
“If They Only Knew”: Color Blindness and Universalism in California Alternative Food Institutions*

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This article takes on the cultural politics of “if they only knew” as it relates to alternative food practice. It draws on surveys and interviews of managers of two kinds of alternative food institutions—farmers’ markets and community-supported agriculture—to illustrate the color-blind mentalities and universalizing impulses of alternative food discourse. The ways in which these discourses instantiate whiteness may have a chilling effect on people of color who tend not to participate in these markets proportionate to whites. Minor exclusionary practices may have profound implications for shaping projects of agro-food transformation. **Key Words:** alternative food institutions, community-supported agriculture, farmers’ markets, racism, whiteness.

本文探讨“如果他们知道”的文化政治和替代性食物之实践的关系。通过问卷调查以及与农贸市场和社区支持农业两种替代食品机构的经理所作的访问，这篇文章说明了替代性食物话语的色盲心态和普及性。这些话语体现出的白人倾向可能会对相比之下较少参与农贸市场的有色人种产生寒蝉的效应。带有轻微排斥性的做法很有可能对农场食品产业转型工程造成深远的影响。关键词：替代性食品机构，社区支持农业，农贸市场，种族歧视，白人度。

En este artículo se analiza la política de “si sólo supieran” según se relaciona con la práctica de alimentos alternativos. Se utilizan datos de encuestas y de entrevistas de administradores de dos tipos de instituciones de alimentos alternativos, mercados al aire libre y agricultura apoyada por la comunidad, para ilustrar las mentalidades indiferentes al color de la piel y universalizar los impulsos de una disertación sobre los alimentos alternativos. La manera en que estas disertaciones implican blancura puede tener un efecto escalofriante en las personas de color que tienden a no participar en estos mercados proporcionalmente respecto a los blancos. Las prácticas exclusivistas leves pueden tener implicaciones profundas en la conformación de proyectos de transformación agroalimentaria. **Palabras claves:** instituciones de alimentos alternativos, agricultura apoyada por la comunidad, mercados al aire libre, racismo, blancura.

“If people only knew where their food came from. . .” This phrase resounds in alternative food movements. My students voice it in the classroom, and it is often the first sentence of papers they write. It undergirds many of the efforts of local food system activists, who focus a good deal of effort on encouraging more personalized relationships between producers and consumers. It is the end goal for a new round of muckraking led by the likes of Eric Schlosser and Michael Pollan, who seek to unveil existing food production practices. It animates the long list of ingredients on upscale restaurant menus.

The phrase warrants additional parsing. Who is the speaker? Who are those that do not know? What would they do if they only knew? Do they not know now? When pushed, the subjects of this rhetoric argue that such an unveiling of the American food supply would necessarily trigger a desire for local, organic food and people would be willing to pay for it (cf. DuPuis 2001). Then, so the logic goes, the food system would be magically transformed into one that is ecologically sustainable and socially just. To be sure, many U.S. alternative food advocates see lack of knowledge as the most proximate obstacle to a transformed food system,

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and in their elevated esteem for farmers—and chefs—relative to others who make their living in the provision of food, think that consumers should be willing to pay the “full cost” of food (Allen et al. 2003). This assertion is made with respect to the growing sense that food in the United States is artificially cheap due to both direct and indirect subsidies to agriculture, which include not only crop payments, but also water, university research and extension, and even immigration policy. It then follows that food produced in more ecologically sustainable and socially just ways would necessarily cost more. On its face, the solution clearly runs up against the goals of food security for low-income people. However, if we consider nutritional quality in addition to food cost and access in our definition of food security, as does the community food security movement, many low-income people are food insecure despite the ubiquity of cheap food (Community Food Security Coalition 2006). For that reason, even the community food security movement, with its focus on linking up producers and consumers at the local level, rarely challenges this rhetoric (Allen 2004).

Although there is much to say about the perverse ecological, social, and health-related effects of U.S. agricultural subsidies (Magdoff, Foster, and Buttel 2000; Kimbrell 2002; Pollan 2006), this article takes on the cultural politics of “if they only knew” as it relates to alternative food practice. Following Stuart Hall, I define cultural politics as the relationship between signifying practices and power and am particularly concerned with how racialized representations and structural inequities are mutually reinforcing (Chen 1996, 395; Hall 1996). In this vein, I argue that rhetoric such as “if they only knew” is illustrative of the color-blind mentalities and universalizing impulses often associated with whiteness. Moreover, much alternative food discourse hails a white subject to these spaces of alternative food practice and thus codes them as white. Insofar as this has a chilling effect on people of color, it not only works as an exclusionary practice, but it also colors the character of food politics more broadly. My objective in raising this issue, therefore, is not to condemn, but to remark on the importance of a less messianic approach to food politics, and even the need to do something different than “invite others to the table”—an increasingly common

phrase in considering ways to address diversity in alternative food movements. (Who sets the table?)

To make this argument, I report on heretofore unpublished results from a study I led on the convergences and contradictions of food security and farm security in two kinds of alternative food institutions: farmers’ markets and community-supported agriculture (CSA). My discussion of managers’ responses to survey questions and interviews regarding the dearth of participation of people of color in their markets (particularly CSA) reveals not only the pervasiveness of rhetoric of “if they only knew” and its cognates; it also shows how they reflect a problematic kind of color blindness. I entertain the possibility of their chilling effect by connecting several unrelated observations that I and others have made. First, however, I present a *prima facie* case that there is disproportionately low participation of people of color in these institutions.

Market Places as White Spaces

Farmers’ markets and CSAs, the latter being arrangements where consumers sign up in advance for a regular weekly or biweekly box of food from a specific farm or group of farms, are frequently heralded as ideal spaces by alternative food advocates. Their presumptions are that these institutions shorten the social and economic distance between producers and consumers, build community and participatory democracy, and otherwise serve as sites of contestation against a globalized food system (Kloppenber, Henrickson, and Stevenson 1996; Feenstra 1997; Hendrickson and Hefferman 2002; Hassanein 2003; Lyson 2004). Thus far, existing research suggests that people of color, and African Americans especially, do not participate in these markets proportionate to the population. It may also be the case that working-class or, more likely, less formally educated whites do not participate equal to their numbers either, but neither have they been subject to the same sort of scrutiny regarding their food provisioning practices, including attempts to enroll them in alternative food practice.

Unfortunately, most scholarly studies of these institutions have paid more attention to

class than race in ascertaining their demographic composition. This tendency no doubt reflects the relative ease of establishing class composition. For example, many markets accept food stamps, now in the form of Electronic Benefit Payment cards. Measuring the use of this program can provide a reasonable proxy for low-income participation. So, for example, a series of studies in the late 1990s determined that less than 25 percent of food stamp recipients reported shopping at a farmers' market at all, and food stamp redemptions at farmers' markets accounted for only 0.02 percent of overall redemptions (Kantor 2001).

A study of farmers' markets conducted by the Agricultural Marketing Service of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) is the only comprehensive study that directly attempted to ascertain the ethnic composition of farmers' market customers. Based on the observations of farmers' market managers, it reported that 74 percent were white, 14 percent African American, 5 percent Asian, and 6 percent Hispanic. In the far west, though, the region discussed in this article, African American participation was considerably less at 5 percent, whereas Asian and Hispanic participation was higher, at 10 percent and 13 percent, respectively (Payne 2002).¹ This latter distribution in part reflects the ethnic makeup of the far west, but is still not proportionate to population. Although a comprehensive study of CSA has yet to be done, a number of highly localized studies have found that CSA primarily serves members with high incomes and include general observations that clienteles are white (Cohen et al. 1997; Festing 1997; Lawson 1997; Cone and Myhre 2000; Hinrichs and Kremer 2002; Perez, Allen, and Brown 2003).

This point must not be construed as a claim that African Americans do not participate in these markets (which surely varies by region) or, worse, a blanket indictment of African American food provisioning practices. A study of a farmers' market in a working-class predominantly African American neighborhood in Chicago found that shoppers at that market were much happier with the food at the farmers' market relative to that at nearby stores (Suarez-Balcazar et al. 2006). Still, the study did not suggest much breadth in participation. In fact, only sixty-four residents out of a community of 117,000 were interviewed in the study de-

spite a methodology that was designed to capture a large sample. In addition, 80 percent of the respondents were regular shoppers at the market. In the last several years, I have visited eight different farmers' markets in California at least a half a dozen times each, four of which are in neighborhoods with a large percentage of African American residents (two in Berkeley, two in Oakland). In my observations, I, too, have noted that African Americans frequent these markets, but not nearly to the extent of reflecting neighborhood demographics or, for that matter, in numbers near the supermarkets in the area. In the markets with which I am most intimately familiar, I have come to know or recognize many of the African Americans who shop there, suggesting they are dedicated but few in number, echoing the results of the earlier study. This speaks to my overarching point: The "whiteness" of these spaces is something that regular shoppers have in some sense had to overcome. Further research could shed more light on this particular phenomenon.

In any case, the problem I am addressing is not negated by the presence of a few black bodies in these alternative food institutions. Indeed, to the extent that studies only count bodies as a way of determining if all phenotypes are adequately represented, they in certain ways contribute to the problem. They not only reinforce notions of race that are based in stabilized categories (cf. Moore, Pandian, and Kosek 2003; Reardon 2005), they bow to the conceit that racism is solved merely by attention to distributional outcomes. As Shrader-Frechette (2005) has argued in regards to environmental justice, fair distribution of environmental burdens and benefits is a necessary but not sufficient condition of justice. In her view, justice can only be achieved with substantive participation in defining the terms and conditions by which those burdens and benefits exist in the first place. In keeping with her concern, mine is not just the numbers, but the ways in which the space itself is coded in ways that create immediate discomforts, which, in the long run, may reinforce broader exclusion. As geographers of race have noted, no space is race neutral; there is an iterative coding of race and space (Thomas 2005; Saldanha 2006; Schein 2006). The question is to what extent these marketplaces are coded as "white space," not only through the

bodies that tend to inhabit them, but also the discourses that circulate through them. That many advocates and admirers of these institutions are blind to this coding suggests that whiteness is at work in these institutions. To this, I now turn.

The Double-Edged Sword of Whiteness: Color Blindness and Universalism

At the outset it needs to be said that whiteness is a messy and controversial concept with which to work, variably referred to as the phenotype of pale bodies, an attribute of particular (privileged) people, a result of historical and social processes of racialization, a set of structural privileges, a standpoint of normalcy, or particular cultural politics and practices (Frankenberg 1993; Kobayashi and Peake 2000). My interest in using whiteness is to make the invisible visible, to decenter white as “normal” or unmarked. I do so cognizant of the critique that the prominence given to whiteness scholarship has effectively recentered whiteness, as noted by McKinney (2005) and Sullivan (2006). Nevertheless, in agro-food scholarship and practice, concerns about race and whiteness are notable for their absence (cf. Slocum 2006, 2007), suggesting there is more work to be done.

For some scholars of whiteness, the point is to encourage more reflexivity among whites as to their privileged social position. Building on the work of Frankenberg, whose point was to bring into view the “social geography of race,” several scholars have highlighted the presumptions and effects of those who inhabit white bodies. So, according to McKinney (2005), the purpose of an engagement with whiteness is not to determine who is racist or not, but to uncover what whites think about being white and what effects that has on a racial system. Her position is that one can be nominally nonracist and still contribute to a racial society. Further augmenting this line of argument, Sullivan (2006) makes the point that the unconscious habits of white privilege are in some respects more pernicious than the explicit racism of white supremacy because it is not examined. She draws particular attention to how nonrecognition of being the beneficiaries of privilege allows whites to retain

a sense of being morally good. These insights, along with those drawn from a growing body of literature, particularly sociological, as to how whites experience their whiteness are important, but they also tend to personalize whiteness (Perry 2002; Bettie 2003). When I teach Wendell Berry, a poet of agrarianism much beloved by the sustainable agriculture movement, I do so to show the racial underpinnings of modern-day agrarianism. I am not interested in having students depict Berry as a racist because of his skin color. My goal instead is to show how a romanticized American agrarian imaginary erases the explicitly racist ways in which American land has been distributed historically, erasures that ramify today in more subtle cultural codings of small farming.

In this argument, I am drawing, then, from geographers of whiteness who as a whole seem less concerned with white personhood and instead focus on the work that whiteness does as an unmarked category in shaping social relations and, hence, space (Holloway 2000; Dwyer and Jones 2003; Schein 2006; Shaw 2006). Kobayashi and Peake (2000, 394) capture the subtle distinctions in this possibly more geographic approach when they state that “whiteness is indicated less by its explicit racism than by the fact that it ignores, or even denies, racist implications.” It is not only a matter of making white people, those inhabiting pale-skinned bodies, accountable as to their effects on others (Frankenberg 1993; Lipsitz 1998; McKinney 2005), although that is an important project in its own right. Rather it is to show how discourses associated with whiteness touch down practically and spatially. In addition, focusing on the discursive aspects of whiteness opens the door to understanding how the doctrine of color blindness, for example, can be embraced by all kinds of people, whites and nonwhites alike.

With this concern in mind, two related manifestations of whiteness are particularly important for how they define alternative food practice and space. One is color blindness. For many, color blindness or the absence of racial identifiers in language are seen as nonracist (Frankenberg 1993; McKinney 2005). Refusing to see (or refusing to admit) race difference for fear of being deemed racist has its origins in liberal thought, yet as many have remarked regarding the doctrine of color blindness, it

does its own violence by erasing the violence that the social construct of race has wrought in the form of racism (Holloway 2000; Brown et al. 2003). Inversely, color blindness erases the privilege that whiteness has brought. This is the point made by various scholars who have considered how whiteness acts as property, a set of expectations and institutional benefits historically derived from white supremacy that in their contemporary invisibility work to naturalize inequalities (Roediger 1991; Harris 1993; Lipsitz 1998).

The other manifestation of whiteness is universalism, or the assumption that values held primarily by whites are normal and widely shared. Sometimes this takes the form of an aesthetic ideal that is not obviously raced but is predicated on whitened cultural practices (Kobayashi and Peake 2000, 394). This move erases difference in another way, by refusing to acknowledge the experience, aesthetics, and ideals of others, with the pernicious effect that those who do not conform to white ideals are justifiably marginalized (Moore, Pandian, and Kosek 2003). In other words, when particular, seemingly universal ideals do not resonate, it is assumed that those for whom they do not resonate must be educated to these ideals or be forever marked as different. It is in this classic missionary impulse that universalism works to reinscribe difference (Hall 1992; Stoler 1995).

Within geography, the only scholar who has engaged concerns at the nexus of whiteness, space, and alternative food practice has been Rachel Slocum. In her first article on this topic (Slocum 2006), she notes how community food movements have been slow to address issues of white privilege in the movement. She attributes this failing both to the persistent invisibility of whiteness as a racial category and to resistance within the movement to embrace an antiracist practice for fear of offending allies. In a more recent exploration (Slocum 2007), she works to see the possible affective affinities of whites and others in spaces of alternative food practice. There is much to be said for this position in regard to the need for an empathetic politics. Still, she is quite sanguine about white efforts "to bring this good food to others" (Slocum 2007, 523). In what follows, I want to suggest that this construction may be part of the problem.

Evidence of Whiteness in Alternative Food Institutions

In 2004–2005, I led a study of farmers' markets and CSA in California. The purpose of the study was to examine to what extent these market forms meet the twin goals of farm security and food security, goals that have been championed as synergistic by the community food security movement. Overall, we found that managers of these institutions generally support the idea of improving the affordability of the food they provide, and most have made an effort to do so, although these efforts vary with institutional capacity. Still, some hedged their interest in supporting food security goals with countervailing concerns such as the need to support farmers first (Guthman, Morris, and Allen 2006).

This article reports on some heretofore unpublished results of the study, specifically those that queried managers' inclinations to implement practices that might encourage participation of people of color in these markets. The majority of data were gathered through surveys sent to all California CSA and farmers' market managers for whom we could find accurate mailing addresses. The response rate for the CSA survey was 37 percent of 111 surveys sent out. For farmers' markets the response rate was 35.4 percent of 443 surveys sent to 294 managers. Both questionnaires addressed background information about farmers' markets and CSA (e.g., years in operation, organization type, profitability), and farmers and customers (e.g., income level, ethnicity). We also asked managers how important they considered addressing food access issues and how willing they were to employ tactics that other markets or CSA farms had adopted to encourage participation among low-income and "non-European-American" populations. Both surveys included short-answer, multiple-choice, and Likert-scaled questions.² In addition, the study involved interviews with a directed sample of CSA and farmers' market managers to explore some of these issues in more depth. We analyzed quantitative responses with descriptive statistics, tested for significance. We analyzed qualitative answers by coding them thematically. For example, an open-ended question regarding the reasons that more affluent people participate in

these markets included answers grouped into emergent categories such as “better education,” “more concern about food quality,” “more health consciousness,” “more time,” or “neighboring demographics.” However, some of the responses cited in this article are not necessarily representative, but tend toward the strongly put. Because we had stated the normative purpose of the study, namely to improve access to low-income people and people of color, many respondents were clearly conscious that they would be judged on their answers and so provided quite timid and limited responses. Therefore, I contend that these responses are the tip of the iceberg, given the lukewarm response to our questions among the less strident. Even if they only represent a minority of respondents, they still bear relevance because of their potential chilling effect.

In indirect ways, this research did provide additional evidence about what is already widely felt to be true: These institutions disproportionately serve white and middle to upper income populations, although it almost goes without saying that farmers’ markets are more racially and class diverse than CSAs. Most CSA managers reported that the vast majority of their customers were white. In response to a survey question as to why European Americans appeared to be the dominant ethnic group, one CSA manager wrote, “cause unfortunately we are in honky heaven! And the only people who seem to be able to afford to live here are people of this race.” Farmers’ market managers reported having more ethnic diversity at their markets, mainly because farmers’ markets more closely mirror the demographics of the area in which they are located, as many managers noted. Still, few are located in communities of color, especially those that are primarily African American, and those that exist in African American neighborhoods tend to be very small. As one farmers’ market manager noted on the survey form,

Farmers’ markets are good for everyone, but many of them are being located in “high-end” areas. The farmers may make more money there, and the higher income communities are “entertained” by outdoor markets.

To be sure, as the primary purpose of such markets is to serve farmers by providing a reg-

ular source of income, most markets are set up in areas where palpable demand exists for them (which also includes many Asian immigrant communities), unless market charters require otherwise.

Putting these important demographic issues aside, it is worth considering why these institutions tend to be disproportionately white even in communities with a more racially mixed population (like my own). I posit that managers’ qualitative responses can shed a great deal of light on participation of people of color in these alternative food institutions. Following various scholars of whiteness, they serve as a reminder that attention to the subjects rather than objects of racializing discourses is a compelling way to understand the work that representational practices do (Morrison 1992; Frankenberg 1993; McKinney 2005). In this case, they illustrate the whitened cultural politics that operate in these institutions.

At one level, most respondents were sympathetic to a project that would make their markets more inclusive. Seventy-four percent of farmers’ market managers and 69 percent of CSA managers thought it important to address the ethnic diversity of their markets, although the enthusiasm among CSA managers dropped to 59 percent when asked if they would consider strategies that increase the ethnic diversity of their customers. The inconsistencies between these responses and those expressed in open-ended written comments and interviews revealed the deeper discomforts invoked by the survey and, hence, the discursive issues.

Most of the managers surveyed and interviewed in this study believed their market spaces are universal spaces that speak to universal values. As one CSA manager stated, the purpose of CSA is to “have people eat real food and understand where it comes from.” For some, that entails rejecting the very idea of having strategies to reach out to particular communities of color. When asked how to improve diversity at the market, one manager responded, “We always hope for more people and do not focus on ethnic—what we present attracts all!” Likewise, a CSA manager said,

Targeting those in our communities that are ethnic or low income would show a prejudice we don’t work within. We do outreach programs

to reach everyone interested in eating locally, healthily, and organically.

Some managers explicitly invoked the language of color blindness. Aversion to questions regarding the ethnicity of customers was founded on the presumption that the questions themselves were racist. As one farmers' market manager put it,

Some of your questions are pretty intrusive—I also found some to be racist. I left these questions blank. This was intentional, not accidental.

Echoed the CSA respondent mentioned earlier,

Difference is wrong; it is better to try to become color blind in how we do things. . . . Your questioning has a slant of political correctness. . . . We are set up for our community.

Yet, another CSA manager responded:

I think it is an admirable goal to try to get our customers to be more diverse, but I feel a bit troubled by all of this. I sometimes feel pressure to be perfectly politically correct. . . . I wish we could elevate the farmers first, then it might be easier to bring the rest of the world along.

Whereas in one register managers rejected the idea of difference, in another they invoked it. Importantly, this last comment was followed immediately by one in which the manager said “the [CSA] concept needs to be taken on by low-income and ethnic folks.” Indeed, another recurring theme throughout the responses was that healthy, local, sustainable eating is a “lifestyle choice” and one to which people of color apparently do not adhere. For example, in responding to the question “What do you think are some of the reasons that it is primarily European-American people who seem to participate in CSAs?,” respondents consistently imputed personal characteristics and motives rather than structural problems with access and affordability. In the qualitative analysis, phrases such as “better education,” “more concern about food quality,” “more health consciousness,” and even “more time” were mentioned repeatedly. One manager portrayed white people as “more aware and willing to do something with food for socio-political reasons rather than other rea-

sons and involved in the social component of CSAs and what they represent.” Another simply said, “Hispanics aren't into fresh, local, and organic products.”

Farmers' market managers named some of these same issues, but also tended to include additional factors regarding neighborhood demographics, location, and cost as obstacles to participation. Even attributing behavior to cost, though, makes presumptions about difference in values. For example, in reference to a question about expanding entitlement programs to make farmers' markets more affordable to all, one manager responded,

I'm not sure that I agree that subsidy is the best route. In my experience, the subsidy customers are the least committed and reliable. I believe that the food is affordable to all; it's just a matter of different values and priorities. Education and outreach are the only hope I have of interesting more low-income people.

One respondent characterized his market as one that “caters to high-income consumers seeking quality and freshness” and said that “low-income people shop elsewhere unless they are given freebies like WIC.” He further said he would not want to use strategies to attract low-income consumers because those strategies “may discourage the high-end consumers that we cater to.”

In short, these responses represent various ways in which lack of knowledge or the “right” values is seen as the barrier to broader participation in alternative food institutions. As Nash (2007) subtly shows in respect to the horrific pesticide exposures that farm workers have been subject to, it is an old trope to attribute structural inequalities to cultural differences or lack of education. What I hope I have shown in addition is that this position involves certain significations: Specifically, managers portray their own values and aesthetics to be so obviously universal that those who do not share them are marked as other. These sorts of sensibilities are hallmarks of whiteness. So, in assuming the universal goodness of fresh, local, and organic food, the authors of these quotes ask those who appear to reject this food to either be subject to conversion efforts or simply be deemed as other. If they only knew.

The White Chill: Is It Lack of Knowledge?

In her unpublished dissertation, “Black Faces, White Spaces: African Americans and the Great Outdoors,” Carolyn Finney (2006) found a tendency among whites to attribute the lack of participation of African Americans in U.S. national parks to such things as different values, lack of interest, or the costs of getting there. When she queried African Americans on the same issue, many rejected those sorts of prompts and responded to an open-ended prompt of “exclusionary practices.” Not all respondents specified these practices, but those that did pointed to issues such as cultural competency, white privilege, and varying levels of commitment by environmental groups. I want to argue for a similar phenomenon with these spaces of alternative food provision, and the exclusionary practices I want to point to are a pervasive set of idioms in alternative food practice that are insensitive to or ignorant of the ways in which they reflect whitened cultural histories and practices (Kobayashi and Peake 2000). “Getting your hands dirty in the soil,” “if they only knew,” and “looking the farmer in the eye” all point to an agrarian past that is far more easily romanticized by whites than others (Guthman 2004).

In particular, the rhetoric of paying the full cost illustrates not only a lack of cultural competency, but also what Lipsitz (1998) has called “the possessive investment in whiteness.” It seems to be asking people who might have historical connections to those who have more than paid the cost with their bodies and livelihoods in U.S. agricultural development—who in certain respects have themselves subsidized the production of cheap food—to pay even more. At the very least, full cost presumes that all else is equal, even though U.S. agricultural land and labor relations are fundamentally predicated on white privilege. As elucidated by Romm (2001), land was virtually given away to whites at the same time that reconstruction failed in the South, Native American lands were appropriated, Chinese and Japanese were precluded from land ownership, and the Spanish-speaking Californios were disenfranchised of their ranches. Given this history, it is certainly conceivable that for some people knowing where your food comes from and paying

the full cost would not have the same aesthetic appeal that it does for white, middle-class alternative food aficionados. For similar reasons, the broader rhetoric of sustainability must be brought under scrutiny. As Finney (2007) asks, “Exactly who and what are being sustained?”

Although the study discussed in this article did not ask nonwhite clients of these institutions why they participate or, more aptly, nonclients why they do not, there is evidence that these discourses and the way they hail a particular subject is read as exclusionary by people of color. For example, Tattenham (2006) conducted a long-term participant observation study of an organization that delivers below-market organic food to an African American neighborhood without conventional supermarkets. One day, she asked one of her neighbors why she did not shop from the truck. The neighbor’s response was, “Because they don’t sell no food! All they got is birdseed. . . . 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.” Stowe (2007) conducted a survey of organizations in California that work on social justice issues as they relate to agriculture and food. The purpose of the survey was to ascertain whether the Ecological Farming Association could do more to encourage low-income and nonwhite constituents attend its annual conference. One question was whether having more Spanish language translation at the conference would encourage more participation among Spanish-speaking farmers. An advocate for such farmers was unsure that translation would make a difference, saying “Yeah those hippies freak them out.” Finally, I have also had several discussions with my campus diversity trainer who works with interns at the university-run organic farm to teach cultural competency. She has heard consistent feedback from the few people of color who attend the program. Many of them feel isolated, not only because of the language employed, but also in their fear of challenging it.

If Who Only Knew

The data presented in this article say much more about the subjectivities of managers of CSA and farmers’ markets than those who are the objects of conversion—or dismissal—in

the context of alternative food efforts. Still, I have also tried to suggest some of the reasons that these institutions do not seem to resonate among people of color as much as they do for whites. Clearly more research is needed to understand how and to what degree people of color experience exclusionary practices in the spaces of alternative food provision. It is research I hope to pursue.

Yet, my underlying concern is that because these spaces tend to hail white subjects, whites continue to define the rhetoric, spaces, and broader projects of agro-food transformation. As I have argued elsewhere (Guthman forthcoming), the current menu reflects a fairly delimited conception of the politics of the possible. This is an enormous problem given how race intersects with agriculture and food in myriad ways, yet many substantial health and livelihood inequalities are barely addressed through existing social movement activity. Insofar as people of color see their deaths earlier due to such lack of attention, the problem in its totality surely meets Gilmore's (2002) criterion of racism. In other words, the implications of these perhaps minor exclusions are far-reaching.

The problem I describe has not gone unnoticed by movement activists. I have attended many public meetings of the sustainable agriculture and alternative food movements where people of color and whites working in communities of color insist that the messages of these movements are, simply put, "too white." Groups such as the Community Food Security Coalition are keenly aware that they have a race problem and conduct antiracism training workshops for their staff and volunteers. There are also a growing number of organizations that are actively attempting to reframe their messages to attract people of color, from Mo' Betta Foods and the Peoples' Grocery in Oakland, to Food from the Hood in Los Angeles, to Growing Power in Milwaukee, to Just Foods in New York. That said, their success has been mixed on this objective, for many of the reasons discussed in this article.

Therefore, I want to conclude by returning to the missionary impulses enacted in alternative food spaces and practices. In the absence of other raced bodies in alternative food spaces, and perhaps in the absence of other explanations that might render indifference to alterna-

tive food practice understandable, the rhetoric of "if they only knew" tends to be reinforced. Meanwhile, the subject positions of the proselytizers, as well as the goodness of the food, continues to go without saying. This is the hallmark of whiteness and its presumption of normativity; it goes to the deeper way in which color blindness and acts of doing good can work to separate and scold others. My point, however, is not to disable activists and advocates who have good intentions, out them for being overtly racist, or even to claim the important counterfactual: that without whiteness food activism would take a substantially different course and be wildly successful. My immediate goal for this article is to encourage much deeper reflection on the cultural politics of food activism. Saldanha (2006, 11) is surely right that "the embodiment of race . . . encompasses certain ethical stances and political choices. It informs what one can do, what one should do, in certain spaces and situations." Following Sullivan (2006), whites need to think about how to use the privileges of whiteness in an antiracist practice. In the realm of food politics, this might mean turning away from proselytizing based on universal assumptions about good food. Perhaps a place to start would be for whites to state how much they do not know to open up the space that might allow others to define the spaces and projects that will help spurn the transformation to a more just and ecological way of providing food.

Notes

¹ Because the survey asked respondents to make eye-ball guesses—certainly a problematic starting place in matters of race—descriptions of ethnicity were necessarily coarse. This explains the conflation of Asian and Asian Americans into one category, for example.

² Likert-scaled questions ask responders to state the strength and direction of their agreement with a given proposition on a five-point scale (e.g., strongly agree, somewhat agree, neutral, etc.)

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