



Shakirah Simley

# Fueling the Resistance

*Co-Founder, Nourish|Resist*

*Acting Executive Director, Southeast Community Center, San Francisco Public Utilities Commission*

WORKS: San Francisco | LIVES: San Francisco

FIELDS: Advocacy, Education, Media

**L**ongtime activist Shakirah Simley writes about food, race, and culture. Her work has appeared in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Huffington Post*, *Civil Eats*, and *Feed the Resistance*, a book anthology of essays and recipes published in 2017. Following the 2016 presidential election, she co-founded Nourish|Resist, a political organizing collective of multiracial food workers. Simley is a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania; as a Fulbright scholar she attended the University of Gastronomic Sciences in Italy, where she received a master's in Food Culture and Communication. In 2017, she was selected as an inaugural Stone Barns Center For Food & Agriculture Exchange Fellow in New York.



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**I**n San Francisco, Shakirah Simley’s path to mixing food with social justice started with her Slow Jam business, which she developed while part of the [La Cocina](#) incubator program. The non-profit mentors women of color and immigrants launching food enterprises.

Simley, 33, is the eldest of five children who grew up in Harlem, where access to the abundant fresh food she found in Northern California was scarce. Simley saw so much surplus fruit when she arrived in San Francisco that she felt compelled to preserve it. “From a food justice and food access perspective, food waste is a shame, so I wanted to turn that excess into value-added products,” she says. “Preserving is a practical, necessary skill with a long history. It’s a way to connect communities to the land and to each other, across race or class lines.”

Simley, who started as a canner-in-residence, went on to serve as the community director for San Francisco’s [Bi-Rite Market](#) and its family of businesses. She also served as an instructor teaching cooking classes at [18 Reasons](#), the educational arm of Bi-Rite.

In 2017, she accepted a position as a community relations manager at the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission. In her new job she is managing a community center and working to build a new one in the historically underserved Bayview neighborhood in San Francisco. In her position—something of a departure from her previous paid employment—she handles issues of environmental justice, economic development, equity, neighborhood revitalization, sustainability, climate change readiness, and, yes, food.

“I needed to find a way to support myself as a single woman of color from a working-class background who wants to live in San Francisco,” says Simley, the daughter of a social worker and granddaughter of a Black Panther. “I also wanted to use my skill set to work on a different scale, where you can impact a whole city or region. And I was looking for a pathway towards political leadership,” she says. “I’m trying to set myself up in San Francisco for a commission appointment or a run for elected office. It’s going to take a while, so I need to understand how the local government systems work. The city is a machine.”



In addition to her day job, Simley speaks, writes, and advocates on food justice matters. She is on the advisory board of [Equity at the Table \(EATT\)](#), founded in 2018. [Nourish|Resist](#) is a tool for political action using food as a lens. Its slogan: “Hate won’t feed us.” The group uses its talents—from baking to organizing—to educate people about how to counter the current administration’s policies and to prepare people for acts of disobedience. At [An UnPresidentialMeal](#), the collective’s first event, [Nourish|Resist](#) hosted a dinner for Mission High School students, staff, and community the night before the inauguration. The evening served as an opportunity to protest the president, express frustration and fear, and gather with like-minded people around a table. The organization followed that event with a meet up on Valentine’s Day that included chocolate and writing supplies for voters to send “love letters to legislators.” The write-in yielded hundreds of colorful and pointed postcards for local politicians and was designed to help people give voice to their activism. In February 2018, [Nourish|Resist](#) hosted a [Reclaiming Refuge MLK Sanctuary Day](#) in collaboration with women of color chefs [Reem Assil](#), [Fernay McPherson](#), and [Preeti Mistry](#).

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Simley has lived, worked, and organized in San Francisco for 10 years. In 2017, she took a six-month self-care sabbatical because, she says, she was burned out. “This work is hard. I had the privilege of taking a mental health break, which carries a stigma,” says Simley, who serves on the executive board of directors for the San Francisco-based educational organization [CUESA](#) (Center for Urban Education about Sustainable Agriculture.) “Especially among black women, we don’t get to take a break. We don’t get permission to do that.”



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She encourages other advocates to look after themselves in the face of great urgency. “You have more time than you think. It took hundreds of years to create these problems in our food systems and communities, it’s going to take a lot of time to undo them,” she says. “Technology gives us a skewed sense of time, but changing hearts, attitudes, and systems of oppression—that takes a lot of time.”

The small, slow food movement has a lot to learn from Big Fast Food, says Simley, in terms of working across all sectors of the economy to bring about change. “We need all kinds of people working on issues around land, access, capital, agriculture, water, housing, finances,” she says. “These are all food issues.”

Her focus remains on the most vulnerable among us. “The majority of the people who feed us are black and brown people who don’t receive fair wages and don’t have access to health care or decent food,” she says. “We need to have a broad-based understanding of all the different points in the food chain to develop a coordinated, cohesive response to cultivate change.”

People of color in food are especially burdened, says Simley. They are expected to grow the food and serve the food. As chefs, they’re also expected to be as eloquent about the roots and recipes of their specific food culture, as they are about grossly appropriative and derivative versions of their food and culture. At the same time, she says, people of color are often expected to call out all the wrongs in the food systems, many of which stem from interpersonal and structural racism that limits their full potential within kitchens, dining rooms, fields, or editing rooms. “In the face of all this, we persist,” she says.

For Simley, doing this work isn’t really a choice. “Apathy is a luxury I’ve never had in life in terms of supporting myself, my family, my community, and the next generation,” she says. “We can’t get siloed. We can’t simply work for change in the food movement. People like me need to run for office. The fight in front of us is old. But our eyes are fresh. And wide open. Food is my lens, but people are my focus. I’m shifting gears towards politics, but will never lose my grounding in this community.”—Sarah Henry