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## **Bastions of White Privilege? Reflections on the Racialization of Alternative Food Networks**

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It is something of an accepted truth that alternative food networks (AFNs) are bastions of the affluent middle and upper classes. No one else, it is assumed, could afford the premium prices routinely attached to organic, fair trade and other ethically produced foodstuffs. In *Alternative Food Networks: Knowledge, Practice and Politics*, David Goodman, Melanie DuPuis and Michael Goodman ask us to think beyond income-based inequality and to consider how a range of other social cleavages may be reflected in and shape AFNs. They argue that race, in particular, has been inadequately problematized both by alternative food movements and by the scholars that study them. Certainly, many have argued that the social standards embedded within various eco-certifications are too weak, allowing, for example, the exploitation of migrant labour on organic farms in the US (e.g. Allen, 2008). But few have looked seriously or critically at the racial composition or dynamics of AFNs. To put it rather crudely, AFNs are not simply the domain of the affluent middle classes, the authors argue, they are the domain of the privileged white middle classes.

It is logically possible that to the extent AFNs are predominantly 'white' this is a reflection not of any processes specific to those networks but of correlations more broadly between race and class in those countries on which Goodman et al. focus their attention: the US and (to a lesser extent with respect to the discussion of racialization) the UK. However, it is also logically possible that AFNs are characterized by their own racially exclusionary practices. Critically, such practices do not need to be racist in intent to be exclusionary in outcome.

The basic proposition that AFNs largely exclude non-white ethnic and racial minorities, as well as the poor, will sit more comfortably with some readers than others. One does not have to look very hard to find numerous alternative food projects initiated by, and benefiting, a variety of ethnic and class groups. Some such examples are highlighted below. However, the purpose of this commentary is not simply to argue the point or to discount the impact of racialization within alternative food networks. The purpose, rather, is to argue that Goodman et al. mark out what ought, in fact, to be a far more substantial research agenda within agri-food studies. Having read this book, I am convinced of the need to push our understanding of racialization conceptually and empirically.

### **Conceptualizing Racialization**

To conceptualize the racialization of AFNs, Goodman et al. extend an argument they have developed through several previous publications (see DuPuis and Goodman, 2005; DuPuis et al., 2006); namely, that some of the values often espoused by

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AFNs have the potential, when applied unreflexively, to reproduce existing social inequalities. The valorization of 'local' foods, in particular, may protect the livelihoods and interests of landed elites while ignoring injustices associated with the distribution of land, exploitative labour relations, undemocratic political institutions, and so on. Such injustices may clearly have a racial basis. However, the racialization of food networks extends beyond this 'defensive localism'. Failure to acknowledge the many ways in which racial inequalities are embedded in existing institutions, social practices and geographies sees these replicated, if not reinforced, through alternative food networks. It is true that some AFNs make explicit attempts to engage in outreach to disadvantaged and/or marginalized groups. Nevertheless, such attempts fail to reform the class and racial composition of AFNs more generally, it is argued, because they fail to challenge the organization of AFNs according to the values, routines and preferences of the white middle classes. Intent, again, is not at issue here. At issue is the treatment of whiteness as an 'unmarked category' and failure, consequently, on the part of AFNs to 'connect the dots' between the ways in which they organize, the spaces in which they operate, the language and symbols they deploy and, ultimately, the exclusion of others (Slocum, 2006).

The relative paucity of literature addressing these connections could suggest that agri-food scholars have similarly treated whiteness as a largely unmarked category. The question then becomes whether these connections are there to be made. How compelling is evidence for the racialization of alternative food networks? And, to the extent that AFNs are racialized, how useful is the concept of unmarked whiteness in exploring and explaining this phenomenon?

### **The Extent of Racialization within Alternative Food Networks**

With respect to the first of these questions, Goodman et al. refer to a small but growing body of literature focused on the production of race through alternative food networks in the US (Slocum, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2011; Guthman, 2008; Alkon and McCullen, 2011). Contributions to this literature are based, for the most part, on in-depth qualitative analysis of discrete case studies of local food initiatives such as farmers' markets. Case study analysis is particularly well suited to tasks of exploration and theorizing; of unpacking what Foucault (1986) referred to as the *how* of power. Conversely, case studies provide a poor platform from which to make generalizations about the extent to which any particular finding or explanation might be representative at greater social, spatial or temporal scales. It is a basic epistemological principle that care should be taken when generalizing from case studies. Yet there is a distinct tendency within the relevant literature to imply representativeness by asserting that alternative food movements more generally are, in fact, predominantly white. Slocum (2007, p. 526), for example, states that AFNs engage 'with a white middle class consumer base that tends to be interested in personal health and perhaps in environmental integrity'. This positions AFN participants as not only white and middle class but as motivated by egoistic, rather than altruistic, motives. No evidence is cited in support of this statement yet it functions nonetheless to suggest that case study results concerning the production of whiteness are representative.

Guthman (2008), by contrast, references several other local case studies, and one national survey of US farmers' market managers, all of which observe that customers of the markets they studied or managed appeared to be predominantly white. This is enough to suggest that processes of racialization are not somehow unique to

a few conveniently chosen case studies, but still leaves unanswered many questions regarding the scales at which research results and the theoretical work they inform are relevant. The need for caution here is reflected in Guthman's (2008) acknowledgment of the possibility of regional variation (presumably, within the US) and of African-American involvement in farmers' markets. Yet Guthman is dismissive of the one study she references that focuses explicitly on the experience of African-American customers in markets serving predominantly low income, African-American communities. The study in question was based on point-of-sale interviews with customers of two farmers' markets in Chicago (see Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2006). The samples were modest for quantitative studies (approximately 60 interviews at each site) and no interviews were conducted with neighbourhood residents who did not attend the market. Nevertheless, both sites generated similar results (indicative of a positive customer experience) and recommendations focus on what can be learned to adapt farmers' markets to the needs of low-income minority communities (not on how to fit communities into a pre-existing norm). While no attempt is made to generalize beyond the interview group, this study does suggest there is nothing intrinsic to farmers' markets that is intimidating to, or inconsistent with the values of, working-class African-American consumers. By drawing attention to the study's small sample size, however, Guthman (2008) implies that its results do not need to be taken seriously. This positions the two Chicago markets not as exceptions to a wider pattern of minority exclusion (a feature that would make them all the more interesting), but as empirically and theoretically irrelevant.

Just how exceptional are the two markets studied by Suarez-Balcazar et al. (2006)? The USDA study cited by Guthman (2008) reports, based on estimations provided by farmers' market managers, that in 2000 approximately 14% of market customers were African-American, compared with 76% white, 5% Asian and 6% Hispanic (see Payne, 2002). No data, unfortunately, are reported on how many individual markets comply with or, conversely, buck this trend. Neither are data reported on customer characteristics less amenable to observation such as income and education.

One of the few types of AFN on which there are comprehensive quantitative data is the market for certified organic food. Studies across a number of Western countries, including the US, conclude that income is a poor indicator of consumption of certified organic foods (see Hughner et al., 2007). Some studies even find negative relationships between income and organic food consumption. This is not difficult to explain. Committed organic consumers who cannot afford the average price premiums attached to organic foods contain their expenditure by buying non-perishables in bulk, avoiding processed foods, minimizing waste, shopping at cooperatives and farmers' markets, avoiding expensive 'luxury' and 'gourmet' foods, and so on (Lockie et al., 2002, 2006). Associations between education and organic food consumption are more mixed. Organic consumers, further, are concerned about a variety of values in addition to health, including environment, food safety, animal welfare, etc. Such values, however, are widely accepted even by those who do not go out of their way to consume organic food (Lockie et al., 2002). Survey results consistently suggest, in other words, that organic food is not, in any universal sense, either a 'class diet' or a reflection of distinctly middle-class values. More common is the finding that organic food consumption is gendered. Women both evince higher levels of concern about the 'naturalness' of foods and are more likely than men to undertake household shopping and food preparation, both variables that are associated with more regular consumption of organic food (Lockie et al., 2004).

Comprehensive studies of the racial basis of organic food consumption are largely restricted to the US. Dettman and Dimitri (2007), for example, report that income, education and race (whiteness) are positively associated with the purchase of pre-packaged organic vegetables (salad mix, carrots and spinach) in the US. Based on actual grocery purchases by a panel of 41 000 consumers contributing to the ACNielsen Homescan database in 2004, it seems that we have here robust data consistent with 'the generally held stereotype that organic consumers are wealthy, well educated Caucasians' (Dettman and Dimitri, 2007, p. 460). Importantly, however, Dettman and Dimitri restrict their analysis to products sold with a Universal Product Code (or barcode) and pre-packaged in standard weight portions. As a consequence, organic vegetables sold through fresh food markets, farm-gate stalls and other outlets that do not use barcodes are excluded, as are organic vegetables sold, even by mainstream retailers, in random weight portions. This particular analysis thus provides compelling evidence that pre-packaged organic vegetables stocked by mainstream retail outlets are indeed more likely to be purchased by US consumers with higher incomes, higher education levels, and of Caucasian backgrounds (although the magnitude of this latter relationship was small). Given that many of these retailers utilize retail geographies, product selections (such as pre-packaged vegetables) and pricing strategies explicitly targeted at wealthy, educated, car-owning consumers these results are not entirely surprising (Lockie, 2009). Similarly, given that a large number of alternative food networks – and all of the strategies mentioned in the previous paragraph for containing expenditure by committed organic consumers are ignored – we should also not be surprised if consideration of different outlets and/or products yields different results.

Stevens-Garmon et al.'s (2007) analysis of Homescan data for 2001 and 2004 offers a case in point. Using a subsample of approximately 8,000 households for which data were available on the organic status of unpackaged vegetables sourced from any retail outlet, they find no consistent relationships between income and expenditure on fresh organic produce for either survey year (although, interestingly, highest per capita expenditures on organic vegetables were evident among households with annual incomes below USD 25 000). Further, Stevens-Garmon et al. (2007) find that, on a per capita basis, Asian and African-American households spent more on fresh organic produce than did white and Hispanic households in both survey years. Between 2001 and 2004, expenditure by Asian-American and 'other' households on organic produce declined slightly while increasing in white, African-American and Hispanic households. The proportion of African-American households purchasing at least some organic produce also rose, increasing from 34 to 37% between surveys. As a consequence, African-Americans displaced Asian-Americans as the leading consumers of organic fresh food in the US on the basis of per capita expenditure. Similar results are reported by Howie (2004) and Barry (2004).

In sum, there is considerable evidence that the characterization of organic food consumers as predominantly white, middle class and health-motivated – even in the US – is a misleading stereotype. Despite this, neither can it be assumed that research results concerning the purchase of certified organic foods are representative of all AFNs. The increase in African-American consumption of organic food between 2001 and 2004 coincided with the enactment of the US Department of Agriculture's National Organic Standard in 2002 and an increase in the supply and visibility of organic produce in mainstream retail outlets (Stevens-Garmon et al., 2007). These outlets now capture more than half of all organic sales in the US. It is entirely pos-

sible, therefore, that less mainstream sources of organic produce have a different demographic profile. The lesson to be learned from survey results concerning organic consumption is not that class and race are immaterial. The lesson, rather, is not to assume that class or race, at any particular time or place, will manifest either in a consistent manner or in ways that common sense and conventional wisdom tell us they might. Case studies that conform with conventional wisdoms on class and race are not to be dismissed, but neither is their relevance beyond specific sites to be taken for granted.

### Unmarked Whiteness and the Imaginary of Community Food

The conceptual utility of 'unmarked whiteness' is not undermined by a lack of evidence that all, or even most, AFNs are characterized by disproportionately white participation. Irrespective of whether they are the norm or the exception, exclusionary processes and outcomes in alternative food networks warrant analysis. Understanding the interplay of production and consumption in AFNs requires us to do more than identify the demographic characteristics of producers, consumers and other participants (or non-participants). It requires us to examine the processes through which specific people are mobilized as participants in specific networks and, conversely, the processes through which others are excluded. Indeed, one of the strengths of literature on the racialization of food networks is its focus on socio-spatial processes of inclusion and exclusion rather than on racial differences per se. Failure on the part of AFN participants to recognize the ways in which particular institutional and spatial arrangements suit some groups more than others offers a plausible explanation for some of the case-study results reported in the literature. The proposition, consequently, that unmarked whiteness generates processes of racialization at odds with the democratic goals of AFNs begs exploration and refinement through further case-study analysis.

Undertaking such analysis and developing more sophisticated accounts of racialization is not aided by premature or overgeneralization regarding the extent to which processes of racialization generate a particular racial profile among AFN participants at broader spatial or temporal scales. Partly this is a matter simply of spatial and temporal diversity (we should not expect that the racial composition of AFNs at particular sites in the US will necessarily be reflected elsewhere). But this is also a matter of diversity among alternative food networks. As stated above, the apparent contradiction of African-Americans being under-represented in some community food initiatives while consuming more certified organic food than other groups could suggest either better access to, or a preference for, more mainstream retail outlets. The latter (a *preference* for more mainstream outlets) could be explained by Guthman's (2008) argument that the historical appropriation of land in the US from Native Americans, the wholesale displacement of African-American farmers in the twentieth century, the exploitation of migrant labour, and so on (see also Lobao and Meyer, 2001) casts a long shadow over romanticized depictions of an agrarian past in which small farmers formed the bedrock of their communities. The discursive appeals commonly associated with community-supported agriculture schemes and farmers' markets (calls to pay the 'real' price of food, underwrite farm livelihoods, and sustain rural communities) position alternative foods in a struggle between small family or peasant farmers and the leviathans of corporate agriculture, but say nothing of the raced history of landowning and food provisioning. AFNs that por-

tray the financial sustainability of small farms as a moral issue for consumers may fail, therefore, to connect with those for whom such attribution of responsibility is experienced as an extension of what is already a privileged white history (see also Slocum, 2008; Alkon and McCullen, 2011). Conversely, those that support minority farmers to supply low-income and/or minority neighbourhoods may assist in the construction of a community imaginary and experience more in tune with the residents of those neighbourhoods.

The 'community imaginary' projected by farmers' markets potentially ignores both material differences in the interests of inhabitants of communities of place and subjective differences in the experience of shared space (Alkon and McCullen, 2011). These are intriguing propositions which, again, beg further exploration and refinement. But it is quite a leap from the proposition that farmers' markets often ignore the raced history of US agriculture to the conclusion that a far broader set of activities and concerns associated with the loose concept of 'community food' – from home cooking to gardening and animal welfare – represent a peculiarly 'white imaginary' (Slocum, 2008, 2011). If this is true, what are we to make of community gardens in the US and the majority involvement, in many of these, of African-Americans and other ethnic minorities (Armstrong, 2000; Draper and Freedman, 2010)? One possibility is that such projects and their leaders represent figures 'of black success that white people love to like', figures that are threatening neither to capitalism nor racism (Slocum, 2011, p. 314). Such an explanation fails, however, to account for non-white initiative and participation. What, from such a perspective, could we possibly make of projects such as Baltimore's Duncan Street Miracle Garden; a project initiated in 1988 by African-American volunteers on what was then urban wasteland and which is, to this day, surrounded by an urban food desert (Corrigan, 2011, p. 1237)? Such projects evince their own community imaginary which, like the imaginary projected by farmers' markets, draws heavily on the emancipatory promise of togetherness and fresh food. Gardeners involved in the Duncan Street Miracle Garden 'give back' to the community by donating produce, allowing neighbourhood children to harvest fruit, sharing knowledge and providing a 'green oasis in the heart of East Baltimore' (Corrigan, 2011, p. 1238). 'Community' is a concept that appeals, in a variety of ways, to much more than the privileged white history of US agriculture.

### **Overgeneralization, Reification and Circularity**

Narratives of 'community' within alternative food networks may be associated, despite their discursive similarities, with very different socio-spatial processes of racialization. Overgeneralizing from case studies of particular kinds of AFN in particular places obscures these processes and, in so doing, obscures the many and varied contributions of people from non-white racial and ethnic backgrounds to community food initiatives. Beyond these relatively obvious empirical implications, however, the implications of overgeneralization extend to a number of additional theoretical and ethical concerns. In the remainder of this commentary I will argue, more specifically, that overgeneralization:

1. leads to the reification of simplified racial schemas;
2. obscures potentially more important dimensions of difference and solidarity;  
and
3. promotes circular and thereby untestable and irrefutable arguments.

*Reification*

Obvious phenotypical features such as white/brown skin colour play indelible roles in peoples' embodied experience of the social regardless of the often tenuous connections between these features and individuals' actual racial and cultural backgrounds (Slocum, 2007). That racial categories, as commonly understood, are socially constructed (and crudely at that) renders them no less relevant therefore to understanding social relations, identity formation, subjectivities, etc. As social constructs, however, care must be taken in the transportation and interpretation of racial categories beyond the historically and spatially specific sites in which they have been produced and/or exposed (see Shaw, 2006). Even if we accept the proposition articulated above that 'unexamined whiteness' (in certain societies) can produce equally unexamined norms of behaviour and organization, we must still accept that the meaning of whiteness and the processes through which such norms are produced may be far from universal. Failure to do so (a failure implicit in the tendency to overgeneralization) presents both whiteness and its converse, non-whiteness, as ahistorical and monolithic categories.

*Difference and Solidarity*

To begin by stating the obvious, reification of whiteness and non-whiteness obfuscates multiple dimensions of ethnic identification and difference. It is not enough to acknowledge that the boundaries between white and non-white may be fuzzy (Slocum, 2007). These may not be the most relevant boundaries in any case. As Hunter (2002) argues, the ways in which various non-white groups in the US encounter hegemonic whiteness can be very different and suggest equally different theoretical and epistemological approaches to race. For example, the experience of colonization, the continuing moral and legal rights, and the cultures and subjectivities of indigenous peoples within settler societies such as the US and Australia are vastly different to those of migrant ethnicities – including forced migrants. Failure to acknowledge the uniqueness and diversity of First Nations among the indigenous peoples of modern nation states is often experienced as racist, and subsuming indigenous peoples within blanket 'non-white', 'other' or even 'pan-aboriginal' categories is thus deeply problematic. What is not unique to indigenous peoples, other 'non-whites' or even 'whites' themselves is ethnic diversity. AFNs may be forced, or seek, to confront ethnicities that in other times and places have been in conflict as migration brings ostensibly former adversaries into proximity (e.g. refugees from the former Yugoslavia). Beyond race and ethnicity, AFNs may be characterized by, or seek to engage with, dimensions of difference and disadvantage associated with disability, age, displacement, etc. (Kingsley and Townsend, 2006). There is no a priori reason for race to empirically, theoretically or ethically trump other dimensions of difference or solidarity.

*Circularity*

There are innumerable examples of alternative food activists, entrepreneurs, organizations, etc. taking clear and deliberate steps to promote more democratic access to high quality, socially and environmentally responsible food. The concept of 'unexamined whiteness' suggests explanations for why these may not always be entirely



successful. Overgeneralization, however, regarding the racial composition of AFNs amplifies this sense of failure and generates accounts of racially inclusive practices within AFNs as, in fact, part of the problem. Fair-skinned people are portrayed in such accounts as essentially incapable of understanding and modifying their racially privileged practices. Their attempts at inclusivity are not simply misdirected but oriented (even if inadvertently) towards extending and imposing norms of whiteness on others. Inclusivity therefore is not about problematizing these norms but about helping people feel good about their possessive investment in whiteness by allowing them to consume a kind of watered down and commodified multiculturalism – lending a cosmopolitan sheen to what remain fundamentally white projects and spaces. Overgeneralization thus allows scholars to ignore the stated intentions and values of AFN participants and to theoretically locate their activities within a project of hegemonic whiteness. From there, it is possible to discount the appearance of racial inclusiveness in some AFNs. ‘The presence of people of colour in white food spaces’, Slocum (2007, p. 521) states, ‘and their interest in alternative food practices does not make community food less white.’ By discounting the involvement of non-whites in AFNs the idea of unexamined and hegemonic whiteness is unchallenged. As an argument that explains away data on the racial composition of AFNs that may otherwise appear to refute the basic hypothesis of white hegemony this is circular, untestable and thereby epistemologically problematic. Perhaps more importantly, discounting the involvement of non-whites in certain AFNs comes at the cost of dismissing as irrelevant the intentions and values of those same people whom hegemonic whiteness is held to disadvantage. Taken to its logical conclusion, this implies that non-white community food activists are not resisting or operating outside of white hegemony but that they are, in fact, complicit in it.

## **Conclusion**

Complicity in a project of hegemonic whiteness is not a charge that Goodman et al. explicitly level at AFNs. In arguing that this is the logical consequence of overgeneralization concerning the racial composition and dynamics of AFNs I am not attempting to discredit the concept of ‘unexamined whiteness’. Nor am I attempting to minimize the importance of highlighting ‘blind spots’ in the practice and ethics of alternative food. On the contrary, I am attempting to encourage a much sharper focus on the processes through which social inclusions and exclusions are produced. We do not need to overstate the case to establish that racialization exists as one form of inclusion/exclusion within some food networks. Mischaracterization of AFNs, on the other hand, as universal bastions of white middle- and upper-class privilege trivializes the involvement of otherwise marginalized and/or disadvantaged participants within these networks. Such mischaracterization encourages us to focus scholarly attention solely on the identification and theorization of exclusion and thereby to lose sight of opportunities to explore and to learn from AFN practices that intentionally, or even unintentionally, promote inclusion. There is an important distinction, to be sure, between learning from success and uncritically celebrating the work of alternative food projects that accord with our own values, routines and preferences. However, there is an equally important distinction to be made between the critical analysis of AFNs and subtly ignoring or explaining away contrary evidence with circular and untestable arguments. In drawing attention to examples of racialization within AFNs Goodman et al., and the scholars they draw on, make a

convincing case to prioritize more empirical and theoretical work on the practices and spaces of alternative food. The insights they offer into the exclusionary consequences of defensive localism and other unreflexively applied values raise questions that ought to be asked across multiple sites and across multiple dimensions of difference and solidarity.

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