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RESEARCH COMMENTARIES: FOOD SYSTEMS RESEARCH PRIORITIES OVER THE NEXT 5 YEARS

White spaces in black and Latino places: Urban agriculture and food sovereignty

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Abstract

In recent years urban agriculture has gained the attention of policy-makers, social organizers, and academics alike. This new wave of work and attention focuses on projects that ameliorate issues ranging from food insecurity to urban blight, and environmental degradation to the subversion of industrial food production. These projects consist of a variation of community gardens, educational programs, demonstration farms, and entrepreneurial production farms (I will identify all of these under the umbrella of urban agriculture (UA)). However, by simply studying the social impact of UA, researchers fail to consider who the active agent is in social change; this results in little acknowledgement of a movement that is predominately white, hegemonic, and exclusive. As a movement, UA is largely championed by a middle-class white populace as part of the alternative food movement, rather than being understood as having historical roots in predominately black and/or Latino neighborhoods. As a result, urban agriculture generally creates white spaces in otherwise black or Latino places. In this paper I will argue for a new research direction that considers UA from a critical race theory framework and that will allow researchers to examine how urban agriculture might create white "spaces" and white "ethics" in predominately black and Latino neighborhoods. Understanding UA from a critical race theory framework will be useful in helping the UA movement talk about food sovereignty rather than food insecurity in urban communities.

Keywords

food systems, race, urban agriculture

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"You just don't find many African Americans who can be farmers in the city." (Meenar & Hoover, 2012, p. 10)

As a subset of the alternative food movement, urban agriculture (UA) places a high emphasis on its role of positively impacting fresh food accessibility and security (Ball, Timperio, & Crawford, 2009; Gatrell, Reid, & Ross, 2011; Gottlieb & Joshi, 2010; Teig, Amulya, Bardwell, Buchenau, Marshall, & Litt, 2009; Walker, Keane, & Burke, 2010), urban blight and decay through greening (Gottlieb & Joshi, 2010; Metcalf & Widener, 2011), and developing social capital (Henderson & Hartsfield, 2009; Teig et al., 2009). Despite the various models and different outcomes, one aspect persists throughout the recent surge in urban agriculture: it is a white-dominated practice primarily occurring in neighborhoods with high concentrations of African American and Latino communities, with little participation from within those communities. As UA works to undermine an industrial corporate food regime, it unintentionally creates an exclusive environment where people of color are excluded, and where white privilege results in the control of land, food production, and any stream of financial capital. In this paper, I will briefly unpack the current work and research surrounding UA, and then using critical race theory and larger alternative food movement literature, argue that UA researchers and practitioners need to consider the impact of their work on race and power dynamics in neighborhoods throughout the United States.

The above quote was recorded from an interview I did on a warm spring day in Philadelphia, just before the growing season got underway. This white farmer/gardener, working in a neighborhood where African Americans make up more than 80 percent of the population, then began to explain to me that there is a lack of diversity among urban growers, and that it is difficult to get communities of color to buy into farming and fresh food. These perceptions are pervasive among UA practitioners. Despite the wide array of research concerning race and power in the larger global and alternative food systems (Alkon & Ageyman, 2011; Alkon & McCullen, 2010; Cook, 2008; Cook et al., 2011; Green, Green, & Kleiner, 2011; Guthman, 2011; Slocum, 2011), little scholarly attention is given to this topic in the urban food production system.

Current Trends in Urban Agriculture Research

Recent trends in urban agriculture exemplify the impact of social movements. More people are rallying around the positive impacts of UA on social capital (Alaimo, Packnett, Miles, & Kruger, 2008; Alaimo, Reischl, & Allen, 2010; Evans & Miewald, 2013); physical activity and public health (Teig et al., 2009); fresh food accessibility; and urban greening (Greenworks Philadelphia, 2009; Levoke & Wakefield, 2011; Metcalf & Widener, 2011; PlaNYC, 2007;Diggable City, 2006).

Social Capital and Community Development

In his trademark work, Robert Putnam identifies social capital as "the connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them" (Putnam, 2000, p. 19). These networks act to engage citizens in trustworthy practices of neighborliness, political participation, or assistance in providing employment opportunities (Putnam, 2000). Urban agriculture has been championed as a strategy to increase and build new avenues of social capital in neighborhoods (Alaimo et al., 2010). UA projects rely heavily on social networks to distribute produce to the neediest populations, and in turn put a significant amount of energy into developing social ties (Meenar & Hoover, 2012). Researchers in Denver interviewed individuals and groups associated with community gardens or urban farms to identify the extent of the collective efficacy of UA. They discovered that gardens and farms were especially effective at creating social and communal ties. The themes of UA in Denver were community building and support, reciprocity, mutual trust, collective democracy, civic engagement, and community building (Teig et al., 2009). Additionally, advocates argue that local government should get into the UA business because of its ability to promote community development, increase civic engagement, and eradicate social ills

such as land vacancy, trash, and drug activity (Henderson & Hartsfield, 2009; Morales, 2009).

Accessibility, Insecurity, and Public Health

Researchers and practitioners in the public health field have taken a keen interest in the rise of obesity- and heart-related illnesses in the U.S. population, especially among underrepresented populations, along with the issue of severe hunger among families who cannot afford the rising cost of food. Findings from public health research have led to an increased interest in the relationship between food insecurity, food access (both spatial or economic), malnutrition, obesity, or other food-related ailments (Larson, Story, & Nelson, 2009).

The research indicates that in impoverished communities and communities of color, options for dietary sufficient foods are limited, while there are ample outlets for processed food lacking in nutritional value (e.g., fast-food outlets, corner stores, and limited-assortment grocery stores) (Ball et al., 2009; Gatrell et al., 2011; Gottlieb & Joshi, 2010; Teig et al., 2009; Walker et al., 2010). The unequal distribution typically occurs along racial and class lines. Studies show that economically disadvantaged neighborhoods have almost half the access to certain types of fruits and vegetables than more advantaged neighborhoods do (Ball et al., 2009); and that in some regions, the lowest-income neighborhoods have nearly 30 percent fewer supermarkets than higher-income neighborhoods (Walker et al., 2010).

Researchers and practitioners of UA are using an accessibility framework to understand and drive their work (Colasanti & Hamm, 2013; Weissman, 2013). By latching onto hundreds of national and local research projects related to food deserts, practitioners of UA are heeding the call to ameliorate the problem of urban food deserts. They do so by working in predominately lower-income neighborhoods (Meenar & Hoover, 2012), distributing produce through a variety of informal networks (Kremer & DeLiberty, 2011), and promoting healthy eating through education (Alaimo et al., 2008). Alaimo et al. (2008) articulate that those households who had at least one participant in a community garden were more likely to eat more fruit and vegetable servings compared to nongarden participants. Their research claims that gardens "may offer potential as a nutrition intervention because they address a primary barrier some urban residents face when trying to eat a healthful diet, that is, limited availability of fresh produce" (Alaimo et al., 2008, p. 97).

Urban Greening and Sustainability

Gaining momentum as a serious social, political, and economic movement, sustainability is also a major driving force behind the UA movement. Mainly concerned with the stamp of "organic" or "local," alternative food activists pride themselves on their low carbon footprint and "knowing" their farmers or animals. As an alternative to the industrial global food system, food movements around the world are concerned with sustainable practices associated with growing local produce (Kloppenburg, Hendrickson, & Stevenson, 1996), raising livestock, and transporting food in a sustainable manner (Mares & Peña, 2011). These concepts of sustainability have flooded into the UA movement as urban producers pride themselves on practicing organic agriculture, rainwater harvesting, local bee-keeping, and composting (Metcalf & Widener, 2011). Additionally, UA promotes another type of greening. Urban farms and gardens around the country work to create and promote a greener landscape in the midst of the built environment (Evans & Miewald, 2013; Gottlieb & Joshi, 2010). Detroit's food policy council has a strong focus on using agriculture to remediate Detroit's 70,000 vacant properties, approximately 27 percent of the city's land base (Gottlieb & Joshi, 2010). From a policy perspective, other cities also promote urban agriculture as a potential partner in urban greening. Philadelphia, New York, and Portland (Oregon) are just a few cities that have incorporated UA into sustainability plans (Greenworks Philadelphia, 2009; PlaNYC, 2007; Rhoads, Rosenbloom, Sunderland, & Cohen, 2006). Summarizing from research in Buffalo, the role of sustainability in UA is as follows: "As with citizenship, when recognized, our implicit human right to labor the earth becomes a civic responsibility. The logic of returning the land to its inhabitants has anticipated the emergence of voluntary 'guerilla gardening' of neglected spaces… Guerrilla

gardeners seek to wage war against scarcity and neglect and to reconsider land ownership in the quest to 'reclaim land from perceived neglect or misuse and assign a new purpose to it'" (Metcalf & Widener, 2011, p. 1242).

As important as sustainability is to the UA framework, the question is, whose land is being "returned" to them? Is UA just another form of urban renewal, displacing underprivileged communities in the process, or is it an inclusive practice that works with marginalized people in the remediation of "their" land? UA needs to begin asking these questions to better understand its impact and begin moving toward sovereignty and justice in the food system.

White Spaces, Ethnic Places: A Gap in Urban Agriculture Research

Race plays a significant role in the global agricultural system. Activists and researchers, many of whom work and write from a food sovereignty framework and mostly focus on the negative impacts of the industrial food system, have identified the hegemonic nature of the 21st century food system. Food sovereignty is a radical alternative movement where the people participating democratically control the production, distribution, and consumption of food (Holt-Giménez, 2011). It is a movement that dismantles monopolistic control of food production, and returns land, water, and seeds to the marginalized (Holt-Giménez, 2009). While UA works as a radical alternative to industrial food practice, does it exemplify problems associated with race, power, and democratic control? The following literature is where UA researchers and practitioners can gain insight into the issues of race relations and sovereignty associated with their work.

In America, geography is racialized (Kobayashi & Peake, 2000). Places are identified as "black," "white," "Asian," "Hispanic," and otherwise. These places are perceived to take on particular identities and ethics, primarily based on racial characteristics, and always are measured against the perceived standard of normal, as based on predominately white, suburban neighborhoods. The racialization of space "is therefore the process by which racialized groups are identified, given stereotypical characteristics, and coerced into specific living conditions, often involving social/spatial segregation and always constituting racialized places" (Kobayashi & Peake, 2000, p. 393). By identifying and articulating perceptions of place, a white norm is standardized and deemed "good," resulting in spaces that are controlled and privileged (Kobayashi & Peake, 2000). This hegemony organizes society based on white culture and values (Omi & Winant, 2002), and leads to a white privilege and ignorance of the world whites created (Mills, 1997, 2007).

Exemplifying what Kobayashi and Peake (2000) identify as white spaces, researchers conducting surveys in Denver found that UA participants were predominately white (78 percent white; 12 percent Hispanic, and 8 percent African American, and 2 percent some other race) (Teig et al., 2009), despite the fact that Denver's Latino population makes up 31.8 percent, blacks makes up 10.2 percent, and those identifying as some other race make up 11.9 percent (US Census Data, 2010). These same trends were exemplified in Philadelphia with garden participation rate made up of 47 percent white, compared to 36 percent African American and 12 percent Latino (Meenar & Hoover, 2012). This is a surprise considering that there is a larger African American population compared to whites in Philadelphia (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Furthermore, in Philadelphia gardens and farms that are led or controlled by whites tend to be located in neighborhoods with a high percentage of either African Americans or Latinos (Meenar & Hoover, 2012).

Similarly, farmers' markets experience predominately white discourse, values, and participation (Alkon & McCullen, 2010). Alkon and McCullen (2010) argue that these patrons ascribe to a romanticized view of farmers on pristine land, and that the predominately white patrons of farmers' markets often shop at the same supermarkets, dine in the same restaurants, or hike the same trails. The participation in the wider countercultural movement "creates a kind of insider ambiance, in which those who know the wider scene, who tend to be white, feel welcome while those who do not may feel excluded" (Alkon & McCullen, 2010, p. 949). Similarly, UA is perceived

as a new countercultural practice working to uproot industrial food production. "The people who are doing this [urban farming] are mostly 20 to 30 something Caucasian kids, white kids, who are farming in these little communes…There are no older people there, they are all young people and they are all white… It [urban farming] is still a white, top down activity" (Meenar & Hoover, 2012, p. 10). Just like farmers' market participants, people involved in UA prefer a countercultural image. At the same time, researchers and practitioners have neglected to understand the vast history, cultural knowledge, and agricultural heritage possessed by landless Asian migrant farm workers, southern black families who farmed in the city after migrating north, and Latino immigrants who left their land due to neoliberal agricultural policy, in search of better livelihoods.

Additionally useful to consider is research outside the food systems literature. In her dissertation research, Carolyn Finney (2006) discovered that whites attribute the minimal participation among African Americans in the national park system to a lack of interest, different values, or cost of enjoying the outdoors. When Finney posed the same questions to African Americans, respondents identified exclusionary practices, environmental groups' lack of commitment or investment in the black population, and white privilege. Furthermore, she identified a lack of visual and textual representation of African Americans related to the environment. In a ten-year period of *Outside* magazine, only 2.2 percent of pictures with persons had people of color represented (Finney, 2006).

These brief examples and review of the literature show a trend that UA researchers and practitioners need to address, one of white privilege, ignorance, and hegemony in work that is otherwise meant to increase sovereignty by being inclusive, participatory, and democratic. Research suggests that African Americans do not participate in the alternative food movement proportionately to their population, and that the manifestation of universal white values excludes many from participating (Guthman, 2011). Future research will benefit from attentive questions regarding perceptions of the UA movement among a more diverse population. Specifically, how does a neighborhood predominately occupied by African Americans see *themselves* participating in this movement? What sort of food would this neighborhood be more inclined to purchase, or, better yet, grow? What does a local Latino community believe should be included in city zoning codes? Issues of land tenure and knowledge about land-access policies need to be studied in order to gain a fuller picture of *who* is gaining access to city land, and *how* they are doing it. Methods such as Finney's (2006) would be appropriate in understanding the perceptions of *all* UA practitioners, and how UA might be represented in the literature — either visually or textually. As mentioned above, with research suggesting that African Americans participate less in the alternative food movement, this begs the question, why? Is it because recent trends in urban agriculture are "unbearably white?" (Guthman, 2011).

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