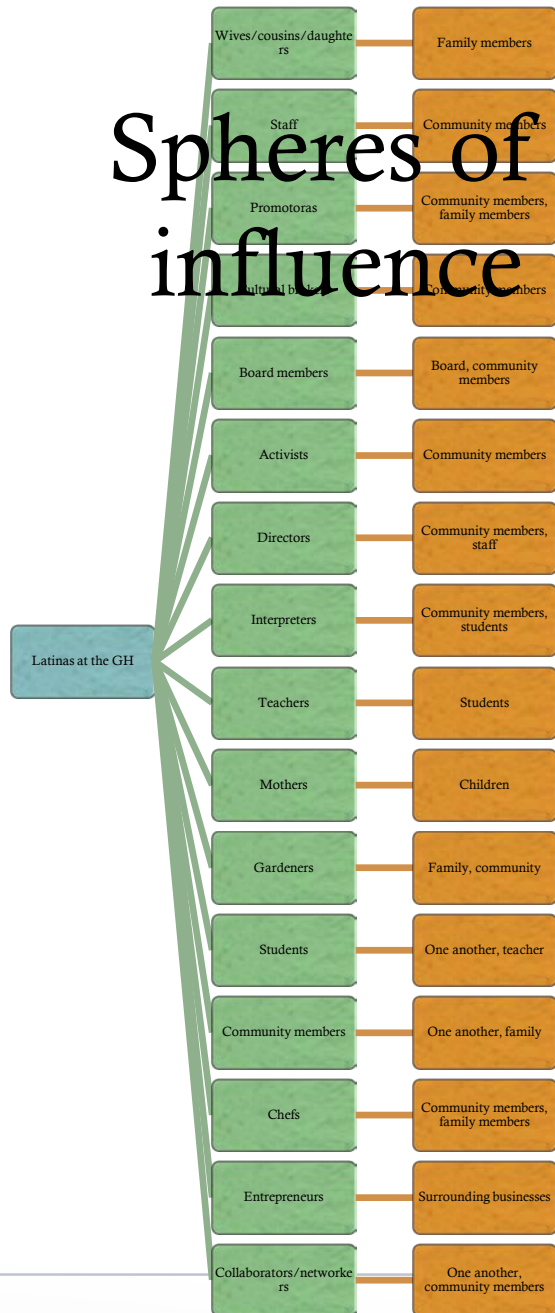
Equally notable is that Esperansa acknowledges this (re)emergence of ancestral knowledge as what is “right,” and always has been. Up until 30 years ago, there was little resistance to “industrial monoculture,” wherein agriculture that is “genetically identical” and fertilized with chemicals and pesticides was owned by large corporations. A number of food movements arose to counter this monoculture with an emphasis to grow local and eat organic (Hope Alkon and Agymeman 1-2). Deemed the “alternative food movement” (AFM), there is no longer anything alternative about it; farm-to-table restaurants are commonplace, as are signs in grocery stores that highlight foods as (hyper)local. In addition, the AFM can be seen as a monoculture in of itself in that it attracts and is represented predominantly White, middle-class people “with similar backgrounds, values and proclivities” (Hope Alkon and Agymeman 2).

Yet something different is happening at the GrowHaus. Esperansa speaks to another trend; women of color are embracing their pasts and reconnecting with traditional foodways and cultural ways of healing. This is a shift toward (re)activating the knowledge of their foremothers and (re)instating practices that have long since been abandoned. By reintegrating practices and knowledge that have been passed down from woman to woman across generations, Latinas are (re)learning how to cook and take care of themselves and one another. In so doing, the locus of knowledge is accomplished through self-realization. This reflection takes into account that humans are “historical beings” and Freire encourages people to take this “historicity as their starting point” when learning (65).

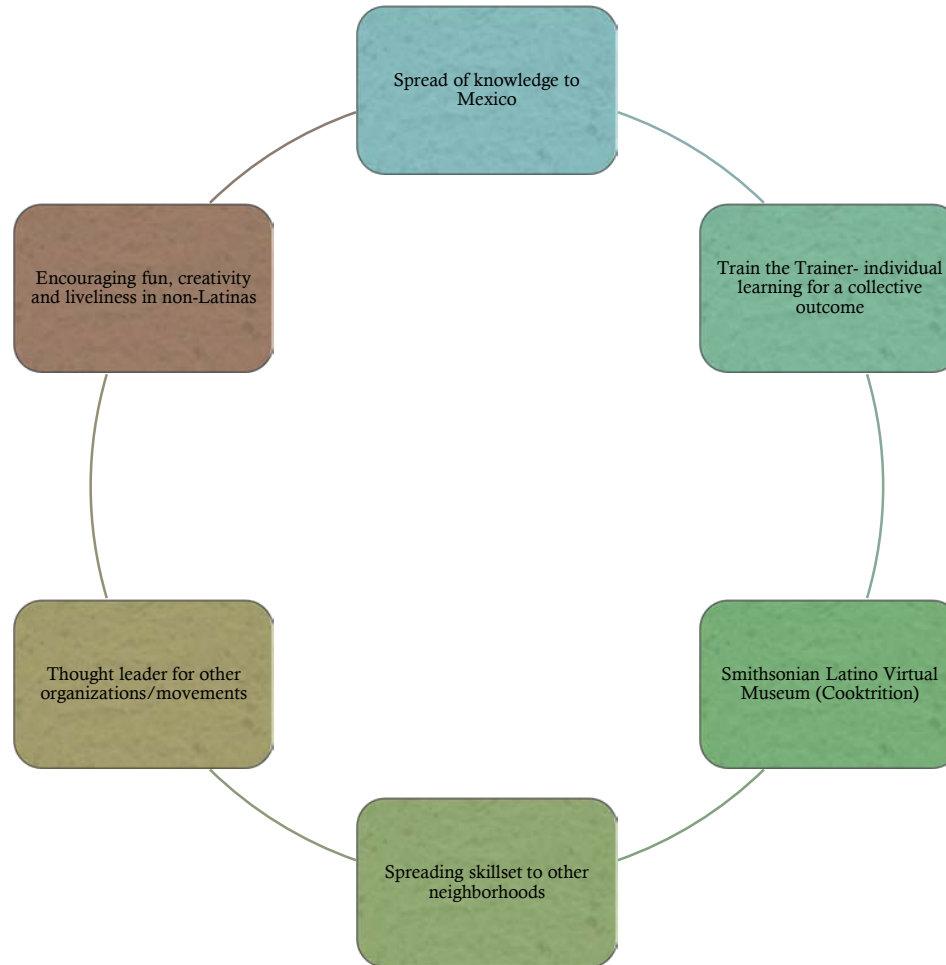
Feminist principle of “personal is political”



Spheres of influence



Beyond the GrowHaus

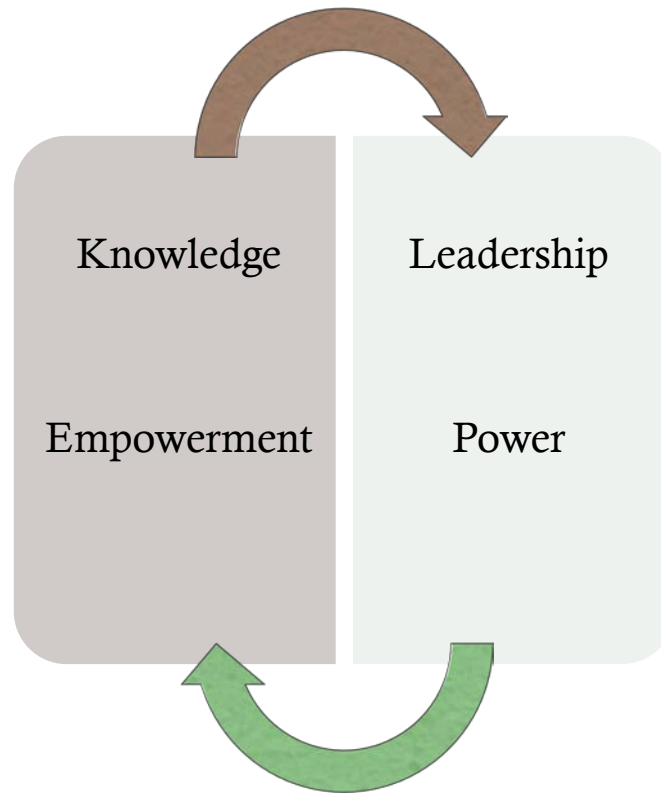


In conclusion

- Food as an entry point to increasing individual and collective empowerment
- Health, abundance and capital redefined taking into account culture, race and class
- Latinas voices at the center of defining healthy, culturally relevant food; driving the direction of the organization, as well as living out the goals of the organization (in spite of its structure and charity model foundation)



Parallel Chapter Structures



Forms of empowerment

- Economic
- Micro/macro
- Shifting domestic roles
- Increasing self-confidence
- Increasing social capital
- Leveraging cultural community wealth
- Hope, optimism, and aspirational capital