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Farming while confronting the other: The production and maintenance of boundaries in the borderlands

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ABSTRACT

The alternative food movement encounters many structural conditions as it strives toward more environmentally sustainable and socially just agrifood systems. One of the greatest challenges the movement faces is not turning its back on migrant farmworkers at the same time it creates and experiments with alternative agricultural models. This article explains why there is a gap between an expressed concern with the inequalities faced by migrant farmworkers and the actual advocacy practices necessary to overcome them. To help tease apart the drivers maintaining this gap, I call attention to the social and symbolic boundaries reproduced by a group of people farming organically in San Diego along the United States/Mexico border. I find that in the course of farming in the context of border politics, food activists internalize a number of structural and ideological conditions producing a racialized agricultural political economy, neoliberalism, and the security state. These include the hegemony of certain stereotypes of migrant farmworkers and inherent notions of difference, the hegemony of militarized borders and monitored immigrant bodies, and race and class privilege that manifests through idealizing nature and farming. At the same time, I find that these boundary maintenance practices are open to change, and call attention to the ambiguity expressed by well-meaning organic farming activists as well as more resistant socioecological imaginaries.

1. Introduction

San Diego is known as “America's Finest City,” replete with popular images of bronzed bodies, surfers, and palm trees. Yet, this ignores the contemporary historical geography of border politics, social inequality, and the challenges brought by social movements.[1] As Miller (2003) argues, booster mythology historically conceals the city's class and racial struggles (160). This article furthers efforts to unearth the contradictory nature of such power dynamics. I use the case of organic food activists farming on the San Diego side of the United States/Mexico border to explain how and why well-meaning people unwittingly reproduce racially stratified border spaces and an agricultural economy predicated on migrant farmworkers through boundary maintenance practices.

Many San Diego alternative food initiatives mirror calls for scaling up local sustainable food production and consumption, while simultaneously pushing out food that is deemed unsustainable (Johnston and Baker, 2005; Friedmann, 2007; Pollan, 2008). Concern is directed primarily at the ecological destruction wrought by the conventional agrifood system, with some attention paid to the social consequences of diet related problems, and even less to poor labor conditions. Therefore, advocacy aims to create shorter agrifood supply chains at local levels based on the principles of economic (e.g. few intermediaries and local money circulation), geographic (e.g. fewer food miles), and social proximity (e.g. celebrating local food cultures and identities).

Relocalization initiatives often avoid other power relations and their sociospatial expression in favor of fetishizing the local (Born and Purcell, 2006; Hinrichs, 2000), which has the effect of flattening difference and reproducing social boundaries (DuPuis and Goodman, 2005; Slocum, 2007; Guthman, 2008a; Alkon, 2012). Perhaps this is unsurprising given the alternative food movement's insistence on categorizations such as “good” and “bad” and “organic” and “industrial” food, “local” and “global”, and “family farm” and “corporate”. These binaries often go unquestioned in local alternative food initiatives. Binary analysis also leads to producing and maintaining social and symbolic boundaries, albeit usually without an explicit desire to do so (Lamont and Molnár, 2002; Jones, 2009). Because this process operates through

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[1] Then-mayor Pete Wilson coined this term in 1972.

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unreflexive language and organizational practice, as in the case of maintaining boundaries between organic farming and migrant farmworker justice, there is little to no questioning of the structural conditions producing boundaries to begin with.

I use a case in San Diego's borderlands[2] to explain how activists maintain boundaries that perpetuate racial inequality and farmworker exploitation in the process of pursuing food system change goals. To draw out how boundaries are central to contradictions within the alternative food movement I highlight historical and contemporary examples of race relations in the San Diego/Tijuana region, and the perceptions and struggles of food activists to advocate on behalf of migrant farmworkers. Such an undertaking expands a growing body of literature into the contradictions and unintended consequences of alternative food movement activism (McClintock, 2013; Sbicca, 2014) by enriching scholarship on activist privilege and racialized representations of migrant farmworkers (Slocum, 2007; Guthman, 2008a; Nelson, 2008; Maldonado, 2009; Alkon, 2012; Harrison and Lloyd, 2013; Holmes, 2013).

I argue that boundary maintenance practices emerge due to an internalization of the structural and ideological conditions of a racialized agricultural political economy, neoliberalism, and the security state, which perpetuates a lack of attention to and limits farmworker advocacy. At the outset, I explain the social boundaries produced by the current agricultural political economy and immigration regime. The article then proceeds thematically by illustrating different forms of boundary maintenance. When taken together, these forms explain how racial inequality is reproduced in San Diego's borderlands, as well as the challenges food activists face advocating for farmworkers. Activists maintain boundaries by internalizing 1) the hegemony of certain stereotypes of difference in a racialized agricultural political economy; 2) the hegemony of militarized borders and monitored immigrant bodies; and 3) race and class privilege through idealizing nature and farming. Yet, I offer cautiously hopeful signs for change at the end of the article, as all hegemonies are subject to fissure and transformation. This is evidenced by some pockets of resistance and alternative imaginaries that push against the reproduction of inequalities in the borderlands.

2. Boundary production and maintenance and the alternative food movement

When many alternative food activists and organizations attend to racial inequality it is often viewed as less important than growing, distributing, and consuming more sustainable food. Although food justice activists push the alternative food movement to address historical trauma and institutionalized racism experienced by indigenous groups and people of color (Alkon and Norgaard, 2009; Sbicca, 2012), organizational commitment and programming is sporadic (Giménez and Shattuck, 2011). While the racialization of farmworkers takes place on conventional farms by employers, white neighbors, and even labor unions (Mitchell, 1996; Maldonado, 2009; Harrison and Lloyd, 2013), this can also arise on organic and small family farms (Holmes, 2013; Gray, 2014). At the same time, there is evidence that some activists ignore or view as irrelevant local racial and ethnic history in the formation of alternative food systems and spaces (Slocum, 2007; Guthman, 2008a; Alkon and Agyeman, 2011).

[2] My notion of borderlands is taken from Gupta and Ferguson (1992): "The term does not indicate a fixed topographical site between two other fixed locales (nations, societies, cultures), but an interstitial zone of displacement and deterritorialization that shapes the identity of the hybridized subject" (18).

Following a recent article by Harrison and Lloyd (2013) in which they seek to explain why dairy employers engage in practices that lead to unequal outcomes in the workplace for migrant dairy workers, I employ Lamont's (2000) relational approach to understanding boundary production and maintenance. Social boundaries are maintained not only by what someone says about someone else, but by how someone understands themselves in relation to that other. This process does not take place in a social vacuum. To explain, then, why well-meaning food activists fail to address racial inequality and migrant farmworker exploitation, even when it is highly visible, requires buffering this relational approach with attention to the internalization of power relations.

Gramsci's (1971) notion of hegemony reminds us that different class interests, such as large-scale growers, political elites, and whites, can join in coercing or winning the consent of large segments of the public to its cultural, economic, or political agenda. As a result, rationalizations of social boundaries spread through official channels like the media or informally around the dinner table, which become internalized as common sense (e.g. migrant labor should be cheap), even by those who in other sectors of life disagree with such interests (e.g. over biotechnology) (Hall, 1986). Yet, like all hegemonies, the hegemony of various racial formations and forms of racial rule is "tentative, incomplete, and "messy"", and thus open to change (Omi and Winant, 1994: 68).

The production and maintenance of boundaries does not simply result from lack of attention to race, but from the possessive investment in whiteness as a historical reality and racial formation (Allen, 1997; Roediger, 1999; Lipsitz, 2006). In this way, white privilege has an agentic force that not only benefits whites as the "normal" race, but is embedded in a system of white supremacy that marks other races as different and inferior. Relatedly, with a growing awareness of, and institutionalized commitment to diversity, people of color become the "other", that is those whose race is marked, for whom race relations matter, and who whites need to learn to engage competently (Pease, 2010). In short, socially stratified spaces can be maintained when the language and categories used to racialize others reflect the interests of dominant groups, which in practice provide symbolic weight to social inequality.

One way whiteness operates in the AFM is through the act of "doing good," namely producing spaces such as farmers markets, organic grocery stores, and nutrition education classes predicated on health (Slocum, 2007). While the alternatives constitutive of "white food space" are not inherently oppressive, they operate in ways that challenge building greater solidarity with migrant and foreign-born farmworkers faced with exploitative labor conditions. A "white farm imaginary" can serve to normalize such conditions for farmers market shoppers who see white vendors, but not low-paid Latino/a farmworkers (Alkon and McCullen, 2011). A language of "if they only knew" helps maintain these boundaries, which is often used by farmers market and community supported agriculture (CSA) managers to explain why people of color participate less than whites (Guthman, 2008a). Such tropes offer colorblind universal explanations for structural inequalities, and they limit the politics of the possible by ignoring the need to challenge white supremacy.

There are additional, and usually intersecting structural forces that influence the formation of boundaries by activists in their quest to create alternative agrifood systems, namely political and economic forces. For instance, racialization processes within agriculture historically serve to further capital accumulation and colonial projects (Henderson, 1998; Ngai, 2004). Food activists' language and practices, then, reveal more than how social boundaries along the lines of race, ethnicity, and nationality are maintained within the alternative food movement. Racialized language and ideologies also expose the power of political and economic