



Investigating connectivity in the urban food landscapes of migrant women facing food insecurity in Washington, DC



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ABSTRACT

The survival strategies of migrant women living in urban poverty are embedded in urban food landscapes ('foodscales') characterized by dynamic social relationships and mobility. Relying on interviews with 31 migrant women in Washington, DC, this paper traces the socio-spatial conditions of their urban foodscales to show that urban environments inhabited by low-income migrants are dynamic, stretching across multiple neighborhoods as they move throughout the city with social networks to obtain affordable, quality, and culturally appropriate food. Investigating these foodscales demonstrates the relational nature of food provisioning strategies thus providing a critique of simplistic explanations of hunger that treat food insecure residents as static, ignorant, and individual economic actors. These explanations risk producing equally simplistic and inefficient approaches to addressing food insecurity such as increasing mainstream consumption opportunities in so-called food deserts or focusing on nutrition education and individual choice without considering residents' dynamic urban experiences. As a result, this paper argues that programmatic responses to insecure urban foodscales should be developed that foster social and physical connectivity while better addressing structural causes of hunger.

1. Introduction

Research on the influence of food environments on hunger, nutrition, and health-related diseases continues to garner much interest. These studies often consider the availability of full-service grocery stores and certain food items in so-called food deserts. However, less attention is paid to the connectivity evident in food provisioning strategies that require moving throughout the city in concert with social networks. This paper seeks to address the latter by demonstrating that the survival strategies of migrant women living in urban poverty are embedded in urban food landscapes ('foodscales') characterized by dynamic social relationships and calculated mobility across the city. For example, some women rely on extended family, neighbors, or friends to share food, while others travel by bus with friends to access emergency food providers throughout the city. Many work multiple jobs, frequently in the informal economy, to make ends meet. With the low wages from these jobs, many women spend precious hours commuting to multiple stores to compare prices in search of the most affordable food. Others, still, grow food in the extremely limited space constraints near their homes (Hammelman,

2017a). As other scholars have written (Alkon et al., 2013; Heynen, 2010; Miewald and McCann, 2013), the daily experiences of low-income urban residents are influenced by structures of urban space as they employ creative strategies for obtaining food. This article attends to these socio-spatial conditions by tracing the urban foodscales of 31 Latina migrant¹ women in Washington, DC. Their experiences shed light on the relationality of their mobile food provisioning strategies.

Foodscales provide a useful lens for drawing attention to the relational nature of food provisioning strategies that can be constrained by the built environment by demonstrating the ways these strategies are both social and mobile. They also provide important avenues to critique simplistic explanations of hunger that treat food insecure residents as static, ignorant, and isolated economic actors. These explanations risk producing equally simplistic policy solutions to food insecurity such as increasing mainstream consumption opportunities in specific food environments (a common occurrence in DC and the US (Hedgpeth, 2005; Mui, 2007; Walker et al., 2010; among others)) or focusing on nutrition education and individual choice (Drewnowski, 2012; Guthman, 2008a; Minkoff-Zern, 2012) without considering residents' dynamic urban experiences. As such, this paper responds

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¹ I use the language of 'migrant' as opposed to 'immigrant' in recognition of the more fluid relationship with home countries perceived and described by many participants in the research. While most do not engage in cyclical migrations, they remain in daily contact with social networks in their regions of origin and may not consider themselves permanently settled in DC.

to calls from critical food scholars for more research on the local geographies and everyday experiences of those living in poverty. Such research can attend to the social, economic, political, and environmental relations that produce and maintain unjust food systems (Bedore, 2014; MacNell et al., 2017; Miewald and McCann, 2013; Panelli and Tipa, 2009; Shannon, 2014). This research seeks to make contributions to these ongoing debates in literature on urban food environments.

I begin by describing the literature and popular media that depict food insecure individuals in marginalized urban neighborhoods as static, bounded in discrete neighborhoods, and lacking the necessary knowledge for making healthy food choices. I then counter these dominant narratives through providing empirical research with migrant women facing food insecurity in Washington, DC, which highlights their complex strategies that rely on social networks to move throughout the city in search of desired food goods. Finally, I conclude with suggestions for different programmatic responses that arise from this more nuanced understanding of insecure urban foodscapes.

2. Investigating urban foodscapes to better understand food insecurity

The concept of food deserts has galvanized public, academic, and policy attention in recent years (Lytle, 2009). Defined by the US Department of Agriculture as “areas with limited access to a variety of healthy and affordable food” (Dutko et al., 2012, pg. iii), there are 23 million Americans living in food deserts (Bedore, 2014). This definition has been specifically interpreted in various ways, with a general emphasis on types and number of food stores within a specific radius from a residence (Walker et al., 2010; Bono & Finn, 2017). Relying on these definitions, policymakers, nutritionists, and community practitioners link poor diets and obesity with living in low-income communities of color lacking grocery stores (as noted in Zenk et al., 2011a). In response, several municipalities and non-governmental organizations have implemented ambitious plans to incentivize grocery stores to enter neighborhoods historically experiencing disinvestment in Washington, DC, and elsewhere (Hedgpeth, 2005; Mui, 2007; Shannon, 2014).

Research on food environments, however, has produced inconsistent results as to the link between living in areas of limited food access and negative health outcomes (Chrisinger, 2016; MacNell et al., 2017; Walker et al., 2010; Zenk et al., 2011a; among others). Critical food scholars offer explanations for these inconsistencies while pointing to deficiencies in early approaches to food desert research. These critiques center around depictions of food insecure individuals as static actors bounded by their residential areas (Bono and Finn, 2017; MacNell et al., 2017; Zenk et al., 2011a) and simply in need of better, mainstream consumption opportunities (Shannon, 2014) and nutrition education (Alkon et al., 2013; Guthman, 2008b). In particular, scholars have begun to question the assumption that food provisioning happens primarily within areas surrounding a place of residence. Instead, several have found that individuals may bypass nearby stores in search of better prices and quality or rely on consumption opportunities within larger activity spaces that they inhabit every day (Alkon et al., 2013; Drewnowski, 2012; MacNell et al., 2017; Zenk et al., 2011a).

The further assumption that the solution lies in creating more mainstream food consumption opportunities has been critiqued by food scholars as obscuring existing resources within a community (Bedore, 2014) and paints low-income neighborhoods as “pathologized spaces” while “normalizing middle-class ‘foodscapes’” (Shannon, 2014, pg. 240). The emerging literature critiquing food deserts has similarly questioned the assumption that those living in areas of limited food access have negative health-related outcomes because they lack sufficient knowledge of food sources and nutrition (Drewnowski, 2012; Guthman, 2008a; Minkoff-Zern, 2012). Instead, these scholars point out that the focus on nutrition education precludes attending to

structural explanations such as the high cost of fresh foods (Minkoff-Zern, 2012).

These simple explanations of static, ignorant, individual food consumers and related solutions of increasing mainstream consumption opportunities belie a more complex urban food landscape. Scholars point to the role of systematic disinvestment in communities of color that leads to areas of limited food access (Alkon et al., 2013; Guthman, 2008b). Additionally, these complex foodscapes are inhabited by mobile residents with social, cultural, and economic connections to their food systems (Hammelman and Hayes-Conroy, 2015; Shannon, 2014). This research builds on these arguments by pointing to the need to consider the relational nature of food provisioning strategies. In doing so, it considers how these strategies are “forged in and through relations” (Massey, 2004, p. 5) with the built environment and other social beings.

The relational nature of food provisioning strategies can be better understood via an examination of the connectivity evident in the food landscapes navigated by food insecure urban migrants each day. Foodscapes, understood as “local everyday spaces of food and eating” (Brembeck and Johansson, 2010, p. 800), have been used in different ways by food scholars in order to better understand the socio-spatial conditions of food consumption. Building on other ‘-scape’ approaches, it includes not only economic and locational considerations of food acquisition, but also cultural and social practices that influence how and what people eat and with whom (Mikkelsen, 2011; Panelli and Tipa, 2009). Foodscapes are not discrete or fixed in space or time. Instead they reveal dynamic connections between people, places, and power (Dolphijn, 2004; Miewald and McCann, 2013). Scholars have explored ethical foodscapes (Friedberg, 2010; Goodman et al., 2010; Morgan, 2010), corporate-organic foodscapes (Johnston et al., 2009), and mental foodscapes (Biltdgård, 2009).

In this paper, an investigation into foodscapes demonstrates the ways that simplistic mainstream depictions of those facing food insecurity mask their geographies of survival and produce ineffective programmatic responses. The following attends to the socio-spatial conditions of food provisioning to highlight the relationality of these strategies that rely on social networks to enable greater mobility for obtaining healthy, affordable, and culturally appropriate foods.

3. Research setting and methods

This paper relies on data from interviews with 31 Latina migrant women living in poverty in Washington, DC, during 2014–2015. The majority of the women in this research were employed or seeking work in domestic service and were self-described as currently or previously food insecure. The women, all of which were 18+ years old, were identified primarily through snowball sampling. I engaged in purposive recruitment seeking Latinas working in domestic service and experiencing food insecurity. Given the possibly difficult subject matter, the potential reluctance of migrants to share their stories with an outsider, and the existence of a wide network of this community working in certain neighborhoods in DC, snowball recruitment was particularly effective for reaching that population. Snowball recruitment has been used extensively for accessing ‘hard to reach’ populations and providing legitimacy to the researcher when they are not an insider in that group (Browne, 2005). Via in-depth interviews and sketch mapping, these women shared their experiences of coping with food insecurity in the context of changing urban environments. The interviews included semi-structured questions about the spatiality of their food insecurity coping strategies, mobility, and social networks. They were conducted in Spanish or English at the preference of the participant. I also used sketch mapping in which participants annotated maps of their neighborhoods alongside our discussion. In particular, they marked places they obtain food and meet with contacts alongside a discussion of routes they take (and don’t take) and what things (terrain, costs, time, safety) and people support or constrain these efforts. I transcribed,

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