

Farmer: Mercy Kariuki-Mcgee

Interviewer: L Kravit-Smith

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BIPOC Farmers in History and Today in the South Sound: A Slow Food Project, Winter 2021

Mercy Kariuki-Mcgee's passion for social justice and farming shone through my laptop this morning during our interview. Despite being virtual I could feel her presence in the room. Much like how it felt hearing her perform in her Afro-fusion band Mazigazi a while back before the pandemic hit. How was I to know that a year later I was going to be interviewing her about her newly created collective?

Mercy worked at The Evergreen State College for 8 years and WSDOT (Washington State Department of Transportation) for 2 years doing climate change work. She has been in the artist community for about 20 years now. She performed in Olympia frequently before the pandemic. Her band started as a family but then grew to 9 members. They do African style rock music, a mix of Afro house and Afro beat. Mercy is also involved heavily in community activism through multiple areas, especially advocating for civil rights and sustainable farming..Through her graduate studies she was able to focus on climate change and sustainability, especially in Africa. This summer she worked heavily on community organizing during the wake of George Floyd's murder. With other activists in our community, Mercy and Elisa helped organize a couple of rallies and was also involved in pushing the city council and elected officials for police accountability and better public safety. She described to me going to the CHOP autonomous zone in Seattle and how she was appreciative of the healing space it created for many BIPOC folks. She was especially touched by the CHOP garden. She saw messages of unity and hope, as well as a place for people to reunite and have a cup of coffee with one another. During her time at CHOP, Mercy began reflecting on the Olympia area and how there wasn't a place for this collective healing and community now.. She said in our interview, "we have a lot of movements and we have a lot of activism happening in the South Sound, but it's not a space for Black and brown people to be heard most of the time. There is very little focus on the Black and brown students. We make up such a small part of the population, so at the end of the day it really doesn't matter, we are not seen and we are not heard.. Our voices were constantly being diluted in all these protests and in all this messaging. So I felt like I needed to find a way to channel the black and brown community, and that's how Haki was founded". Haki means justice in Swahili, a commonly spoken language in Africa. The Haki Farming Collective was founded by Mercy and her daughter Elisa Mcgee. A graduate of Evergreen as well. Elisa has a passion for POC empowerment and is dedicated to creating an awareness of ecology sensibility. The Haki Collective hopes to center Black, Indigenous, Latinx, LGBTQ+, disabled, and other marginalized community members..

When Mercy and Elisa began working on their idea they reached out to Grub (Garden-Raised Bounty) who willingly granted them the use of the Veterans garden space located on Martin Way E, Lacey as it was not being used due to the pandemic. This gave Haki Collective an opportunity to preview a specialized urban farm and even harvested some of the 2020 crops from the garden. Through Grub, Mercy was connected to the Community Farm Land Trust (CFLT) who are well known for their efforts to preserve farmland in the South Sound. This connection allowed Mercy and Elisa to start exploring possibilities of a larger piece of land to farm on. As of today, Haki has formed a partnership with CFLT and will soon be able to steward one of the preserved farmland in Thurston County as it becomes available. Mercy believes that farming is a way to empower people. She believes that building a good community surrounds the idea of having access to healthy food and knowledge around where your food is coming from. She thrives to work with decolonization of food and reclaiming plant medicine. Haki wishes to reunite people and bring in elders to come and show us old ways of collecting the seeds, sowing the seed, cooking the food and cultivating the soil. As far as being a collective, they have a small membership right now of people interested in farming with them. They have to build up from scratch. And because of the numbers of BIPOC in this community being so pushed away from farming it is going to take quite a bit of time. They encourage BIPOC people to come back and own land because over the years, Black and brown people have been pushed out of farming. This quote of hers really stood out to me, “BIPOC people don't have the capability to go back to the land, they don't have the generational wealth. And generational wealth means your family has a farm that has been in your family for many years. So, how do you get the Black and brown people to go start farming? You have to start very small, and you have to show them the way. Haki is going to help lead that way in finding the land, putting the policies together, connecting new generations of farmers with resources, as well as starting to build this generational wealth for BIPOC folks”. She described to me the hardships when it came to financial burdens. She says, “It is very hard to get the money to even buy a tractor. If you look up on the web, you see a ton of GoFundMe for BIPOC farmers. Why do we have to do this? White people rarely have to start funding pages. We hope that within the collective we can form a community of same minded people who feel the same oppression, who feel the same need of acquiring land and growing their own food. We also want to see directly how our food is grown, because half the time, BIPOC people are the ones who suffer from health impacts of bad food or eating unhealthy food due to systemic racism”. With that concept of accessibility, Haki is trying to make CSA's accessible to BIPOC communities. They are offering CSA's to BIPOC folks for free if they help volunteer at the farm.

Haki is currently working with Grub, The Community Farm Land Trust. North Thurston Public School, the Black Student Union at North Thurston High School and The Together Program after school program. And with the school program, they're hoping when COVID is over, to bring students over to the farm so they can actually learn about plants, the soil and how to farm in their own backyard. It is no surprise that Mercy and Elisa are dedicated in helping the younger generations learn about farming. Mercy grew up on a small family farm when she was

younger in Kenya, Africa. Her family farmed many items including: coffee, vegetables, beans, sweet potatoes, sugar cane, yams, cassava, macadamia nuts, avocados, and mangoes. And it is with this passion that she hopes to cultivate the next generation of farmers in our community. Yet working with young folks doesn't come without concerns. Mercy talked about her fear in working with BIPOC youth if the Haki Collective ever moves to a more rural area of Washington. She says, "I fear putting a load of students in the yellow bus and having them get attacked. I do have those fears in my head. I have these dreams of farming and also fear. We have to always be cautious and as a black or brown person, you're always walking on eggshells, always worried about who is watching you, who is following you, you're always looking behind your back. We want the community to know that the existence of black and brown farmers next door to you, doesn't take away work from you. Doesn't change your farming habits, doesn't take away your rights. All it does is help increase the diversity of your community and help grow their economy at the same time."

The Haki Collective is doing incredible work. Mercy has created what I have always dreamed of having in Olympia, as well as all over the world. A space where BIPOC people and other marginalized groups are centered. Where we can come together in a space that focuses on collective healing and accessibility to our traditional medicines and food sources. Mercy's vision of farming and food is an act of resistance against the white supremacist views of farming. With her collaborative approach, she challenges neoliberal, capitalist views on land owning. I am more than thrilled to get a chance to work with her community.