



# Whiteness and Farmers Markets: Performances, Perpetuations . . . Contestations?

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**Abstract:** Academics and activists highlight the potential for alternative agrifood movements to contribute to the evolving coalescence of justice and sustainability. This potential, however, is constrained by what scholars have identified as the prevalent whiteness of such movements. This paper uses ethnographic research at two northern California farmers markets to investigate how whiteness is performed and perpetuated through the movements' discourses and practices. We found that many managers, vendors and customers hold notions of what farmers and community members should be that both reflect and inform an affluent, liberal habitus of whiteness. Although whiteness pervades these spaces, we have also witnessed individual discourses and acts of solidarity and anti-racism, as well as fledgling institutional efforts to contest white cultural dominance. We conclude by discussing the potential of farmers markets to create an anti-racist politics of food.

**Keywords:** alternative agrifood movement, environmental justice, farmers markets, imaginary, sustainability, whiteness

## Introduction

Academics and activists have struggled to conceptualize and create what Julian Agyeman (2005) has productively termed "just sustainability". In the context of increasing environmental degradation and growing disparities in wealth, this concept, which emphasizes both the sustainable use of resources and the just distribution of environmental risks and benefits, becomes increasingly important. Just sustainability is reflected not only in a flurry of recent scholarly activity on the intersections of environment with race (see, for example, Pellow 2002; Pulido 1996; Sze 2006), class (Gould, Lewis and Timmons Roberts 2004; Obach 2004), and social justice (Gottlieb 2001; Pinderhughes

2007), but in activist campaigns to ensure that green economic growth will create benefits for racially and economically marginalized people (Jones 2008).

Several of these works look to alternative agrifood systems—an umbrella term encompassing a range of organic, local and fair trade imperatives—as a potential engine of just sustainability (Agyeman and Evans 2004; Gottlieb 2001; Pinderhughes 2003). While US environmentalism has historically been dominated by efforts to preserve landscapes and species threatened by humans (Cronon 1995; Gottlieb 2001), both alternative agrifood movements and the environmental justice efforts of low-income communities of color stress the connection between humans and nature (DiChiro 1996; Taylor 2000). One great claim of alternative agrifood movements is that **defetishizing food—that is, revealing the social and environmental relationships that make its production and distribution possible**—will animate both consumer and political demands for ecologically sustainable and socially just food production. For this reason, alternative agrifood systems may have an important role to play in the formation of just sustainability.

As the most prevalent and public institution within alternative agrifood systems, farmers markets<sup>1</sup> provide an important standpoint from which to examine the everyday discourses and practices that fulfill the movement's vision. The number of farmers markets in the USA has grown exponentially in the past few decades; they exist in all 50 states and most major cities host numerous markets throughout the week (US Department of Agriculture 2006).

Despite their noted potential to create just sustainability, scholars have argued that farmers markets, and the alternative agrifood movement more generally, contain whitened discourses and practices (Guthman 2008a, 2008b; Slocum 2007)<sup>2</sup>. This whiteness refers not only to the clustering of pale bodies in farmers markets and other movement spaces (Saldanha 2006; Slocum 2007, 2008), but also suggests that such spaces are shaped by a set of white cultural practices (Frankenberg 1993; Guthman 2008a, 2008b; Kobayashi and Peake 2000). This whiteness can inhibit the participation of people of color in alternative food systems, and can constrain the ability of those food systems to meaningfully address inequality. Thus, such whiteness may prevent alternative food movements, despite their growing popularity, from contributing to a just sustainability that can transform existing social, material and ecological relations.

In this paper, we seek to illuminate the discourses and practices through which whiteness becomes ingrained in two northern California farmers markets that resonate closely with the alternative agrifood movement. Our research revealed two imaginaries—sets of values and symbols that shape the discourses and practices of a social group. **In what we call the white farm imaginary, market participants valorize**

the predominantly white vendors who “grow their food”, rendering invisible the low-paid, predominantly Latino/a workers who do the bulk of the cultivation. Customers draw upon the complimentary community imaginary to depict themselves, as well as their friends and neighbors, as ethically motivated supporters of struggling family farmers. Many managers, vendors and customers unwittingly draw upon the community imaginary to justify or obscure the structural barriers that prevent the participation of low-income people and people of color. As we will demonstrate below, both narratives not only reveal white cultural dominance, but a particularly patterned set of thoughts, behaviors and tastes that we refer to as an affluent, liberal habitus of whiteness.<sup>3</sup> Our findings suggest that the dispositions and skills that allow an individual to feel politically empowered by the buying and selling of local organic food, as well as socially accepted as part of the farmers market community, reflect this intersection of race, class and political orientation. Thus, farmers markets such as our cases become inclusive, empowering spaces for a form of food politics that reflects liberal, affluent, white identities and positionalities.

However, in addition to this pervasive affluent whiteness, we have also observed statements and acts of solidarity and anti-racism. These discourses and practices exist alongside, rather than in direct opposition to, the narratives described above. By attending to both constructions and contestations of affluent whiteness, our empathetic critique synthesizes Slocum’s (2007:522) dictate to follow existing strategies and see where they go and Guthman’s desire to push the movement in a more emancipatory direction. Thus we are neither completely dismissive nor completely laudatory of farmers markets’ abilities to contribute to just sustainability, but recognize that any potential contribution requires that market participants recognize and confront the liberal, elite whiteness that pervades their discourses and practices.

### **Conceptualizing Whiteness in Alternative Agriculture**

Until recently, most academic literature about alternative agrifood movements echoed proponents’ sentiments and validated its leaders’ assertions (Lyson 2004; Kloppenburg, Hendrickson and Stevenson 1996). These scholars, as well as numerous popular writers (Berry 2002; McKibben 2007; Pollan 2006), praise the politically transformative potential of alternative foods and of sustained relationships between producers and consumers. Key to their argument is the notion of defetishization. Conventional agriculture, they argue, hides the socially and environmentally harmful processes through which food is produced. Accordingly, lifting the veil on those processes, or, in the cliché adopted by alternative agrifood movement participants, “knowing where your food comes from”, will improve those social and ecological relations. This logic resonates with studies concluding that connecting producers

and consumers can shape more ethical relations (Gilbert 1988; Hartwick 2000). Somewhat conversely, but motivated by similar aims, some scholars of Fair Trade efforts argue that by embracing the fetishized ideal of warm relations between producers and consumers, actors can reimagine and begin to build a socially just and ecologically sustainable network of food distribution (Goodman 2004; Hughes 2005). In this paper, we discuss the promises and pitfalls of both defetishizing and refetishizing food production in farmers markets.

Beyond debates of fetishism, some scholars critique alternative agrifood systems for their exclusivity and lack of wide-scale impact. Several have argued that in order to create a just and sustainable society, alternative agriculture movements must challenge conventional agriculture rather than merely provide alternative niches (Allen 2004; Buttel 1997; Magdoff, Foster and Buttel 2000). Alternative markets, these authors argue, reinforce the neoliberal prescription to address social problems through market-exchange relations (Guthman 2008c), and allow affluent consumers to substitute individual purchasing decisions for sustained collective action (Szasz 2007).

One vein of critical agrifood scholarship argues that the movement's ability to create political transformation is hampered by its complicity with whiteness. Whites comprise the overwhelming majority of California's organic farmers (Allen 2004), and tend to dominate farmers markets (Payne 2002) and community supported agriculture programs (Hinrichs 2000). Using Saldanha's (2006) idea of viscosity, Slocum (2007) claims that when white bodies cluster around property and privilege, as happens in farmers markets, they can code these spaces as white, creating what Kobayashi and Peake (2000) term a "racialized space". This runs contrary to the popular belief among farmers market managers that markets are culturally neutral.

The whiteness we observe at farmer markets is about more than just the presence of pale-skinned bodies. According to Ruth Frankenberg's foundational work, whiteness "carries with it a set of ways of being in the world, a set of cultural practices often not named as 'white' by white folks, but looked upon instead as 'American' or 'normal'" (Frankenberg 1993:4). However, building on Nayak's (2006) critique of Frankenberg's writing, we conceptualize whiteness not as a consistent, essentialized identity, but as existing in multiple forms. The whiteness we see in our cases is not the working class performances of "god, guns and country" that fill the rhetoric of the GOP. Indeed, we suspect that this kind of white, conservative, working class<sup>4</sup> discourse may cohere with conventional agribusiness.<sup>5</sup> Nor is what we observed the whiteness of elite country clubs that deliberately attempt to maintain the formal or informal exclusion of non-whites.

On the contrary, the farmers markets we studied reflect an affluent, liberal habitus of whiteness. This whiteness is affluent in that it requires

comfort with expensive products such as gourmet foods and politically liberal in its regard for environmental concerns and cultural diversity. Through this habitus, and the social practices that follow from it, those we studied signaled their privileged social locations and beliefs to one another. In these farmers markets, affluence and liberal political orientation shape whiteness, but whiteness is not reducible to class or politics. The imaginaries we analyze below reveal a particularly affluent, liberal variant of whiteness. Thus, our research suggests that it is not only oppressions, but also privileges that merit an intersectional (Collins 1990) approach that views race as constructed through class and vice versa.<sup>6</sup> Such an approach reflects the complex, multi-dimensional, mutually constructed and irreducible social locations that shape subjectivities and practices. We argue that an intersectional analysis of affluent, liberal whiteness in farmers markets can contribute to an understanding of why participants tend to defetishize how food is produced but not who produces it.

To unpack the racialized and class-inflected narratives at play in farmers markets is to extend the alternative agriculture movement's strategic rupturing of the veil of commodity fetishism to include the systemic inequalities on which both conventional and alternative agriculture depend (Cook, Crang and Thorpe 2004). Our observations reveal fledgling and partial attempts by market managers, vendors and customers to do just that. Currently, these attempts are primarily discursive, representing a desire to re-imagine the politics of food in explicitly anti-racist and anti-classist ways.

The farmers markets we study are generally characterized by an affluent, liberal habitus of whiteness. Recognizing this, some market managers, vendors and customers have begun to attempt to discursively disrupt some inequalities. However, as many scholars before us have noted, the ultimate goal of these discursive disruptions—the transformation of material realities—requires that the alternative agriculture movement go beyond the politics of consumption to sustained collective action. **As public spaces in which political activity is already present, farmers markets have the potential to act as entry points for more progressive, politicized social movement activity.** Acknowledging the way that affluent, liberal whiteness shapes farmers markets, as well as the structural racial and economic inequalities embedded in the food system, can ensure that this collective action is aimed at justice as well as sustainability.

## Research Approach

Initially, each author approached her research site with a broad interest in social justice, but no preformulated idea as to how race and class would manifest, as is consistent with Glaser and Strauss' (1967)

grounded theory. In other words, we did not set out to study whiteness, but our analyses emerged from a research process stressing detailed observations. Additionally, we conceived of and conducted each of these projects independently. We were later introduced by a common committee member, and began to share insights. Only then did the idea of a comparative paper develop.

We spent 18 months as participant observers (the first author in Berkeley and the second author in Davis). In this capacity, we took on the roles of customers, volunteers and occasional vendors. Our observations allowed us to witness and analyze some of the interactions that comprise farmers markets. More specifically, we listened to the everyday discourses through which buyers and sellers linked the practice of food commerce to ethical goals including environmental sustainability, community building and social justice. During and after these observations, we took copious notes, which we later expanded.

In addition, each researcher conducted in-depth interviews with customers, vendors, market managers, and “tourists” (people who go to the market but do not shop). The first author conducted 18 interviews and the second author conducted 13.<sup>7</sup> All interviews were recorded and later transcribed. During our interviews, we asked those we interviewed to discuss the larger social, economic, ethical and political meanings they assign to farmers markets. In other words, we were interested in the understandings of social life that would lead participants to buy, sell and work at a farmers market. The first author also conducted a survey of 100 market customers, using a sample of convenience.<sup>8</sup> This survey provided not only demographic information but also data on the values and priorities of a larger swath of market patrons. The second author gleaned demographic information through repeated racial point counts.<sup>9</sup>

Both authors then scrutinized our notes and interview transcripts, and began to code them. This search for patterns from within a wealth of available data allows the observations and interviews to give rise to the analysis, and minimizes the risk of researchers merely replicating their own perspectives (Glaser and Strauss 1967). This grounded theory approach is particularly appropriate to our research because of our own positionality within the alternative agrifood movement, in which we’ve both been active for many years.

Within the movement, we have played a variety of roles, including farmers market customers, vendors, gardeners, farm apprentices, local food system analysts and cooks. Each of us has been moved by the aesthetics of alternative agriculture and inspired by its political potential. However, we are also among those movement participants who believe that more needs to be done to attend to issues of social justice. Farmers markets are spaces in which we see friends and feel included in the communities in which we live. Nonetheless, we are disturbed by our belief that these pleasures are, at least in part, tied to our own light

skins and middle-class upbringings. This paper combines rigorous research methodology with the insights of insiders in order to explore the ways that whiteness manifests and is contested in alternative agrifood systems.

## Case Description

We have focused on the following two cases, not because they are representative of farmers markets nationwide, but because they closely resemble the imperatives and poetics of the alternative agrifood movement, and because of their relative influence. Indeed, both markets have won numerous awards, and market managers share their successes at conferences around the country. As we will describe below, our cases emphasize ecological production and community building to a greater extent than other area markets. Moreover, this kind of market is not specific to California, but can be found in other affluent, highly educated areas including Ann Arbor (Michigan), Madison (Wisconsin), or the Union Square market in Manhattan. The type of farmers market our cases represent are those that are most explicitly concerned with justice and sustainability.

### *Davis*

The Davis Farmers Market occurs every Wednesday and Saturday within the lush green landscape of Davis's Central Park. At 32 years old, it is one of the longest-running farmers markets in the country. The Davis Farmers Market is an important part of the city's identity. Indeed, the city's homepage depicts the farmers market.

Under a towering green pavilion built for the purpose of this popular market, rest the stands of dozens of organic and conventional produce and other farm product vendors. Each end of the pavilion hosts additional activity; the north end is populated by political groups and non-profit organizations, while the south side features a handful of hot food vendors. While vendors come from throughout the state, the farmers market gives priority to local farmers and businesspeople. Much of the market's produce comes from the nearby Capay Valley and surrounding counties, while the prepared foods are provided largely by vendors located in and around Davis.

People of all ages pack the pavilion, moving in all directions, stopping to shop at stands, taking advantage of a free sample, or talking with a run-in acquaintance. In the backdrop of all this hustle and bustle, kids play on playgrounds and water fountains and adults relax and chat in the expansive green field adjacent to the market. While Davis is often described as a college town, farmers market customers consist primarily of families and older permanent residents. White and Asian American

participants closely represent the town's respective demographics (70% and 18% respectively) (US Census Bureau nd), while Latino and African-American participants are underrepresented. According to the latest census counts which sum up both student and permanent resident populations, Davis' Latino population constitutes 9.6% of the total and African-Americans are 2.3% of the total (US Census Bureau nd). At the market, these populations made up 4% and 1.5% respectively.

### *North Berkeley*

Every Thursday evening, a busy North Berkeley street is blocked off by about 20 tent stalls. A festive spectacle as well as a commercial venue, tables are artfully arranged with rainbows of brightly colored produce, bread, fish and sweets. At either end, individuals circulating petitions stand ready to engage customers as they enter and exit the market. As in Davis, customers stroll from one artfully decorated booth to the next, sampling seasonal fruits. Many patrons, especially those with young children, gather along the grassy, tree-lined median to savor their purchases. The Ecology Center, which manages the North Berkeley Farmers Market, mandates that all produce sold there be exclusively organic and that prepared foods be at least 80% organic. In addition, all but one vendor—a date farmer from southern California—come from within 150 miles of the city.

Located in an area nicknamed the “gourmet ghetto” for its high concentration of elite eateries, this market serves Berkeley's most affluent and predominantly white neighborhood. Indeed, the median home value, largely unaffected by the current economic upheaval, was \$700,000. The first author's survey results revealed that market patrons are 78% white, 48% have at least a bachelors degree and 31% earn more than \$100,000 per year. Local food luminaries such as *NY Times* food writer Michael Pollan and celebrity chef Alice Waters have been spotted wandering through the market's booths. Waters, whose Chez Panisse Restaurant lies just a few hundred yards from the market's entrance, was among the first gourmet chefs to insist on locally grown organic ingredients. Chez Panisse, and North Berkeley in general, can be described as a site at which organic food was transformed from health food for hippies to gourmet food for elites. Both the counterculture associated with Berkeley in the 1960s and the upscale nature of the neighborhood today play important roles in associating the market with whiteness.

## **Performances of Whiteness**

### *Production: The White Farm Imaginary*

For many customers in the farmers markets we study, the markets are more than just a place to procure food. **Customers are motivated to shop**

at farmers markets by ethical imperatives to “support your local farmer” or “buy directly from the people who grow our food”. Such phrases are common not only in the everyday conversations of market shoppers, but in the work of food writers and celebrity chefs that has made alternative agriculture so increasingly popular. In this section, we argue that these common slogans produce what we call a white farm imaginary. This imagery romanticizes and universalizes an agrarian narrative specific to whites while masking the contributions and struggles of people of color in food production (see also Sackman 2005).

The white farm imaginary holds the small-scale, yeoman farmer as an American agricultural icon. Only whites, however, were historically able to farm in this way<sup>10</sup>. This imaginary ignores the justification of Native American displacement by white homesteaders, the enslavement of African-Americans, the masses of underpaid Asian immigrants who worked California’s first factory farms, and the mostly Mexican farm laborers who harvest the majority of food grown in the USA today (Allen 2004; Guthman 2008b). Therefore, it is quite possible that the romantic notions of yeoman farmers and rural culture do not resonate with many people of color whose collective history recalls the racism and classism of America’s agricultural past and present. Indeed, Mitchell (1996) clearly demonstrates that agribusiness has exploited migrant farm workers while rendering their struggles invisible throughout California’s agricultural history. This romanticizing of agriculture, we argue, is one reason that whites are disproportionately drawn to farmers markets that espouse the alternative agriculture movement’s discourse.

We witnessed this valorization of small farmers constantly throughout our fieldwork. Farmers were valorized as necessary components of the community, as stewards of the land, and as keepers of traditional knowledges, such as seed saving. Most often, farmers were revered for their hard work. One afternoon in North Berkeley, for example, the first author overheard the following exchange between a farmer and customer. The customer had picked out three heads of baby gem lettuce from among the farmers’ brightly colored choices.

“That’s two,” said the farmer, about to give him a price.

“No, three,” replied the customer.

“Best policy,” the farmer said with a smile.

“No sense gypping you,” exclaimed the customer.<sup>11</sup> “You guys are like the hardest workers. *No one works harder than farmers*” (emphasis ours).

A similar example from Davis also valorizes hardworking farmers. One customer claimed that she bikes 20 minutes to the farmers market, even in the winter’s pouring rain. When the second author asked why, the customer answered, “Oh gosh they made the effort to pick this food, I need to go buy it from them. It must have been miserable for them to

stand there and sell it when it's so cold." By asserting the difficulties of farming and vending, these customers contribute to the imperative to support small farm owners through the public performance of local, organic food purchasing.

Customers attend farmers markets not only to financially support farmers, but to defetishize their relationship to food by establishing personal connections with, in their own words, "the people who grow our food". One regular customer in North Berkeley said that she "comes to the market because food is so important in my life and I want to touch the hand of people who grew it". **At the farmers markets we study, those hands tend to belong to white farm owners and their white non-farmworker employees. Latino/a farmworkers seldom sell at these farmers markets, even though they greatly contribute to the growth of the food sold there.** Indeed, despite consumers' assumptions to the contrary, many market farms rely heavily on non-family labor.

Because the ideology of farmers markets names them as places where customers buy directly from growers, the color of faces customers see at the market influences who they believe grows the food they buy, and in the case of our markets, confirms the customers' notion that sustainable agriculture is done by white family farmers. Indeed, patrons at each market have often conveyed their mistaken beliefs that market farms do not employ non-family labor. In the second author's experience as a vendor, customers frequently assume that she is either the farmer or a farm family member. For example, one customer asked the second author if she was the sister or daughter of the other vendor (another white non-farmworker employee who bore no resemblance to the second author). Other white, non-farmer vendors in Davis have experienced a similar mistaken identity as a farmer or farm family member. Discovery of the vendor's non-grower identity usually happens when a customer inquires about conditions on the farm or a particular variety and the vendor is unable to answer. When customers discovered this vendor-grower mismatch, they tended to look surprised and sometimes disappointed. Their disappointment reflects the reverence attributed to market farmers, who, because of the history of Californian agriculture (Mitchell 1996), are disproportionately white.

Even when customers do meet farm owners, they are far from actually knowing the people who grow their food. In this way, the white farm imaginary facilitates a partial defetishization drawn by racial lines and refetishizes sustainable agricultural production by painting a whitened picture of who grows food. The abundance of white farmer-farm operators and their white non-farmworker employees at farmers markets suggests an image of a white family farmer as the subject of sustainable agricultural production and fails to paint a more accurate racial portrayal of those who grow our food. Moreover, by rendering farmworkers

invisible, the white farm imaginary precludes the alternative agrifoods movement from envisioning or advocating for more equitable farm labor relations.

By focusing on and heroicizing farm owners, rather than farmworkers, the alternative agriculture movement emphasizes and valorizes the role of whites in the food system rather than people of color. The invisibility of farmworkers within the prominent alternative agriculture discourse prevents the movement from addressing structural forces that shape agricultural possibilities. For example, the white farm imaginary leads those seeking food system reform to assume that market farmers hire only relatives, making regulation of employment practices seem unnecessary.

### *Consumption: The Community Imaginary*

Another reason to support farmers markets, according to the published poetics of alternative agriculture as well as those we observed, is to “build community” with both growers and eaters. This narrative depicts farmers markets as places where customers meet neighbors and share interests in food and farming, creating a sense of togetherness that many believe is antithetical to urban anonymity.<sup>12</sup> Scholars have argued that this valorization of community (Slocum 2007) and locality (DuPuis and Goodman 2005) may embody whiteness and reproduce privilege. The assumption that positive norms of community overlap with shared space, Slocum argues, may elide the ways one’s race, class, or gender influence belonging or allegiance to a specific locality or community. Ignoring these subjective experiences while assuming natural shared interests of physical neighbors risks conflating social and spatial relations (Hinrichs 2000) by failing to address race and class divisions that exist within place-based communities (Slocum 2006). In the following section, we explore ways that whiteness is embedded in farmers markets’ discourses and practices of community. Because customers in our market sites assume the market community to be proxy for the surrounding city community, the market creates a community imaginary where the subjects are white, affluent and happy with food system alternatives, and potentially blinded from seeing food system problems experienced by others.

In Davis, market patrons consistently define the farmers market as a symbol of community and families. Indeed, they describe the market as a place where the Davis community’s identity forms. Market managers’ choices in music and special events, many of which are focused on children, serve to create this ambiance. Below, one patron describes the market community:

In a place like Davis you’d expect everybody to be college students and doing this sorta thing. It’s interesting to find how many older people are

here or in the market. It's really cool 'cause it feels more community than college-based. It's kind of a weird answer but, it really feels more like a community than a bunch of college students selling, ya know, co-op stuff.

This quote exemplifies a general sentiment that other interviews showed as well. In fact, several interviewees explicitly defined the Davis community as permanent residents and not students. One 10-year resident of Davis told the second author that she likes its college town atmosphere, yet she differentiates the students from “folks, the real people who live in—mostly live in Davis”.

Students, however, comprise half of the town's Latino/a and African-American residents and 95% of its Asian Americans. Therefore, to say that the Davis farmers market community is about families (rather than students) is to say that it is about whites and not people of color. **By equating the Davis Farmers Market community only with the town's predominantly white permanent residents, farmers market customers symbolically deny many people of color a place in the Davis community.** Moreover, regarding Davis' community identity as cohering around the leisurely consumerism of the farmers market suggests that such **whiteness is inseparable from affluence.**

Farmers market participants further construct their community as white by asserting that farmers market demographics are representative of the town. When the second author asked customers about the lack of racial diversity at the farmers market, many replied that, “Davis is pretty white”. When she revealed the town's actual populations (according to the 2000 Census) of Latinos (6170) and African-Americans (1500), most of her interviewees were surprised; they expected these numbers to be much lower. One interviewee even disagreed with the census data, saying “I don't think there's 900 African Americans in Davis”. By constructing a Davis community that does not include students, farmers market customers fail to see the racial diversity that does exist in their town, therefore normalizing the whiteness of the farmers market. Additionally, while the “town-gown” divide of most college communities indicates an affluent university in a working-class town, both authors' experiences living and working in Davis reveal that the townspeople, many of whom are university employees, are much more affluent than the racially diverse student body.

In North Berkeley, community is often understood and expressed in terms of a wider countercultural scene that is dominated by whites.<sup>13</sup> One regular customer described the community as “hungry people . . . and also the soil, the air, the land” necessary to produce the food. This response resonates with both the counterculture that made Berkeley famous, and the alternative agriculture movement's tenet that local food can help humans reconnect to the natural world (Alkon 2008).<sup>14</sup>

Participation in the wider countercultural scene often creates social connections between managers, vendors and customers. These individuals have often visited the same places, eaten at the same (generally expensive) restaurants, volunteered for the same (generally progressive) organizations and are constantly discovering common friends and acquaintances. The first author has overheard discussions between vendors and customers who have run into each other hiking, or who recognize the places and events depicted on one another's t-shirts and canvas shopping bags. This 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.

Perhaps the most pervasive example of white affluent culture in this farmers market is the emphasis on gourmet food. While North Berkeley can lay particular claim to the association between local/organic and haute cuisine, this theme is common to many farmers markets. The North Berkeley Farmers Market emphasizes gourmet food through a special event called *Shopping with the Chef*, in which a local chef leads market patrons around the various farm stands, discussing both varieties of produce as well as his/her relationship with the farm owners. Many of the chefs who have participated in this event have also authored cookbooks. Additionally, Chez Panisse founder Alice Waters was one of the featured speakers at the market's 30th anniversary celebration.

Like many farmers markets, North Berkeley is informally associated with Slow Foods International, which, according to its website, aims "to counteract fast food and fast life, the disappearance of local food traditions and people's dwindling interest in the food they eat". During her observations, the first author often heard one regular customer telling farmers of her plans to attend the organization's annual conference in Italy. Two farm owners attended as well. The following year, many more attended the Slow Food Nation gathering in San Francisco.

Both Slow Food and Chez Panisse tend to romanticize a European rural imaginary populated by artisanal producers. Indeed, in her keynote address to market farmers, as well as patrons who had paid \$125 to attend the market's anniversary gala, Waters compared the Berkeley Farmers Market to the street markets in Provence that initially inspired her California-French Cuisine. Similarly, Marie Sarita Gaytán's (2004) study of northern Californian Slow Food *convivia* found that the group puts rural European food culture on a pedestal, rendering it discursively exclusive to people of color and the urban working class. In their allusions to European culinary and agricultural superiority, these institutions serve to strengthen the notion that alternative agriculture and food, both generally and in North Berkeley, is the province of whites.

Lastly, organic food at the North Berkeley Farmers Market is, on the whole, more expensive than similar goods purchased nearby, and

certainly more expensive than the processed foods that line the center aisles of grocery stores (Pollan 2006). Given the strong correlation that exists between race and income, high cost reinforces the market's whiteness.

Rather than acknowledge that high cost makes farmers market patronage an impossibility for many low-income people, market participants tend to cast food purchasing decisions as a matter of individual choice. "We need to rethink the percentage of our budget that we spend on food", said one market vendor, evidencing this perspective. "Only when people are willing to pay for it will our relationship with the land become more sustainable". Similarly, Slow Food's mission, which works against "people's dwindling interest" in food, renders invisible the experiences of those who make food decisions based primarily on need. The market's high prices make it more likely that whites, who tend to be more affluent, will shop there. By positing farmers market shopping as an ethical imperative, yet not acknowledging the class exclusivity of this practice, farmers market participants reinforce what Wacquant (2007) calls the "moral inferiority of the poor" and by extension, the moral superiority of affluent whites. Furthermore, this logic ignores the reality that the poor, especially the urban poor, already spend a greater percentage of their income on food than the suburban middle class does (Caplovitz 1967; Kaufman et al 1997). In this way, market participants' refusal to acknowledge the possibility of price constraints evidences a worldview in which affluent whiteness has been universalized, rather than understood as a particular social location.

In sum, there are a number of ways that we see whiteness working in these farmers markets. Some are found in the alternative agrifood movement's wider philosophy. These include the romantic imagery surrounding small farmers as well as the imperative to buy directly from them. The former ignores the role of race in the history of American agriculture while the latter leads us to believe that the whites we see selling at the farmers market, rather than their mostly Latino/a employees, are those who presently grow our food. Farmers markets such as those we study emphasize the importance of building community, but are often unaware that they define community in a way that draws in whites while pushing away people of color. Discourses that romanticize the European countryside paint alternative agriculture as a white practice while casting food choice as a moral, rather than economic, decision normalizes affluence. While the imaginaries that we describe here refetishize and reimagine a food system that grants farm owners a better wage, they do not radically reimagine labor dynamics or food accessibility and affordability. By turning a blind eye to the social structures that create racial and class inequality, farmers market participants reify the affluent white imaginaries

described above, constraining their abilities to contribute to just sustainability.

## Contesting Whiteness

As we have established in the previous section, whiteness pervades both the Davis and North Berkeley farmers markets. However, many individuals who work and shop at farmers markets are taking small discursive actions towards dismantling the influence of whiteness on alternative agrifood systems.

In each market, the white farm imaginary—the myth that those growing market produce are white family farmers—is disrupted in a number of ways. Although they are underrepresented, some non-white farmers and farmworkers are present in each market. In addition, each market has recently added an organic farm owned and operated by people of color (making a total of three in Davis and four in Berkeley).<sup>15</sup> In North Berkeley, two of the farmers market managers and three non-farming vendors<sup>16</sup> also identify as people of color. While we agree with previous research claiming that the presence of people of color does not necessarily disrupt whiteness (Guthman 2008b), we also believe that this diversity of bodies encourages market shoppers to recognize that people of color play important roles in alternative agrifood systems. Furthermore, one Davis organic farm posts a large photograph of their “family” farm depicting all of its employees. In this photo, Latino/a farmworkers outnumber family members two to one, painting a more racially and economically accurate image of small-scale organic farms.

The presence of farmers of color allows for the telling of more culturally specific agrarian stories than the universalist narratives we deconstructed in the previous section. For example, during her *Shopping with the Chef* presentation, a white, female chef paused at one farm stand. There she offered descriptions of the produce interwoven with stories of the Native American farmer’s childhood. As someone whose parents migrated seasonally in search of farm labor, this farmer’s story is quite different from those of the white market farmers, many of whom came from middle class backgrounds, and were drawn to farming through their participation in the counterculture. By telling this particular farmer’s history, the chef contests the pervasiveness of whiteness in alternative agrifood systems.

Farmers of color can also fulfill the culturally specific foodways of particular customers. For example, one Chinese American Davis customer revealed that she goes to the market in part to buy produce from the Hmong vendors there because they grow varieties of greens that she likes to eat. If that farmer did not attend the Davis Farmers Market, the customer told the second, she would have to drive half an

hour to get the same produce. The Davis farmers market allows this woman to more conveniently eat in what she considers to be culturally appropriate ways.

Another way that farmers market participants contest the pervasive whiteness of alternative agriculture systems is by beginning to notice that it exists. These vendors, managers and customers are, to paraphrase George Lipsitz, beginning to speak the name of whiteness in a variety of ways (1998:61). In Davis, white customers have noted that their farmers market's special events include a Christmas celebration, but no festivities for Dia de los Muertos or Chinese New Year. This absence is particularly striking, customers have told the second author, because the Mexican and Chinese holidays overlap with the seasonal harvests of marigolds and mandarins.

Some North Berkeley market managers and vendors acknowledge the whiteness of their market by educating customers about food insecurity. One manager, for example, a white man in his mid 20s, often posts farming facts on a bulletin board alongside the Ecology Center table. These regularly include statistics concerning race and food access, and often serve as jumping off points for conversations about race, class and food. Rather than present a color-blind image of the food system, this manager initiates conversations that educate an affluent, white clientele about institutional racism. The above examples indicate that some farmers market managers, vendors and customers are beginning to understand, discuss and teach each other about the ways that whiteness and classism affect both the conventional and alternative agrifood systems.

While these acts take place largely at the individual level, the markets themselves are also taking steps to contest whiteness. In Davis, the farmers market has recently begun hosting a small, weekly market on campus, targeting students with coupons and promotions. By inviting students to participate in the farmers market, managers work to create a more diverse market community. In Berkeley, The Ecology Center attempts to combat the structural racism that deprives many Black and Latino/a residents of access to fresh food through a program called Farm Fresh Choice. Directed by a Black woman and a Latino man, Farm Fresh Choice hires low-income youth of color to sell farmers market produce, which they purchase in bulk, in their own neighborhoods. This program attempts to replace the white farm and community imaginaries with stories about how organic produce is relevant to low-income communities of color. Program directors depict the unhealthy food choices that pervade black and Latino/a communities as a form of colonialism, against which organic produce becomes a tool for racial empowerment. Through support for such *food justice* programs (Alkon and Norgaard 2009), farmers markets can become allies to people of color creating alternatives to agribusiness in their own communities.<sup>17</sup>

By increasing access to locally grown organic food, these programs may shift the material reality of food insecurity.

Some managers, vendors and customers at the Davis and North Berkeley farmers markets attempt to contest the pervasiveness of whiteness in alternative agrifood systems. This is accomplished through the presence of non-white farmers and farmworkers, the telling of culturally specific agricultural histories and the presence of culturally specific produce varieties, all of which disrupt the white farm imaginary. Moreover, some market participants do acknowledge and question the role of race in both conventional and alternative agrifood systems. Beyond the individual level, organizations managing these farmers markets have pursued policies that may alter the power of whiteness in alternative agrifood systems. During the time of our fieldwork, the most prominent campaign was to alter the farm bill, replacing agribusiness subsidies with support for small farmers, ecologically sound production practices, and anti-hunger programming.<sup>18</sup>

### **Toward An Anti-Racist Politics of Food**

The alternative agrifood movement is predicated on the idea that defetishizing food by revealing its social and ecological relations of production will result in a more just and sustainable food system. However, much of the movement's rhetoric and strategy reflects an affluent, liberal habitus of whiteness that masks and refetishizes the structural inequalities inherent to both conventional and alternative agriculture. Such whiteness is constructed through white farm and community imaginaries that depict the producers and consumers of local organic produce as ethical without acknowledging their race and class privilege. Low income people and people of color, on the other hand, can then be condemned as ignorant of and apathetic towards their food sources. Conversely, some market participants work to discursively disrupt this dominant whiteness by critiquing its presumed universality, and by creating physical and metaphorical spaces to hear communities of colors' agricultural and food stories and histories. Our findings reveal that whiteness must be understood as mutually constructed through class, extending Patricia Hill Collins' concept of intersectionality to apply to privilege as well as oppression. Additionally, we suggest that both consumption and defetishization, though certainly not politically transformative themselves, can potentially link farmers market participants to a broader food politics that is cognizant of both structural inequality and the need for systemic change.

The whiteness we have observed at the Davis and North Berkeley farmers markets is inseparable from affluence and liberal political orientation. This reveals the importance of understanding privilege through the complex and multi-dimensional lens of intersectionality. The liberal, affluent habitus of whiteness that colors our cases stands

in contrast to both working-class, conservative variants of whiteness as well as those of explicitly exclusive groups, suggesting the need to see race and class as inextricably constructed through one another. The ability of those we studied to draw on unexamined race and class privileges to demean low-income people of color while maintaining a liberal regard for diversity suggests that unpacking the complexities involved in the creation of privileged subjectivities is a necessary step toward the creation of just sustainability.

However, even a farmers market that reflects deeply on race and class privilege may be limited, as many scholars before us have argued, by its emphasis on a politics of consumption. While it is reasonable to believe that the movement's complacency with capitalism and consumerism, systems that are inherently exploitative and divisive, inhibits its potential for just sustainability, we do not agree that it is appropriate to dismiss the farmers market's potential to inspire social change. After all, farmers markets are not just consumptive spaces—they are also public spaces and institutions of the larger alternative agrifood movement. For those who go to farmers markets, this combination of functions can render farmers markets entry point into more collective food politics. Both markets described in this paper already host political activity in which shoppers learn about and engage in debates around various local, state and national political politics, and have directly supported several campaigns aimed at food and agricultural policy.<sup>19</sup>

Our observations contend not only with the politics of consumption, but with debates concerning whether defetishizing production–consumption relations is necessary or sufficient in creating political change (Cook, Crang and Thorpe 2004; Guthman 2008a, 2008b; Szasz 2007; Magdoff, Foster and Buttel 2000). On one hand, the invisibility of these social relations is part of what allows labor and environmental practices to be exploitative (Marx [1867] 1992). However, simply “removing the veil” that obscures those relationships may not render them more ethical. For example, in the case of our white farm imaginary, the presence of Mexican farmworkers at the market will not automatically cue an anti-racist politics among customers. However, a greater understanding of how the food system is affected by institutional racism may provoke the most politicized farmers market supporters to advocate for immigration and entitlement reform alongside more progressive agricultural policy. As for less politicized market attendees, learning about structural inequality may not bring about political engagement. But neither does it replicate the movement's colorblind assumption that if people only knew where their food came from, they would become supporters of alternative agriculture. What Guthman (2008b) finds problematic about this refrain is not its educational effort but its implicit charge to affluent whites to convert low-income people and people of color to their lifestyles.

We do not dismiss the educational potential of defetishization, and are documenting fledgling efforts of whites to teach other whites anti-racism and to resist white normativity in farmers market settings. We are also documenting and calling for more inclusion of farmworkers in farmers market settings—welcoming them to tell their stories and shape new visions of just sustainability. The farmers market is the public venue of the alternative food movement. It is there that discourse is constantly reinscribed and collective strategies are implemented and reimaged. Discursive disruptions of affluent, liberal whiteness in these spaces may help to energize and broaden the movement's collective work. Only then might meaningful material transformation be possible.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> We spell farmers markets without the apostrophe to connote that they belong to all of the managers, customers and vendors who play active roles in their creation and functioning. Allen (2004) submits that markets' emphasis on farmers' economic success is one reason that social justice priorities are marginalized. Thus, recasting farmers markets as consisting of farmers, rather than belonging to them, implies that farmers markets are a public resource rather than the property of the most prominent vendors.

<sup>2</sup> In addition to the scholarly critique of the alternative agrifood's whiteness, a popular satirical blog called "Stuff White People Like" lists farmers markets and organic food in its top 10 (Lander 2008).

<sup>3</sup> The concept of habitus comes from Bourdieu's (1977) *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. An individual develops a particular habitus—a set of cultural practices and associated attitudes—from their social location, which then provides the skills and dispositions necessary to navigate a given social field. We found that whiteness, affluence and political liberalism all contribute to a particular habitus that contributes to comfort within farmers markets stressing organic and local food.

<sup>4</sup> This discourse is sometimes associated with working class people, but is also espoused by political and business leaders, who have never been working class, in order to create cultural resonance and support.

<sup>5</sup> For academic treatments of working class whiteness, see Frankenberg (1993), McDermott (2006) or Roediger (1999).

<sup>6</sup> We acknowledge that a truly intersectional approach would include an unlimited number of social categories such as gender, nation, sexuality, etc. Such is the challenge of translating this complex concept into empirical research. In this study, we deal only with race and class, but view them as mutually constructed with a variety of social locations.

<sup>7</sup> Most of the second author's interviews were with customers (10) because of her initial research focus on consumer motivations. She also did in-depth interviews with

one market manager and two farmers, in addition to hours of informal discussion with farmers during participant observation. The first author interviewed four market managers, eight vendors and six customers.

<sup>8</sup> A sample of convenience simply indicates that the researcher attempted to stop shoppers as they passed by her at the market, and surveyed those who agreed to participate. While these findings are not generalizable in the way a random sample would be, her demographic data were overwhelming, and fit with her ethnographic impressions concerning the affluent, white character of the North Berkeley Farmers Market.

<sup>9</sup> A racial point count refers to tallying what the second author perceived to be the race of customers moving past a fixed point. It should be noted that this method is flawed because of the researcher's dependence on her visual impressions to judge customers' racial identity, rather than allowing them to identify themselves. The second author chose this method because of limited time and resources. Because her research examines the symbolism of racial body clustering, this thumbnail sketch of the market's racial demographics is still useful for illustrating the color of bodies that occupy the market space.

<sup>10</sup> This mythical yeoman tradition was never present in California, which has been dominated by an agribusiness system that exploited migrant farm workers for as long as there has been white settlement (Daniel 1981; Mitchell 1996).

<sup>11</sup> Cultural prohibitions against ethnic slurs are so strong in Berkeley that we suspect the customer is unaware that gyp is a derogatory insinuation associating Roma peoples, demeaningly called gypsies, with theft. Ignorance of this term reflects white privilege and the invisibility of people of color, but not the individual-level racism generally associated with more common ethnic slurs.

<sup>12</sup> Debates concerning the role of community in urban life have been central to the field of urban sociology, and dominate its foundational works (Park, Burgess, and McKenzie 1925; Tönnies 1957). The notion that community is antithetical to urban life is widely available in popular culture (as observed by Lofland 1998; Strauss 1968), and is often lamented by the popular literature supporting the alternative agriculture movement (for example, Berry 2002).

<sup>13</sup> Of course, not all counterculture is dominated by whites. However, the projects discussed at this farmers market tend to be.

<sup>14</sup> Saldanha's (2006) work on whiteness, which investigates the expatriate "trance scene" in Goa, India also posits white viscosity as potentially produced through counterculture.

<sup>15</sup> Some of these farms do not have their certification, presumably because of the expense, but are considered by market managers to be organic farms. This is also true of white farms at each market.

<sup>16</sup> Non-farming vendors include those selling prepared food as well as fish and honey.

<sup>17</sup> Many of these projects, led by black and Latino/a activists, aim to tie alternative agrifood practices to explicit discourses of racial identity and anti-racism. In practice, however, many of them rely on the work of white volunteers motivated by the alternative agriculture movement (Guthman 2008a).

<sup>18</sup> Additionally, market managers are open to creating additional strategies to contest whiteness. For example, after posting earlier versions of this paper on the Community Food Security listserv, we received many messages from market managers around the USA who expressed interest in our work.

<sup>19</sup> The great popularity and presence of political tabling at the Davis Farmers Market suggests a great potential for farmers markets to serve as a gateway to food politics that go beyond consumption. While some of the second author's interviewees stated that they avoided the market's political tables, just as many interviewees claimed that they visited the political tables during each of their trips to the market. These political tables

almost never represent groups mobilized around food issues, but the space is available for that and the general popularity of this space suggests that food-related campaigns there would garner much support.

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