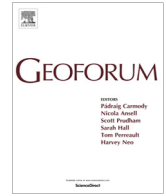




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Alternative food provision conflicts in cities: Contesting food privilege, injustice, and whiteness in Jamaica Plain, Boston



Isabelle Anguelovski

Institute for Environmental Sciences and Technology (ICTA), Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain

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ABSTRACT

Food justice studies have exposed that lower-income residents and people of color tend not to participate in alternative food initiatives. Much of this marginalization originates in the often exclusionary practices and discourses from members of the alternative food movement. In this paper, I contribute to the scholarship on urban food justice by examining how Latino residents experience, reflect on, and confront new exclusionary practices in the spaces and discourses of alternative food activism and practices in the city. Through empirical research conducted on a conflict related to the opening of a Whole Foods store replacing a Latino supermarket in Jamaica Plain, Boston, I analyze how food injustice and food privilege have been produced in a neighborhood that used to have a variety of culturally-sensitive food options. Findings highlight a loss of a large variety of Latino products and of socio-cultural practices around food for Latinos and low-income customers. Such changes have created feelings of alienation, displacement, and of becoming out-of-place in the neighborhood. Results also show the slow disappearance of affordable or community-based food options in Hyde Square, turning the neighborhood in a “food unjust” neighborhood. Last, the paper brings to light the whitened and colorblind discourse about healthy and natural food of middle-class Whole Foods’ supporters. Such positions show how environmental racism, food privilege, and whiteness can affect the relationships that a community has with its food, invisibilize its members and its cultural and social food practices, and in turn affect their place-making and their territorialization in the neighborhood.

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Introduction

Every day in Jamaica Plain, Boston, Latino customers would anxiously wait for the opening of Hi-Lo Foods, a grocery store catering products from all over Latin America. Vans of residents from elderly homes would stop in front of Hi-Lo for their weekly trip to buy camote, yucca, café, mate, or recaó, a Puerto Rican herb used for cooking a variety of dishes. Local Latinos would set up milk crates in front of the store and hang out after their shopping trips. Hi-Lo was much more than a supermarket. It was about a neighborhood, a community, and valuable place and safe haven for residents and customers. However, on January 14, 2011, the same day that Knapp Foods Inc., the owner of Hi-Lo, announced that the business would be closed, it also revealed that it would be sold to Whole Foods Inc. and converted into a Whole Foods Market. The months that ensued saw an aggressive battle build up between supporters of the new store and activists who protested the opening of a Whole Foods Market. Why did such a polarizing

conflict arise in a neighborhood praising itself for its tolerance, inclusion, and diversity?

Many food justice groups organize to ensure that lower income and minority residents are able to afford fresh food in their neighborhood. Food justice is also part of a broader social justice and environmental justice agenda with a vision that brings together food and economic development, improved nutrition and health, and community empowerment (Gottlieb and Joshi, 2010). Food justice organizations are often critical of alternative food movement activists who praise healthy, local, and organic food without considering the racial and social inequities within the existing food system and without incorporating a food justice lens in their activism (i.e., Guthman, 2008a,b).

Most recently, food has become a new actor worth of much examination in regards to gentrification processes and dynamics. In the last few years, urban conflicts have developed against projects or initiatives, such as waterfront restoration or park creation, that are presented as improving access to environmental goods while, in reality, creating or exacerbating risks of displacement and gentrification. This combined process of neighborhood greening and exclusion of vulnerable residents has been called environmental

E-mail address: Isabelle.Anguelovski@uab.cat

or ecological gentrification (Dooling, 2009; Checker 2011). However, environmental gentrification protests surface not only against municipal projects of waterfront clean-up or green space enhancement, but also against so-called healthy and natural food venues and stores in multiracial neighborhoods. Because issues related to food are more intimate (Winson, 1993) and visibilize individual choices toward basic needs, conflicts seem to be highly polarized.

In this paper, I use the conflict in Jamaica Plain to examine the production of food privilege – the exclusive access to desirable “natural” and fresh food thanks to one’s economic, cultural, and political power – and food injustice. How do food privilege and food injustice get produced with the opening of so-called alternative, organic, and sustainable food chains in multi-racial neighborhoods? In turn, how do local activists experience and confront the exclusionary discourses and practices conveyed by their defenders? Results show that the arrival of Whole Foods together with the mobilization of its enthusiasts triggered a conflict in which Latino residents and their supporters contested the slow dismantlement of a “food just” neighborhood and the colorblindness of Whole Foods supporters – many of whom committed to alternative food principles and practices and presenting themselves as defenders of social justice. The conflict illustrates new ways of conceptualizing and fighting (green) gentrification by showing how issues of food justice, whiteness, and social and “environmental privilege” – the exclusive access that some groups have to prime environmental amenities (i.e., parks, forests, etc.) and to elite green neighborhoods (Park and Pellow, 2011) – are enmeshed in gentrification processes.

Environmental gentrification and urban food justice: An emerging connection

In neighborhoods experiencing gentrification, developers, investors, and individuals from privileged backgrounds buy the devalued property of less well-off families and turn them around for new wealthier residents (Anderson, 1990; Smith, 1986). Through rent gaps (Smith, 1987), profits can be made by reinvesting in degraded and abandoned properties. Today, an increasing number of neighborhoods such as Harlem (New York) or Bronzeville (Chicago) are experiencing a “New Urban Renewal” through the revitalization of inner-city areas (Hyra, 2008). Land is being appropriated and speculated upon. In gentrifying neighborhoods, gentrifiers tend to be workers from white collar backgrounds inserted in a post-industrial, service-oriented economy (Brown-Saracino, 2013) and with a particular lifestyle and consumption associated with higher-status or alternative goods (Beauregard, 2010). Most recently, these multi-tier dynamics have come to include another variable: Neighborhood greening by public and private investors. Inequality (re)formation and gentrification are triggered by urban environmental transformations.

Recent research has exposed that a correlation exists between urban land clean-up; investment in park or open space, waterfront redevelopment, ecological design, or ecological restoration; and changes in demographic trends and property values. For instance, the clean-up of Superfund sites has been associated with up to an 18% appreciation in housing values – within 1 km of the site (Gamper-Rabindran et al., 2011). The removal of sites from the Superfund list results in an increase of 26% in mean household income, and 31% increase in share of college graduates (Gamper-Rabindran and Timmins, 2011). In other words, brownfield redevelopment does not seem to benefit people originally exposed to environmental toxins but rather well-off and educated groups who move to the neighborhood.

This process of combined greening and displacement of former residents is called ecological gentrification, that is “the implementation of an environmental planning agenda related to public green

spaces that leads to the displacement or exclusion of the most economically vulnerable human population while espousing an environmental ethic” (Dooling, 2009). Gentrification puts emphasis on the fact that new or restored environmental goods tend to be accompanied by rising property values, which in turn attracts wealthier groups, while creating greater gap with poorer neighborhoods where lower classes are forced to move because this is where they can afford to live (Gould and Lewis, 2012). In many ways, green gentrification is the flipside of what Mindy Fullilove (Fullilove, 2001), John Betancur, and Don Parson (Betancur, 2002; Parson, 1982) respectively called “Negro Removal” or “Latino Removal,” because displacement is followed by “green and white arrival.” The racial aspect of whiteness is in some ways hidden and invisibilized by the word “green.” As new high-end housing accompany greening, developers and real estate agents often point to the diversity and “authentic” black experiences of people who might move into places such as Harlem. They bank on the traditional local identity as they encourage newcomers to move in, but those same newcomers might ultimately sacrifice the sites where the local identity is best embodied.

Starting in the 1980s with the protest in Tompkins Square Park in NYC (Smith, 1996), activists have organized against processes that seem to combine greening and gentrification. Community organization seems to have accelerated and become more vocal in the 2000s. As residents fight the replacement of their community space and gardens by high-end housing and other developments, they question governmental projects that maximize exchange value while beautifying and sanitizing the city (Schmelzkopf, 2002). For instance, in Austin EJ groups such as PODER contest smart growth policies in the context of neighborhood revitalization and upgrading (Tretter, 2013). In 2006, the National Environmental Justice Advisory Council released a report pointing to the “Unintended Impacts of Redevelopment and Revitalization Efforts in Five Environmental Justice Communities,” especially issues of affordability and displacement. Today, Activists also resist the transformation of streetscapes into motors of gentrification. In Portland, OR city plans to enhance biking safety along North Williams Avenue have been met with the resistance of residents, who explain that safety seems only to have become a concern because white residents are moving to the neighborhood or riding through it (Agyeman, 2013). Traditional EJ activism suggested that residents are fixed in their neighborhood and cannot move out away from toxic industries or waste sites. On the opposite, recent EJ activism related to gentrification is about fighting displacement from one’s long-time neighborhood.

Green gentrification activism is not only about viewing green spaces or waterfront promenades promoted by sustainability plans with a concerned look. Residents are now also apprehensive about the impact of so-called healthy food stores moving into their neighborhood (often with the approval of elected officials) because they signal to developers, real estate agents, and outside residents that it is “ready” to be re-developed. Activists talk about the Whole Food Effect: When chains like Whole Foods open a store, residents claim that the company knows that the neighborhood is ripe for socio-economic changes. After store opening, policy reports have shown that real estate prices tend to increase. For example, in Portland, price premiums for homes located close to specialty grocery stores are estimated to range from 5.8% to 29.3%.¹ This is where environmental gentrification, urban food systems, and urban food justice struggles start to connect.

The right to healthy, fresh, local, and affordable food for community food security is one of the main focus points of community

¹ See: <http://www.reconnectingamerica.org/assets/Uploads/JohnsonGardner-Urban-Living-Infra-Research-Report.pdf>.

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