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Who Sets the Table?

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Patricia Allen, *Together at the Table: Sustainability and Sustenance in the American Agrifood System* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2004).

Everyone is not treated equally in the U.S. food system. Some people are left out, overlooked, and exploited, while others benefit, feast, and profit. An understanding of these inequalities led to the creation of alternative agrifood movements, which sociologist Patricia Allen defines as people who are building alternatives to the industrial food system. These alternative agrifood movements are rising up to bring justice and equity to a food system that oppresses, disregards, and overlooks many of its participants. However, even these alternatives to the industrial food system are influenced by cultural attitudes and dominant ideologies, which is the topic of Allen's 2004 *Together at the Table*. Her book explores the larger narrative behind alternative agrifood movements by debunking the dominant "ideas, values, meanings, and strategies that have been produced and are inscribed in our current social system" (80).

In other words, alternative agrifood movements are still influenced by dominant ideologies, such as the myth of white superiority or the "undeserving poor," which perpetuate systemic racism, classism, and sexism through their intended alternatives to the industrial food system. Allen explores these ideas in *Together at the Table* by uncovering the "unexamined ideas and practices rooted in assumptions and ideologies that shape the discourse and practices of alternative agrifood movements" (116). She highlights the ingrained ideas that determine which groups of people have a say and which groups are silenced, the voices of those who determine who eats what and who does not eat at all.

As the industrial food system and its alternatives have evolved, *Together at the Table* has been sometimes pushed aside and overlooked in favor of newer publications. Although much time has passed since its publication fourteen years ago, the dominant ideologies that Allen critiques still remain, making the text worth revisiting. If we are to uncover and dismantle the dominant ideologies influencing alternative agrifood movements, we must look to the examples put forth in *Together at the Table*, but in order to do so, Allen's work must reclaim a spot on reading lists and syllabi. When alternative agrifood movements interrogate the dominant ideologies shaping them, issues and inequalities can be defined and addressed. Dismantling ideologies is time-consuming and laborious, but when the goal is to create alternative agrifood movements that propagate justice and equality, it is crucial work.

Biography

Alaina Spencer is a Research Fellow with Sustainable India Finance Facility and a freelance writer on food system issues. She holds a MS in Food Systems and Society from Marylhurst University and a BA in Geography and Sustainability from the University of Texas at Austin. Her thesis, “Want Amid Plenty: The Capitalist Paradox of Hunger and Food Waste,” examines how the agricultural industry and food relief organizations’ discourse influence the general public’s understanding of the issues of hunger and food waste. You can find her work on Food Tank or via Twitter [@alainaspencer](https://twitter.com/alainaspencer).