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Guthman, Julie

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Bringing good food to others: investigating the subjects of alternative food practice

Julie Guthman

Department of Community Studies, University of California at Santa Cruz

Under the banner of food justice, the last few years has seen a profusion of projects focused on selling, donating, bringing or growing fresh fruits and vegetables in neighborhoods inhabited by African Americans – often at below market prices – or educating them to the quality of locally grown, seasonal, and organic food. The focus of this article is the subjects of such projects – those who enroll in such projects ‘to bring good food to others,’ in this case undergraduate majors in Community Studies at the University of California at Santa Cruz who do six-month field studies with such organizations. Drawing on formal and informal communications with me, I show that they are hailed by a set of discourses that reflect whitened cultural histories, such as the value of putting one’s hands in the soil. I show their disappointments when they find these projects lack resonance in the communities in which they are located. I then show how many come to see that current activism reflects white desires more than those of the communities they putatively serve. In this way, the article provides insight into the production and reproduction of whiteness in the alternative food movement, and how it might be disrupted. I conclude that more attention to the cultural politics of alternative food might enable whites to be more effective allies in anti-racist struggles.

Keywords: alternative food practice • food deserts • organic food • racism • transcommunality • urban food security • whiteness

Spearheaded by the organic food movement, much food activism in the USA in the last 25 years has focused on developing alternatives to the conventional system. Advocates of alternative food institutions place a heavy emphasis on educating people to the provenance of their food and encouraging the development of localized food systems.¹ Yet, a lack of attention to questions of privilege has given rise to some stinging scholarly critiques of the contemporary US alternative food movement of late. Alternative food institutions have tended to cater to relatively well-off consumers, in part because organic food has been positioned as a niche product, even obtaining the moniker of ‘yuppie chow,’ and in part because many of the spaces of alternative food practice have been designed and located to secure market opportunities and decent prices for farmers.² With some exceptions, farmers’ markets and community supported agriculture (CSA) tend to locate or distribute to areas of relative wealth.³ For the most part, they are also ‘white’ spaces, as instantiated not only by the people who frequent them, but also in terms of the cultural codings that are performed at such markets.⁴ A recent study of farm-to-school programs demonstrates a similar trend; unless heavily subsidized by private foundations or the public sector, most of these programs are developing in relatively white, affluent school districts.⁵

For these reasons and others, food security activists and advocates are drawing increasing attention to the lack of access to and affordability of fresh, healthful food in communities of color. Many have come to use the term ‘food deserts’ to describe urban environments where few, if any, venues provide an array of healthful fruits, vegetables, meats, and grain products, but instead sell snack foods and highly processed ready-to-eat meals.⁶ They attribute the food desert phenomenon to racist insurance and lending practices (redlining), which have historically made it difficult to develop and sustain businesses in certain areas.⁷ They also attribute it to white flight and the net loss of supermarkets to suburbs with larger sites, fewer zoning impediments, and customers with higher purchasing power.⁸ To a lesser degree they situate the food desert phenomenon within the neoliberal restructuring of urban space more broadly which through disinvestment and endemic unemployment have relegated the inhabitants of some cities to intense poverty.⁹ Yet instead of structural inequalities, the focus remains on food, the area of concern which galvanizes a wide range of actors, from public health professionals, to sustainable agriculture practitioners, to community food security and environmental justice advocates.

In keeping with this focus, the last few years has seen a profusion of urban food security projects. Operating under the assumption that knowledge, access, and cost are the primary barriers to more healthful eating, much of the on-the-ground work is focused on donating, selling (at below market prices), or growing fresh fruits and vegetables in so-called food deserts and educating residents to the quality of locally grown, seasonal, and organic food. The specific projects undertaken take many different forms, including farmers’ markets, urban-based CSAs, produce delivery services, ‘good neighbor’ programs where liquor and convenience stores owners are asked to supply fresh fruits and vegetables, garden projects, and environmental and nutritional education programs. Because the food desert problem represents one of market failure, most of these efforts to provision fresh, locally grown food to such neighborhoods are necessarily run by nonprofit organizations and thus take the form of alternatives. And since many neighborhoods deemed food deserts are primarily populated by African Americans relative to, say, Latinos or recent Asian immigrants, many of the educational efforts are specifically intended to enroll African Americans.¹⁰

Thus far, little systematic research has been done regarding the efficacy of these projects, except by Alkon, a graduate student at the University of California at Davis, who has done consistent participant-observation at two farmers’ markets in the San Francisco bay area, one of which is in west Oakland.¹¹ She notes the paucity of food purchasing in the west Oakland market which sees only a few regular customers and rarely has more than 100 attend in a single day. Her surveys have revealed that many of the customers are white and/or middle-class blacks who are from out of the area and who go there specifically to support black farmers – and not so much to acquire food which they can easily obtain elsewhere. Since her research was completed, the market has been on shaky footing, with few farmers participating, and is temporarily closed as of this writing. Anecdotal research and observations, including some referenced in this article, suggests that these projects have not quite taken hold in other communities either, although I also hear of success stories. In truth it is hard to know, since many of us – this author included – want to support this nascent ‘food justice’ movement and are cautious about characterizing it in any but the most adulatory ways.

Still, more research could and should be done to understand what makes these projects take hold – or not.

More pointedly, more could be done to understand how neighborhood residents react to such projects, yet in ways that do not damn one group's eating practices nor evangelize about another's. What I am suggesting is that the problematic inheres in the research question itself: namely that trying to understand how the African Americans who are the target of these efforts appear to reject them in some sense replicates the very phenomenon being addressed – the effect of white desire to enroll black people in a particular set of food practices. I use these pointed and essentializing terms quite consciously here to draw attention to the race-inflected, even missionary, aspects of alternative food politics despite the pretense of color-blindness. As Holloway points out, categorizations of race 'violate the experiences and processes we seek to understand,' yet it remains a necessary essentialism in social science writing research on race precisely because of the persistence of 'race' as a social fact.¹² I also want to distinguish these dynamics from those occurring in, for example, Latino-oriented food security projects, which appear to garner broad participation, likely related to the inability of undocumented immigrants to access state-funded food entitlements.¹³

Yet, rather than trying to understand to what degree and why the objects of these food projects are disinterested in them, the purpose of this article is to turn toward their subjects – those who enroll in such projects 'to bring good food to others.' In that quote, I refer to the work of Rachel Slocum who has also noted the pervasive whiteness of alternative food movements, but in a recent intervention seeks to re-estimate the more progressive inclinations of whites in such projects.¹⁴ My focus on the subjects of these projects – and their desires – follows from Toni Morrison who once wrote that her project is to 'avert the critical gaze from the racial object to the racial subject; from the described and imagined to the describers and imaginers'.¹⁵ I have the good fortune to work closely with a set of such subjects, namely my undergraduate students in Community Studies at the University of California at Santa Cruz (UCSC). The Community Studies major is built around a required six-month full-time field study, in which students work with social justice organizations in a substantive way. My students, the 'food students,' are especially attracted to these projects. Through them, great insight can be gained regarding how whiteness inheres in the political practice of alternative food – and how that dynamic might be altered.

The research thus presented in this article is that of my students while on their field studies and my 'research' on them. Their research suggests that these projects appear to lack resonance in the communities in which they are located. My research suggests that a set of discourses and practices that reflect whitened cultural histories are what animate my students. Together, the research speaks to how many of these projects reflect white desires and missionary practices, which might explain this lack of resonance. Yet this article also reports on my students' disappointments and their reflections on those disappointments. It shows that, by doing this work, my students learn invaluable lessons about anti-racist practice that could not easily be obtained otherwise. Their experiences thus speak to the possibilities in what John Brown Childs has called transcommunalism, referring to the constructive and developmental interaction among diverse communities which through shared political action 'flows increased communication, mutual respect, and understanding'.¹⁶ As his book title suggests, transcommunalism presents an important counterpoint to the politics of conversion.

Whitened cultural practices in alternative food movements

Explicit questions of the racial aspects of alternative food provision have just begun to surface in scholarly and activist discourse. Slocum notes how community food movements have been slow to address issues of white privilege.¹⁷ She attributes this failing both to the persistent invisibility of whiteness as a racial category and to resistance within the movement to embrace an anti-racist practice for fear of offending allies. Following Saldanha, she also attributes this to the tendency of white bodies to stick together in alternative food space, which in some sense acts as an exclusionary practice – although she takes care to point out the progressive possibilities of ‘the interaction of bodies’ in alternative food space.¹⁸ Here I want to add to her analysis, while at the same time trouble it, by suggesting yet another dimension of the problem. Namely, the alternative movement has been animated by a set of discourses that derive from whitened cultural histories, which, in turn, have inflected the spaces of alternative food provision. Many in the movement seem oblivious to the racial character of these discourses – if anything they presume them to be universal – and so are ignorant of the way in which employment of these discourses might constitute another kind of exclusionary practice.¹⁹ Among them I would include the idea of bringing this good food to others.

Many scholars have noted that a marker of whiteness is its own invisibility, that it allows whites to deny white privilege by not seeing whiteness as a racialized category. Cognizant of the critique that the prominence given to whiteness scholarship has effectively re-centered whiteness, as noted by McKinney and Sullivan, I join those who persist in using whiteness to de-center white as ‘normal,’ unmarked, and therefore universal, and to make whites accountable for their effects on others.²⁰ This seems especially important for practitioners of alternative food who take pride in being morally good.²¹ Still, it seems that a more critical point is the unconscious ways in which whiteness works to shape the social relations and spaces of alternative food.²² Delaney writes that while ‘there is no outside to a wholly racialized world ... the ways in which the racial formation is given spatial expression remain extremely variable and shifting.’ He goes on to say how race ideologies combine with other ideological elements so to ‘shape space, give meanings to places, and condition the experience of embodied subjects enplaced and moving through the material world.’²³ Peake and Kobayashi are more explicit in pointing to how white values, aesthetic tastes, and cultural practices can come to shape space.²⁴ As they write, ‘geographically, human beings shape and reciprocally are shaped by their surrounding environments to produce landscapes that conform similarly to ideals of beauty, utility, or harmony, values not immediately associated with ‘race’ but predicated on whitened cultural practices.’²⁵ Their point is that whiteness is enacted in the indifference to the cultural meanings – the idioms if you will – that excites some people and perhaps repels others, but in any case inscribes particular spaces with those meanings.

Over the last decade or so of participant-observation in alternative food movements, I have come to note a set of discourses that commonly circulate within these movements. A number of the values that underlie them do, in fact, seem predicated on whitened cultural histories. In what follows I will describe three, albeit in only cursory ways. To be clear, in making these points I do not want to suggest an essential white or black desire. Some African Americans are clearly drawn to alternative food practice just as many whites are seemingly

turned off by it. I merely want to point to how these discourses tend to interpellate a white subject, a point that will be corroborated by student research, as far as it goes.

One is the aesthetic of organic, natural food. The meanings of 'organic' and 'natural' are of course contested and now highly evolved in light of significant public and private activity in regulating these terms.²⁶ Nevertheless, as terms used to describe a less modern state of affairs, they are necessarily not entirely innocent of race. As Moore et al. argue, discourses of nature are routinely implicated in the production of racial difference, although not in patterned or stable ways.²⁷ The more well-known and blatant examples applicable here are Nazi flirtations with organic farming through the teachings of Rudolph Steiner, and the solidly nationalist foundations of the British Soil Association. In both cases, notions of national vigor, purity, home soil, and even social organicism made organic farming attractive as both a material and discursive practice.²⁸ While few who eat organic food are aware of this history and even fewer would condone it, the term 'organic' has not been voided of those connotations. As encapsulated in the Ecological Farming Association's t-shirt slogan of 'Dirt First,' soil has obtained a foundational appeal in organic farming movements, the bedrock, as it were, of social formations. This meaning can be provocatively juxtaposed to less favorable ones. For example, some black nationalist groups have worked to distance themselves from racist-imposed idioms of dirt, filth, and backwardness associated with the 'slave diet,' notwithstanding the Nation of Islam's recent purchase of farmland in Georgia on which organic crops will be grown specifically in the interest of African American food sovereignty.²⁹ At the very least, this suggests that 'organic' is a word of controversial origins and cannot be deemed innocuous.

A second and clearly related discourse is found in the oft-said rhetoric of 'putting your hands in the soil' or 'getting your hands dirty.' This rhetoric is often voiced with an enthusiasm that betrays the presumption of a universal desire to tend the land. Drawing on the work of agrarianists such as Wendell Berry, many alternative food activists do indeed see farming and gardening as the utmost in vocations and avocations.³⁰ This discourse has taken on new valences with the horticultural therapy movement, which has popularized the notion that direct contact with nature in gardening and farming provides a path towards healing and empowerment.³¹ Notwithstanding that people of many cultures have tended, enjoyed, and even tenaciously reproduced their gardens in circumstances of displacement, this value still seems insensitive to a racialized history of agrarian land and labor relationships in the US. For example, as elucidated so succinctly by Romm, land was given away free to whites at the same time that reconstruction failed in the South, Native lands were appropriated – and Natives exterminated, the Chinese and Japanese were precluded from land ownership, and the Californios were disenfranchised of their ranches.³² The agrarian imaginary persists in alternative food movement politics, despite that farming in the US continues to be based on white land ownership and non-white labor, with its persistent and well-documented injustices of various kinds.³³

A third is the very idea of alternatives. For a variety of reasons, many activists have settled on the notion of promoting alternatives as the best strategy to transform the US system.³⁴ Some of these alternatives are self-styled utopian projects that have origins in the 1960s counterculture and back to the land movements, the latter of which were particularly white, formed in part to escape both the strife and privileges of the city. While most communes

disintegrated, the intentional communities and permaculture farms of today are the contemporary iterations of this legacy. Much more prominent are the alternative forms of marketing which are neither collective nor anti-market, but still carry a certain countercultural coding, especially CSA. Much of this activity goes under the name of localism, the leitmotif of contemporary food politics. As several scholars have noted, localism as a strategy can be defensive, xenophobic and impervious to uneven development, as if all communities would want to stay as they are.³⁵ Here, the romance of the backward-looking 'local' is usefully juxtaposed to African American efforts to be part of American modernity and technological progress.³⁶ And yet again, notwithstanding black nationalist involvement in breakfast programs and bakeries, the specific valorization of alternative forms of marketing flies in the face of a social history where many African Americans came to prefer the anonymous supermarkets because they were not a site of racist practices as were the small, corner stores.³⁷

Yet it is not only the content of these discourses that reflect whitened cultural histories. It is also the missionary zeal with which they are delivered. Aided and abetted by popular food writers such as Michael Pollan who has worked prodigiously to convert people to his particular way of eating, a messianic disposition has taken hold in alternative food politics.³⁸ As instantiated in the oft-repeated refrain, 'if only people knew where their food came from ...', there is great desire to educate others to the provenance of food as a way to spark eating transformations. While different in the types of food being promoted, the impulse bears certain similarities to past projects in the US to reform foodways. As described by others, many such projects were directed at newly arrived immigrants and had traces of eugenic motivations.³⁹ More broadly, the intention to do good on behalf of those deemed other has the markings of colonial projects, in that it seeks to improve the other while eliding the historical developments that produced these material and cultural distinctions in the first place.⁴⁰ In this case, the mission of correcting eating practices is kept ideologically separate from the fact of US capitalist development, much of which is founded on the devaluation of racialized labor, most manifestly in the food and farming sectors, that made many who work(ed) in that sector dependent on cheap food. In this context, it is also worth remarking on the language of 'food deserts' which, like the 'dark continent' is itself layered with colonial codings, evoking images of places beyond repair separated from the processes that make them seem so.

In short, these discourses are not innocent of race, yet as the following will show, my students come to my course well schooled in these discourses and eager to spread the gospel. They are in that way 'hailed' as subjects of alternative food practice.⁴¹ Yet, as I will also show, the field study experience mirrors their desires back to them, in ways that not only cause them to reconsider the wisdom of alternative approaches, but also to reflect on their own subject positions as whites telling others what to eat.

Subjects of alternative food practice

Coming into its fortieth year, the Community Studies major is an outstanding and unique laboratory for examining the shifts in social movement objectives, strategies, and organization that has taken place over the last several decades. Tellingly, the last few years have seen

unprecedented interest among students in food and agriculture as both site and means of transformation. This interest owes in no small part to the pervasiveness of foodie culture on California's central coast and in the San Francisco bay area. Santa Cruz, more specifically, has been referred to as ground zero of the US alternative food and agriculture movement, as it is home to a number of seminal organizations, and UCSC has become a magnet for food scholars and students. The Center for Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems that houses the university farm is world renowned. Witnessing this interest, my department created a position in local/global political economy of food, and I was hired in 2003 to accommodate the many students who wanted to work in this area. Student interest has only grown, buoyed in part by the sheer numbers of people involved in alternative food practice.

Given the major's emphasis on social justice, students are asked to find field placements that address inequity of some sort or another. Increasingly, my students choose field studies that are the very stuff of these urban food security projects: teaching kids 'how to eat' in farm-to-school programs, distributing farm fresh food in low income areas, or working with 'at-risk' adults and youth in gardening programs. Of course, the types of projects that excite them do not emerge out of thin air, but reflect, profoundly, the current menu of putatively transformative projects. As I have argued elsewhere, current arenas of activism around food and agriculture already reflects a delimited politics of the possible. That many of these projects emphasize consumer choice, localism, entrepreneurialism, and self-improvement demonstrates the extent to which food politics have been at the cutting edge of neoliberal regulatory transformations.⁴²

Over the course of four cohorts I have worked with nearly two dozen different students who have chosen such projects, and I have supervised several quite intensively. Before going to the field they do coursework that engages key debates in contemporary food activism. They also do coursework that addresses social positionality in general and white privilege especially (since the vast majority of them are white). The extent to which they do not always 'get it' until they are in the field or after they return to analyze their field notes is part of what makes an experiential major work – and also speaks to the arguments presented in this article. They are also trained in participant observation and other field research methods and ethics through their coursework. A requirement of the field study is that they write field notes on a daily basis and check in with their advisor at key intervals.

Some of the empirical data presented in this article, then, are based on their field study observations, as communicated through their informal verbal and written reports to me, as well as completed senior theses (not all write a thesis). The rest is comprised of my observations of them. Specifically, I use letters of inquiry, first day questionnaires, and notes taken the first day of class, as a way to show what animates them. And I use their findings, as expressed both formally and informally, as a way to show what disappoints them – and what they learn from that. Except for data pulled directly from senior theses, I do not link up particular observations with particular field study organizations in courtesy to both my students and the projects they observed. I do, however, include references to the organizations that inspired them.

Animations

Students come to my gateway course, entitled Agriculture, Food and Social Justice, eager to gain admission. I often receive impassioned pleas by email seeking entry into a class where

I usually must limit the number of enrollees. To enter into my class, students fill out a questionnaire regarding what about the class and major is of interest to them. This is standard practice for the major. I also listen carefully to the opening ice breaker where they articulate what animates them about food production, distribution, and consumption. These initial communications are useful specimens of alternative food movement discourses, since most students are attempting to impress me. To be honest, I receive a range of communications, mediated in part by prior coursework, their knowledge of me, and various levels of affect and analytical development. Nevertheless, ideas that routinely emerge include those reflecting the discourses discussed above: the value of real, organic food, putting one's hands in the soil, and knowing where one's food comes by shopping at local and alternative venues. Crucially, the desire to pass these values to others is a central aspect of their social change ambitions.

On the value of the organic, for example, one woman wrote me in an email, 'I am extremely passionate about organic food and the politics behind the FDA. I grew up in [...] and have traveled to many parts of the world so I know what real food is suppose to taste like without the addition of condiments and spices ... I plan to educate youth on the subject of organic farming.'

Another wrote: 'I read the description for your agri food and social justice class and it looked really interesting to me. My brother just graduated from the university with a degree in environmental studies and always talks to me about food and the importance of buying local and organic.'

And another: 'I saw that your class was the most on topic for what I want to spend my life doing. I was raised on an organic olive farm and would love the opportunity to learn how to improve/expand this practice.... I also spent the last few months trying to implement a campus food recovery system, called The Campus Kitchens Project, which takes surplus foods from the dining hall, prepares nutritional meals, and then delivers those meals to those in need in the surrounding community.'

Garden projects evoke equivalent passion. Said one student, 'This class is the perfect opportunity that could lead me straight where I want to be in my future. Last spring I took ESLP, Education for Sustainable Living program, and got extremely involved with food justice. What I learned in that class was far more valuable to my personal growth than any class I have previously attended. It spoke to me. Although I was only taking it for two units, I went far beyond the borders and requirements. I helped plant pumpkins, strawberries, and lavender for one afternoon at a Watsonville High School.' (Watsonville is a largely Latino community, where many farm workers live – and several students, not in the Community Studies major, have gone there with the intention of teaching Latino youth how to grow food, apparently with nary a trace of irony shown.) Another said, 'I will be doing an internship with the Homeless Garden Project (HGP) this fall. I am structuring the internship around issues of community food security and the ways in which CSA programs such as HGP's can offer opportunities to and empower people in our community.'

Several students every year mention recent experiences 'putting their hands in the soil' – or 'getting their hands dirty' at the university farm. Some say they think everyone should do this at some point.

Yet, it is the alternatives that seem to most excite these students. One way they voice this is with the refrain of 'if people only knew.' This phrase or some variant of it is invariably

stated during these introductions; it has shown up in the lead paragraph of many student papers. One woman said on the first day of class, 'I feel sorry for those families who feed their kids stuff without even knowing where it comes from. If they knew where it was from, they wouldn't feed them that.' When pressed as to what people would do if they only knew, most say they would pay the full cost of food or shop in venues where you know the farmer. Many students discuss how good shopping at the farmers' market makes them feel, saying that it creates community.

Some students come in with particularly romanticized versions of the alternatives. I recall one who explained that there is little need for policy when we can create local food systems by simply setting up more markets and CSA. Another person seeking entry into the course said that the way to obtain social justice in the food system would be for everyone to grow their own food. Several others have argued for a return to pre-modern ways of producing and distributing food.

Finally, many students come to the major hoping to work with youth or children to teach them how to eat and/or garden as their field study. In short, they begin the course well versed in alternative food movement discourses and want very much 'to bring this good food to others.' In the case of these urban food security projects, many go convinced that the problem is simply one of access, or perhaps lack of exposure. Often what they find surprises them.

Findings

By the time they go to the field, students have been exposed to some scholarly critiques about alternative food; they are also exposed to issues of privilege. But it is the field experience itself – by design – that allows them to see things in new ways.

For example, some note that organic and/or farm fresh food does not have the resonance they had hoped for. For example, in a required faculty update letter, one student working at a gardening and environmental education project reported that, 'Often times the girls show up with Jack in the Box for breakfast, eating it while working. The newly hired market manager ... is openly opposed to eating vegetables.' Another student wrote of a field trip where she accompanied African American youth to a nearby intentional community and organic demonstration farm. As she reports it in her thesis most of the youth were repulsed by the food. 'Eww! This lasagna is vegetarian?' inquired one girl. 'This shit is organic,' stated another. Later the youth were asked to say what they thought organic means. Many used the terms 'disgusting', 'gross,' or 'dirty.'⁴³

One student worked with a job program for homeless people and recovering drug addicts in a midwest city. The program is designed to teach people how to farm, as a means of employment and empowerment. It also encourages them to change the way they eat. As my student wrote, many trainees did not take home as much produce as they could carry, despite encouragement to do so.⁴⁴ Another working at a garden project in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina had a similar experience. She wrote of an exchange she had had with a local black activist who she had encouraged to stop by and pick vegetables. The person 'laughed and said she did not know how to cook any of the things we planted.'⁴⁵

Nor did gardening seem to go over so well. A student cited above wrote of another field trip to a nearby organic farm. The director of the youth program had said that it would be

a good idea for the youth to ‘get their hands dirty’ and pick fruit. As my student described it, the African American chaperone, as well as the youth, had scowls on their faces as they left for the field trip. In talking to the youth later, she learned that they resented the expectation to work not only for free, but for white farmers.⁴⁶ In a somewhat similar vein, the letter from the student at the environmental education project went on to say, ‘I am also working at a community garden that is run by [the same organization]. It is approximately one acre and is located within public housing. It is far from a productive garden. It is underfunded and run by a 70 year-old woman with no gardening experience. She is assisted by teenagers that drag their feet and have little interest in being there, perhaps because their tasks mainly consist of weeding. They have little access to the growing or harvesting crops and are unable to see the whole process through. They are used as laborers instead of gardeners. There is little outside expertise brought in and no community involvement.’ The student working in New Orleans noted that ‘few people ever acknowledged our presence or accompanied us in the garden.’⁴⁷ The student working in the job training program found that those working in the garden could not identify crops they had seeded, transplanted, cultivated, and harvested all season. Several students who have worked in school gardening programs have reported back to me that the kids do not like to garden – they don’t like getting their shoes or hands dirty. They have also corroborated the finding that many of the youth of color participating in garden projects see their efforts more as donated labor than therapy.

As for the idea of alternatives, some of my students observe that such projects lack resonance precisely because they are alternatives. In a conversation with her African American neighbor one day, my student mentioned that she worked for the organization that brought a truck of organic fruits and vegetables to their neighborhood. Her neighbor’s response to why she did not shop from the truck (which was both convenient and sold at below market prices) was that ‘Because they don’t sell no food! All they got is birdseed.’ She went on to exclaim ‘Who are they to tell me how to eat? I don’t want that stuff. It’s not food. I need to be able to feed my family.’ When my student asked her what she would like the truck to offer, the neighbor said, ‘You know, what normal grocery stores have.’⁴⁸ Another student working at an umbrella organization for several different projects noted in her thesis how very few people worked in the nearby garden and/or attended the fledgling farmers’ market. She also worked on a liquor store conversion project, where, she writes, it was difficult to get a steady following. One month they had some success, selling about 20 bunches of collard and mustard greens in one week. Most of the food, though, went to the compost.⁴⁹ In a verbal report to me she noted that organizational staff had heard from community members on several occasions that what they really wanted was a Safeway in their neighborhood.

Interpretations

As the foot dragging comment profoundly shows, student observations are not innocent of the presumptions (and hopes) that students bring to the work. For their part, *all* of my students have returned from their field studies with some disappointment that community participation in the organizational efforts in which they take part is so minimal. I suspect that for some this confirms a sense that they know what is best and others need to be taught – or written off.

Many students, however, come to see that lack of participation reflects more profoundly on the projects than the objects of these interventions.

For example, one student, working at an urban food justice organization, wrote in his update letter about the organization's insistence on local food systems, even when problems seem to call for more regulatory solutions. In this case, the staff had had a discussion on the possibility that feedlot dairy production was possibly responsible for the 2006 e.coli outbreak on bagged spinach. One staff member had said that everybody should just eat locally from small farmers. Dissatisfied with this response, my student queried the Executive Director regarding the reason the organization no longer worked on policy and structural issues. She told him, 'You can't give too much bad information without a solution, and if you can't give people a solution, they become depressed and unmotivated.' My student interpreted this as an organization too wedded to localism.

In a somewhat different vein, the student working in the job training program in the mid-west picked up on some striking contradictions regarding the organization's purposes. In her thesis she noted that the organization was teaching black people without access to land to be farmers while in nearby rural counties, white farmers with access to land were barely making a living because of poor commodity prices. She wondered how the newly taught farmers could ever be successful under those conditions. She also noted that the food being produced in the CSA project was being purchased by wealthier white residents of the city while nearby black residents could not afford the produce. Apparently, the prices were set high to be a source of revenue for the organization. Throughout the paper she alluded to how the founders of the project had a particular vision they wanted to pursue and rarely paused to reflect on client disinterest. In her conclusion, she charged that 'one group of people is determining the correct way of life for another.'⁵⁰ Her conclusions echoed those of the student who had heard the desire for Safeway. In her thesis she concluded that the insistence on alternatives may well reinforce a sense of exclusion and stigmatization – as if residents of food deserts are not even deserving of what others take for granted: a Safeway.⁵¹

In short, through analyzing the field study, many students conclude that the alternatives reflect the desires of the creators of these projects more than those of the communities they putatively serve. In drawing these conclusions, some begin to realize that such projects are reflections of their own desires as well, desires that have been shaped both by their own participation in alternative food practice and the imperative to do good as they begin to come to terms with their privilege. The point is well illustrated with the comments of the student who went to New Orleans after Katrina, insisting that she could make a contribution, as have several others that went. After returning and reflecting on her experience, she harkened back to her reading of Poppendieck's *Sweet Charity* and the halo effect of emergency food – all too often providing more benefit for the donor than the receiver.⁵² As my student so aptly observed, 'New Orleans changed me and I did very little to change New Orleans'.⁵³

Object(ive)s of alternative food practice

At this point it is important to say something more about the alternatives to the alternatives. Although I have taken care to speak through my students, it is possible that what I have said

reflects poorly on these projects. This is not what I wish to do. Many of these projects are making valiant attempts to hail an African American subject, as names like The Peoples' Grocery, Mo' Betta Foods, Food from the Hood, Mandela's Farmers' Market, Black to our Roots, and Growing Power amply demonstrate. These organizations endeavor to re-work some of the whitened idioms associated with alternative food practice, specifically as a way to enroll African Americans in their projects. For example, as described by Alkon, the west Oakland farmers' market (Mandela market) frames its work in terms of black identity. It publicizes the plight of African American farmers (who are few and far between in California), and encourages community support of these farmers in the name of racial justice. She describes how vendors see their work in terms of providing alternatives to the supermarkets that have abandoned the cities and, as one put it, 'sell poison'. The market also emphasizes black cuisine and culture. And unlike, say, the nearby Berkeley farmers' market, food is sold substantially below supermarket prices (some vendors have been subsidized at times).⁵⁴ Mo' Better Foods similarly sees its work in terms of rectifying a history where African Americans have been consistently stripped of landholding possibilities. They also work to establish a more positive relationship to agrarian production among African American consumers. Finally, many of those African Americans who do participate in alternative food more broadly have become involved because they have been sickened (literally and/or figuratively) by industrial food provisioning practices and are attracted to food perceived to be more wholesome.

Yet, leaders and staff of these organizations have to constantly struggle to create and maintain an African American presence, sometimes at the expense of keeping out white people who want to do good, including interns. Another of my students, who worked in a community garden in a largely African American community, wrote in her field notes of the discussions she often had with her supervisor. 'She often tells me and other people who come into [the name of the garden] wanting to help out, that we are not trying to serve the anarchist/hippy/ "crust" sector of [that city]. This makes sense because she wants to serve the African American/Latino families and not groups of privileged white people who come around "wearing ripped up clothes and generally insulting everyone."' The student went on to note that the 'struggle for inclusivity in the garden was complicated by the inadvertent creation of white spaces which put off a majority of the low income people.' In short, the leaders, staff, and advocates of these organizations are highly cognizant of the whiteness of the alternative food movement and strive to alter both the economic and cultural conditions in which the alternatives to the alternatives operate.

Nevertheless, if the evidence my students provide is at all valid, these projects seem to be coded white. They are so, not only because of the prevalence of white bodies, as important as that is. As some of their field notes illustrate, it appears that the associations of the food, the modes of educating people to its qualities, and the ways of delivering themselves lacks appeal to the people they are designed to entice. Based on the evidence presented in this article, it would be difficult to sustain that the cultural politics of alternative food discussed above are the reason that these urban food projects seemed to have gained little traction. Yet it would be worth considering. It would also be worth considering how these projects themselves reflect a very limited politics of the possible.

Indeed, one conclusion to be drawn from this article is that addressing the food desert problem through an alternative supply side emphasis is inadequate and possibly misguided.

In conversations with food scholars and activists around the country working on various community food security projects, I have corroborated the claim that African American residents of food deserts seem to want conventional grocery stores. As a couple of quotes above suggest, they do indeed want the opportunity of shopping with anonymity, convenience, and normality at conventional supermarkets, despite what advocates of alternative food might want for them.⁵⁵

If this is the case, it may well be that the focus of activism should shift away from the particular qualities of food and towards the injustices that underlie disparities in food access. Activists might pay more attention to projects considered much more difficult in the current political climate: eliminating redlining, investing in urban renewal, expanding entitlement programs, obtaining living wages, along with eliminating toxins from and improving the quality of the mainstream food supply. The question, then, is what kind of cultural politics might facilitate that shift in focus.

Conclusion: towards a politics of listening, watching, and not always helping

I hope I have shown that this article is largely about the subjects of contemporary alternative food projects rather than those who are the objects of their enrolment efforts. Specifically, I have tried to link common discourses of alternative food practice to whitened cultural histories. Then, through my students I have suggested that many food activists are excited by these discourses, despite their implicit racial meanings. To the extent these meanings and those hailed by them code alternative food as white is a problem in its own right, since it seems to work against the goal of bringing this good food to others, in all of its ambiguity. It seems that much more attention needs to be given to the cultural practices of food activism including more reflection and care given to the idioms we use and the historical constructions on which they lie.

My deeper concern is how whiteness perhaps crowds out the imaginings of other sorts of political projects that could indeed be more explicitly anti-racist. In that light, I am haunted by the Safeway refrain. While there are many critiques to be made regarding the power and practices of conventional supermarkets, I remain struck by the disjunction between what alternative food activists do and what food desert residents seem to want. Given the already delimited terrain of the possible in food activism, it makes little sense for those schooled in a limited menu of political choices defining the terms and forms that food activism takes. The discursive space must be opened to new political imaginings.

Given these two concerns, how do we grapple with the ethicality of white participation in these projects? Sullivan speaks to the paradoxical nature of this ethic. On the one hand, she argues that 'a white person's choice to change her environment in order to challenge her unconscious habits of white privilege itself instantiates privilege. Wanting to make things better is just not enough, she says.⁵⁶ On the other hand, she points out that in leaving the comfort of white space, whites engage in an anti-racist practice, for in doing so they begin to see the contours of white privilege. Perry and Shotwell have similarly argued that propositional arguments only go so far in teaching white privilege, that experiential learning enables people to get it.⁵⁷ As I have shown here, it is unlikely that the epiphanies my students had

would have come without the experience of their field studies. Classrooms can never do the point justice. So, if an objective is to enable whites to be more effective allies in anti-racist struggles – indeed to draw upon the resources of white privilege,⁵⁸ there is much to be said for participatory action, despite the multiple discomforts it creates. By the same token, such participation seems to call for a different sensibility than is currently operative, one that encourages those who wish to convert, to listen, watch, and sometimes even stay away instead. This approach might allow others to define the spaces and projects of food transformation.

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Biographical note

Julie Guthman is an associate professor in the Department of Community Studies at the University of California, Santa Cruz. At its core, her research is about various efforts and social movements to transform the way food is produced, distributed, and consumed. Her book, *Agrarian dreams: the paradox of organic farming in California* (University of California, 2004), won the 2007 Frederick H. Buttel Award for Outstanding Scholarly Achievement from the Rural Sociological Society. She can be contacted at: Department of Community Studies, 1156 High St. University of California at Santa Cruz, Santa Cruz, CA 95064, USA; email: jguthman@ucsc.edu

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