

Confronting Whiteness in Kansas City's Local Food Movement: Diversity Work and Discourse on Privilege and Power

Abstract: In recent years, the whiteness of the local food movement has been an increasingly popular topic in both academic and popular discourse. In what ways have those within this movement responded to critiques of exclusionary whiteness and privilege? Drawing on interviews with local food advocates in Kansas City (KC), this article explores the discourses and practices used within the movement in response to questions of equity and racial justice. It argues that in KC, one way that local food movement advocates react to these critiques is by discursively celebrating “diversity”—a response that actually works to further conceal racialized inequality and to maintain systemic white privilege. Within this case study,

this “diversity work” took the form of counting and celebrating phenotypic diversity in local food spaces. In KC, this manifests as a celebration of new U.S. immigrants—a form of diversity work that is easier to engage in than calls for deeper, structural changes in the food system. This diversity work, whether intentionally or not, depoliticizes discussions of food systems reform and distances local food advocates from the responsibility to address deeper inequities. Such findings illustrate some of the narratives and practices that help sustain structural racial inequality in local food systems amidst a shifting broader discourse that calls for the dismantling of white privilege within many social movements.

ON AN EARLY JULY MORNING, I joined two organic vegetable farmers at their vendor's booth in Kansas City's City Market, one of the largest and oldest farmers markets in the Midwest. As Clive called out to passersby, offering them a taste of that day's ruby red radishes, I chatted with Jeff, our conversation intermittently put on hold when one of us pivoted to help a customer or ran back to the truck to grab more produce to fill the display table as it emptied. Clive and Jeff, white men in their fifties, are co-owners of a profitable mid-sized organic farm located north of the city.¹ They had invited me to work with them at City Market on Saturdays, after having heard from a mutual friend about my research—in which I sought to understand the experiences of African Americans in Kansas City, Missouri's (KC) local food system. As part of that work, I wanted to examine how local food advocates thought about, and responded to, criticisms of the movement's “whiteness.” So, as we worked, I asked Clive and Jeff questions about the local food movement as it intersected with ideas of diversity, privilege, and racial inequality. That morning, Jeff retorted to one of my questions with several of his own: “Why wouldn't someone want to have their hands in the soil? Why wouldn't someone love this fresh goodness?” “Well,” I started to answer, as I slid a customer's bills into the cash drawer, “some African American people have told

me—.” As I spoke, two women in headscarves passed by. Jeff interrupted me excitedly and told me they were frequent customers of his, Somali refugees: “You see that? Now *that's* real diversity, those are *real* African Americans. This market must feel like home to them. It feels like home to all of us who give a shit!”

When I began this research in 2016, KC's local food movement was just beginning to face questions of its whiteness and privilege—chiefly from actors within the local food scene. Within the past five years, other social movements in KC have worked concertedly to address structural inequality and white privilege within their domains—the KC chapter of Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ), for example, draws hundreds of urban residents for their monthly meetings. KC's local food movement, however, has lagged behind—as a result, Black Kansas City residents (Kansas Citians), in particular, have been increasingly vocal in calls for food system reform. Within this context, I investigated how local food advocates, like Clive and Jeff, responded to questions about whiteness and privilege.

Drawing on 90 interviews (38 with white local food advocates who work at farmers markets or food systems-focused nonprofits; 52 with African American low-income KC residents of “food deserts”), two years of participant observation,

and archival research, I illustrate one way that local food advocates respond to critiques of whiteness within the local food movement: by discursively and programmatically focusing on “diversity”—a response that fails to engage deeply with racialized inequality, and actually works to further conceal systemic whiteness (cf. Ahmed 2012; Ahmed and Swan 2006). Within this case study, this “diversity work” took the form of counting and celebrating phenotypic diversity in local food spaces. In KC, this manifests as a celebration of new U.S. immigrants—as evidenced in Jeff’s statement above—a form of diversity work that is easier to engage in when compared to calls for deeper, structural changes in the food system. This diversity work, whether intentionally or not, depoliticizes discussions of food systems reform and distances local food advocates from the responsibility to address deeper inequities. I do not argue that these responses are representative of the local food movement nationwide, or even of all local food advocates within KC. Nor do I attempt to analyze whether these responses are made with malicious intent or are the result of well-intentioned ignorance. Rather, I argue that regardless of intent, these responses serve to reproduce systemic white privilege within KC’s local food system.

Following a number of other critical race scholars, I capitalize Black throughout this article (in reference to Blackness as a cultural identification rather than a phenotypic marker) and refer to white people and whiteness in lowercase. Interview participants who identified as white were referencing phenotypic difference rather than cultural identification; and whiteness, as used here, references a structural system rather than an ethnic group.

In what follows, I first situate this case study within studies of institutional diversity work and whiteness, before outlining the local food movement in KC and some of the racialized tensions that exist within it. Then, I present and discuss some critiques from Black KC residents, and the diversity work undertaken by local food advocates in reaction to questions regarding their privilege. I close by considering what this data illuminates about the challenges of effecting racial justice in the U.S. local food movement.

Maintaining White Privilege: Diversity Rhetoric and Managerial Approaches to Equity

“Diversity” language is often used by institutions as a way of containing or subverting demands for racial justice. Institutions perform “diversity work” by highlighting and institutionalizing difference—through discourse, diversity committees, and diversity statements; this work helps to manage conflict and maintain racialized power hierarchies (Mohanty 2003; Puwar 2004;

Alexander 2005). Key to this process is a surface-level celebration of phenotypic diversity as evidence of equity and justice, and discourse that “bypasses power as well as history to suggest a harmonious empty pluralism” (Mohanty 2003: 193). Instead of a project that interrogates racialized privileges, diversity work has come “overwhelmingly to mean the inclusion of people who look different” (Puwar 2004). A focus on increasing the amount of “color” in the room becomes a substitute for discussions of racism and the (re)production of systemic inequities within the institution (Ahmed 2012)—and, of course, increased representation is not analogous to increased equity.

Diversity work, then, often becomes an endeavor meant to change perceptions rather than a project that addresses racialized power structures (Bannerji 2000; Ahmed 2012). Diversity mission statements, for example, are often a key component of diversity work. In the past several years a number of local food nonprofits in Kansas City have added a “Statement of Diversity” to their websites. Such statements codify the institutions’ commitments to “diversity” or “equity”; however, often the recording of these goals becomes a placeholder for actual action—the intent becomes the work itself (cf. Ahmed and Swan 2006). Further, the problem comes to be conceptualized not as an issue with institutional racial hierarchy, but with the *perceptions* outsiders hold about the institution (Ahmed 2012; Bhattacharyya 2018). The development and publicization of a diversity statement is a way to let people of color know that the perceptions they have about the institution are incorrect; Ahmed (2012: 34) notes that it is a way to signify that whiteness is “in the image” rather than “in the organization,” and to divert questions away from systemic changes within the organization that could be enacted.

As scholarship within postcolonial studies indicates, diversity work is easily adopted into the local food movement—celebration of “ethnic food” has historically functioned in postcolonial nations as a way of rendering “tolerance” more palatable (Probyn 2000: 103; Narayan 1995; Kalra 2004; Germann Molz 2011). Eating, and the celebration of the cuisine of the “other,” is a safe way to embrace calls for diversity and equity without threatening the status quo in any structural way. Buettner (2008), for example, illustrates this process in Britain, where chicken tikka masala has been adopted as a national dish despite racial inequities and colonial histories of violence against the Indian diaspora (see also Duruz 2004; Slocum 2011; Cook 2008). Instead of an entry point to discussions of racial inequity, consumption of ethnic food and discursive celebration of other ethnic groups becomes a process of class distinction (hooks 1992; Germann Molz 2007), a way of signaling liberal values of diversity rather than a means of interrogating inequality and pushing for substantive social

change. Moreover, it is often an appropriative practice in which those with privilege, often white, profit from exploitation of the “exotic” (see, for example, discussion surrounding filmmaker Francis Ford Coppola’s new “Native American”-themed restaurant, *Werowocomoco*). In these ways, diversity work supports white structural privilege while quieting demands for racial justice.

Whiteness and the Local Food Movement

Whiteness, as used herein, is not necessarily a reference to observable phenotypic difference. Rather, it is a way to index a constellation of privileges that benefit whites and disadvantage racialized minorities (cf. Burton 2015; Jung, Vargas, and Bonilla-Silva 2011; Kobayashi and Peake 2000). Structural whiteness is systemic in the United States, indelibly intertwined into our laws and legal system, economic relations, sociocultural norms, and in every aspect—production, distribution, and consumption—of our food system. The whiteness of our local food system has been extensively theorized (cf. Guthman 2011). It adheres in farmers markets and upscale boutique grocery stores through white cultural practices of consumption (Slocum 2007), through inattention to issues of unaffordability and emphasis on “voting with your fork” (Alkon 2012; Johnston 2007), and through a colorblind refusal to acknowledge historical racialized inequities in land access, use, and food consumption (Guthman 2008; Mares and Pena 2011).

Within the local food movement, historically, questions of difference and privilege have been glossed over. While racial inequality is deeply embedded in the U.S. food system, the local food movement highlights and celebrates an agrarian narrative specific to whites—the romantic notion of the small-scale yeoman farmer (Alkon and McCullen 2011). Excluded from this narrative are violent histories of Native displacement by white homesteaders, African American slave labor, and the low-paid Latinx farmworkers who harvest a majority of U.S. crops often in conditions of extreme precarity. In this “white farm imaginary,” consumers are presented with a whitewashed narrative of food production and distribution, and the racialized inequities of the food system are erased (Alkon and McCullen 2011). The narratives shared in this article will illustrate that in some contexts, this approach to questions of race and privilege is changing—many local food advocates in KC are undertaking diversity work. This diversity work, however (as feminists of color have illustrated within myriad other domains), involves a surface-level celebration of racialized “others” that depoliticizes the work of food systems reform.

It is important to understand how exactly local food advocates are working to address structural white privilege. Several

studies have shown that privilege and whiteness have an enormous impact on the ability of local food movements to enact positive changes within communities (Anguelovski 2015; Kolavalli 2018), but there has been little scholarship on how, exactly, local food advocates respond to critiques of white privilege. In one study, a survey of Canadian community food organizations, Wakefield et al. (2013) found local food movement advocates rarely mentioned racial equity when questioned about institutional priorities (see also Gimenez and Shattuck 2011; Davenport and Mishtal 2019). Conversely, Guthman (2008) has noted that her students, during participatory research in local food organizations, came to understand the whitened privilege of their agrarian discourse through encounters with racialized others. While other case studies have illustrated how local food advocates draw on colorblind discourse to maintain racialized boundaries and to avoid engaging with the racial inequities of their work (cf. Alkon and McCullen 2011; Sbicca 2015), this article illustrates how, in one context, these responses have changed: instead of colorblind narratives, local food advocates in this case study advanced surface-level celebrations of diversity, “diversity work,” as a discursive and programmatic reaction to critiques of privilege.

Racial Inequities in Kansas City’s Local Food Movement

KC’s local urban food system is robust: the metropolitan area includes over 20 farmers markets, 380 community gardens, a municipal farm, and an ever-growing number of small-scale, high-production urban farms—which funnel produce into the city’s thriving farm-to-table dining scene. A number of nonprofits promote local food production through community garden development and urban farm granting programs—as both ameliorative for food insecurity and a pathway to entrepreneurship—and are supported, monetarily and discursively, by local city officials. For example, this public-private partnership manifests as KC Grow Water Access Grant Program—municipal funding distributed via a local food-focused nonprofit, in the form of grants for water infrastructure at community gardens, that is intended to address urban food insecurity by encouraging the poor to grow their own food.

But while programs such as these, as well as citywide discourse, boast that KC’s local food scene is inclusive, severe racialized inequality affects KC’s growing local food system. Kansas City, itself, is starkly segregated; histories of forcible racialized segregation have resulted in a boundary line running north/south—Troost Avenue—that separates the Black east side of KC from the largely white and affluent west side. Nineteen percent of residents on KC’s east side are food insecure—a

number that has risen consistently over the past ten years, even as urban local food production has grown (Gundersen et al. 2016). KC's east side residents are also facing pressure from ecogentrification (cf. Curran and Hamilton 2012; Kolavalli 2018), as white urban farm entrepreneurs take advantage of low real estate values to start farm businesses in historically Black neighborhoods. Among other food system issues voiced to me by low-income Black consumers of color were cost ("That's food we can't afford," a Black woman in her fifties laughed while picking up free groceries at Harvesters food pantry, when I asked her about farmers markets); discourse promoted by local food nonprofits that morally condemns Black diets (see also Guthman 2003; Alkon et al. 2013); lack of transportation to local food markets (a majority of the food-insecure KC residents interviewed for this study did not have a car; many depended on children or grandchildren for weekly trips to Walmart); and feeling "out of place" at farmers markets (none of these issues are unique to KC; see also Alkon and McCullen 2011; Harper 2011). Local Black gardeners and farmers also point to racialized inequities from the perspective of local food production: infrastructural/distribution costs that make selling at conventional markets prohibitive; rhetoric at horticulture workshops about "getting your hands dirty" that ignores histories of slave labor (see also Guthman 2008); and racialized social networks that privilege white farmers in restaurant sales—for example, currently only one of the 37 farmers collectively sourced from by the two most popular farm-to-table restaurants in KC (The Rieger and The Farmhouse) is a person of color (cf. Kolavalli 2018).

These issues have been brought to the forefront over the past several years in KC, chiefly by Black farmers and gardeners, who have become increasingly vocal about the need for local food advocates to address structural inequities, the specific ways they affect Black KC residents, and the myriad ways they affect other racialized populations. Recently, for example, advertisements for a fundraiser gala for a local nonprofit that promotes urban farming were plastered with calls for reparations for Black farmers, and charges that the organization was only pretending to make local food accessible for consumers of all income levels. This article does not explore these issues in detail; rather, it examines the ways that local food advocates have responded to mounting criticism of their white privilege.

Critiquing the System: Black Kansas City Residents and Food Systems Reform

The disjuncture between how Black and white food systems advocates in KC approach efforts to enact equity in the local food system is exemplified by the discussion at a panel event,

"Critical Conversations on KC's Local Food Scene," hosted by a group of diverse farmers and myself in 2017. The event was hosted with the goal of highlighting some of the challenges faced by racialized KC residents in the local food economy; our panel included an urban planner (a first-generation Mexican immigrant to Kansas City), a young Black farmer and activist, an African American woman who runs an urban garden program at a homeless shelter, and the owner of the oldest African American-owned farm in KC. The panelists each discussed their relationship to the land, their wish that narratives about food and agriculture included racialized groups, and their struggles as entrepreneurs in the local food economy. Every comment shared by the panelists was linked by an assertion that discussion of food and urban agriculture should be tied to larger issues—systemic poverty and inequality, racialized violence, disinvestment in specific urban areas. One panelist, a young Black farmer, situated food insecurity within the broader context of racialized violence and inequality in the U.S.:

What creates food insecurity? We can think about the founding of the United States, when white males are the only people who can legally own land everyone else becomes food insecure because they don't have access to land. Control of the land, segregation, this is what creates food insecurity. Landlessness—my grandfather's father was chased off his land in Mississippi. That violence creates food insecurity. Mass incarceration is also a thing that causes food insecurity, because when one breadwinner is taken out of the home, hunger ensues. These are the things we need to think about in our organizations that address hunger.

His comments powerfully contextualized food insecurity within larger systemic issues, and chastised local food organizations in KC for discussing hunger as separate from racialized violence. During the Q&A portion of the event, some white local food advocates began to critique these perspectives; a director of an influential nonprofit that promotes urban farming responded:

I think that there's a lot of work that's happened that hasn't been recognized here. I'm thinking specifically around [a Latinx-focused nonprofit] organizing their own folks, educating their own folks, I'm thinking about some of the Hmong growers I know who are educating their own folks. Those kinds of engagements in specific grounded communities is what's ultimately going to change our food system.... So characterizing the local food movement as [white] is diminishing of other people, who in fact are working quite hard in their own communities, and who didn't show up to this event because they're working in their own communities. I agree, our meetings are white ... that's just the characteristics of who gets involved, by and large, I would say. And so in this movement we've got mostly white women. I don't look out and see a purely white local food system in Kansas City. I see, as I move through my world, a very diverse, constantly mixed group of people, all engaging in a whole variety of ways. And some of them are recognized by the mainstream, and some of them aren't.

In her response, the local food advocate (a white woman in her fifties) tries to highlight the diversity she sees in the food system, but her words minimize and reframe several of the concerns about racialized inequality voiced by the panelists. Her comments turn the onus of (mis)representation back onto the panelists—in their statements about feeling marginalized by the whiteness of the urban food movement, these panelists, her comments indicate, are themselves ignoring the “diversity” of farmers involved in urban food production. The whiteness of food movement leadership, she continues, is because white women are the ones who get involved—a statement that indicates she might not be aware of historical leadership of Black, Latinx, and Indigenous people in food movements, such as in La Via Campesina, the Black Panther Party’s food program, and Indigenous food sovereignty activism (to name just a few examples). Her response redirected conversation away from how her organization could work toward inclusivity and equity, and instead foregrounded that minority communities helping out “their own folks” is how our food system will change.

The young Black farmer responded:

I think you made a good point about recognizing work that’s already been done, and it made me think of the Black Panthers in Kansas City. I mean, they started the food program at St. Mary’s on 12th and Brooklyn. The church is still there, but they’re gone. They’re actually in jail or killed by the state. So me thinking personally about Black people in this area’s efforts to transform their realities, their food system—we run into violence. What does that mean? [Food system reform] broadens out into a revolutionary project, like we can’t just grow food. Food was a major part of what the Panthers were doing—so was education, so was housing, so was access to health care. But they recognized that none of these programs can actually work if we have an oppressive system that seems to be intent on killing us ... through our diet, through numerous ways. That’s kind of what your comment brought up for me.

Here, the farmer highlights how Black people who have attempted to change the food system themselves have been targeted and either jailed or killed by the state. He argues that local food systems will not be equitable, diverse, and just until local food advocates situate their work within histories of systemic violence within the U.S. These comments closed the panel event, and since 2017, an increasing number of local food advocates have been undertaking “diversity work.” This work, however, is focused intently on celebrating extant phenotypic diversity within the local food system, and does not engage with any of the systems reform suggestions made by Black farmers, such as those made at the panel event. Below, I explore some of these narratives and discuss what they reveal about “diversity work” in the local food movement.

“Diversity Work”: Racialized Hierarchies and “Model Minorities” in Local Food Movement Discourse

Root Deep, a refugee agricultural training program, is the first thing many local food advocates cite when asked about diversity in KC’s local food system—it is exemplary of the “diversity work” local food advocates are undertaking. Funded by a USDA Refugee Agricultural Partnership Program, and implemented locally by several local food nonprofits, Root Deep trains refugees in local food production and distribution. The cohort composition changes yearly—at the time of this research, the farm included refugees from mostly South Asian countries, primarily Bhutan and Burma.

The Root Deep training farm is located on the site of KC’s oldest housing project, in a predominantly low-income African American area; program directors intended for the farming space to be used by local housing project residents—and included a community garden for that purpose, but only one Black neighbor has ever gardened at the site. One resident of the housing project, a Black woman in her thirties, told me: “That farm they’re so proud of? They bring [refugees] over here and force them to work, and act like they’re doing ’em a favor. It’s a damn slave farm.” Root Deep farm stands on the site of a demolished housing block, surrounded by still-remaining housing—the optics, in which primarily white staff supervise farmers of color, lend to neighborhood residents’ perception of the site as a plantation. A recent chemical spill east of the farm, combined, likely, with the fact that the farm is located on the site of demolished housing, has led many African American residents of the area to call the produce grown there unclean—a Black neighbor in his sixties told me: “That soil’s contaminated.” Many neighborhood residents also perceive the farm as extractive—while one neighborhood resident works at the farm, the rest of the farmers and staff live off-site.

While the refugee farmers—who are supported in production, marketing, and sales by the grant-funded program—are generally quite successful, efforts to include, and sell produce to, Black neighborhood residents have faltered. The community garden intended for neighborhood use has been dismantled, and various attempts to sell produce from the farm to housing project residents—a farmers market, free food gift baskets, cooking demonstrations—have either been ignored or received badly by African American neighbors. One of the program directors, a white woman in her early thirties, told me: “We tried to engage ... I just don’t know any of the reasons they wouldn’t want to come out.”

This pattern and narrative—bringing food to racialized spaces, and disappointment when Black neighborhood residents

do not take an interest—is a common one in KC local food projects (see also Guthman 2008). A white woman in her seventies, who bought a vacant lot in a Black neighborhood (that she does not live in) to found a community garden, expressed to me: “I’m trying to get the community engaged, but no one wants to engage. I’m offering this garden and no one is excited.” A mobile grocery store, founded by a white local food advocate in her forties, passionate about “diversifying” the movement, was also not received well by Black food desert residents and went bankrupt in 2017. Its founder expressed to me: “You know, it’s like people have their routines and however inconvenient they are they don’t want to change them—even if they have to take this bus and transfer to that bus line, or whatever, it’s their routine and they don’t want to change it ... we just need to teach people how to shop with us.”

Black food-insecure KC residents shared with me various reasons why they chose not to participate. The mobile grocery store, many interviewees told me, had an unpredictable schedule, limited variety, and high prices—“Yeah, they have bananas at 59 cents a pound. 59 cents! At Price Chopper in Brookside you can get ‘em for 39 cents a pound,” an African American man in his fifties told me. A majority of the interviewees worked multiple jobs, or had limited mobility, and simply did not have time or interest to participate in a community garden. And at Root Deep, neighbors shared—in addition to concerns about the racialized power dynamics of the farm and the perceived contamination of the land—that they had seen many programs come and go over the years, and did not want to get involved with another one that would leave soon.

Faced with failure to engage low-income Black KC residents in their programs, local food advocates are pointing toward, and celebrating, newly arrived U.S. immigrants as indices of the local food system’s diversity. Several of the Root Deep management expressed the opinion that the refugees were preferable to farm with and create programming for, in contrast to African Americans. Speaking about “diversity” programming,” and Root Deep in particular, a farm director—a white woman in her fifties who also owns and operates a large organic farm just outside of KC—told me about the contrast between working with her friend, an eighty-year-old African American man who grew up on a farm in the Deep South, versus the refugee farmers:

It’s funny, he’s gotten over the years ... his racial views have gotten even more polarized. Anytime I see him [he] makes a point of reminding me that if he and I had been talking like we were [in his hometown, during his youth], standing as close as we were, he could’ve been lynched—you know, growing up in rural Texas in an agricultural community. In contrast, one of the things I like about this place [Root Deep] ... I love

working with the refugees because for most of them, farming is something that has respect and value and all the rest, so they’ve got emotional baggage but it’s not so much about farming as it is about their other experiences. I feel like they are present in farming in a way that’s pretty miraculous, and I’m really grateful that we get to help them bring that here, hybridize it so that they become Burmese American farmers, they become Bhutanese American farmers. And they’re adding “new seeds” to our sort of collective seed bank ... that feels like a pretty cool thing to be doing.

The racialized ideologies that inform this discourse are messy and confusing—the refugees from Burma and Bhutan who farm today with Root Deep come from countries where a vast majority of the population are involved in agriculture, but they have also faced years of genocide and ethnic cleansing at the hands of their state governments. While the farm director feels that refugees have “emotional baggage” but not necessarily about farming, these perceptions and generalizations may not be true. Moreover, this comment minimizes the violence that racialized minorities experience in the local food system. It is helpful to consider these messy ideologies within the context of post-Civil Rights Era myths of the “model minority”: a pervasive ideology (and political agenda) that subverts Black Americans’ demands for racial justice. Within this ideology, which the farm director’s comments unconsciously perpetuate, comparisons are drawn between African Americans and the “right kind” of immigrants—often, Asian Americans are depicted as uncomplaining hard workers who serve as proof that people of color can live the “American dream” (cf. Prashad 2000). This ideology, of course, is untrue. The persistence of laws and structures that actively harm Black U.S. citizens, compared with the state engineering and immigration controls that lead to the upward mobility of some U.S. immigrants of color, means that these “model minority” arguments hold no water.

In discourses promoting the farm, however, new U.S. immigrants are portrayed as urban savior “model minorities” who are active participants in the local food movement. A Root Deep board member told me, “Nothing much grew there ‘til we came”: a comment that depicts the housing project as desolate, and glosses over the extant social networks and activity in the space. In the press, local reporters claim if it were not for Root Deep, “no fresh produce would be available within an hour’s walk”; another states that the space is used to “educate locals” on nutrition and health. A program manager notes, “It’s been so long since [neighborhood residents] used fresh vegetables” and “the farm is transforming the way people in the neighborhood eat”—despite the community engagement failures outlined above (and without evidence that residents were not eating vegetables before the farm’s arrival). Root Deep features prominently in

promotional and fundraising materials for all of its partner nonprofits, and its refugee participants are often invited guests of honor at fundraiser events and galas; a donation request flyer for one of the nonprofits that manages Root Deep, for example, includes a photo of a smiling farmer from Burma,² the housing project depicted in the background behind rows of corn:

Farmers in our program (like the lovely Burmese farmer in the photo) take their produce to food deserts in Kansas City—places where families are struggling to put food on the table. With your support, refugee farmers have helped feed over 35,000 low-income families in our community in the last five years!... Will you donate now to give the gift of food, farms, and community?... Can you donate today to help families in our community live the American Dream?

This discourse highlights the “diversity” of KC’s local food movement. It also, perhaps unintentionally, echoes persistent, dangerous tropes of low-income African Americans as dependent on the state (Goode 2009), while contrasting them with new immigrants who are entrepreneurs living the “American Dream.” New U.S. immigrants, here refugees, are discursively made complicit in discourses reproducing pathologies of the urban poor—myths about lack of dietary and health knowledge (cf. Larchet 2014)—and are celebrated for the “diversity” they bring to the food system.

Frequently, when I asked about concerns raised by Black KC residents regarding privilege in the local food system, local food advocates would point toward the presence of refugees, and newly arrived immigrants from African countries and Southeast Asia, as evidence of diversity and equity. A local food advocate who works at a community garden program, a forty-year-old white woman, responded with confusion about questions of white privilege in KC’s food system, because she sees “diversity” at local food spaces all the time:

But there’s so many South Indians that come to City Market. Lebanese, people from Bombay, Mumbai. Those people, they know about real food. They may not know about organic food, or local food, but what else is there in most countries, you know what I mean?

The physical presence of racialized others (particularly those perceived to be first-generation immigrants from “agrarian” cultures) at local food spaces is frequently cited in response to questions about privilege in the movement. A thirty-year-old local food vendor at a KC farmers market, when I asked about white privilege within the local food movement, simply pointed to three women—who later indicated they were from northern Burma—as they passed by. The vendor stated: “They still have that white calamine face lotion on. They’re maybe five minutes off the boat. Do you see them?

They’re here.” Even though I pressed, in each interview, and asked about the concerns raised by Black KC residents cited earlier, both local food advocates continued to highlight visible diversity they could see in market spaces. By using visible phenotypic difference as a marker of diversity, inclusion, and equity, this response—whether intentional or unintentional—diverts discussion away from the structural, often invisible ways that racial inequity still exists in the local food system.

Much of the discourse highlighting racialized presence in local food spaces perpetuates popular orientalist imagery and harmful tropes that paint new U.S. immigrants as uncorrupted “noble savages.” For example, a sixty-something white market manager for City Market, when I asked her about white privilege in the local food movement, responded, “Oh we have so many immigrants and ethnic shoppers come here, though. When these guys come from outside one of the most familiar things for them is what happens at the City Market: you’re bumping shoulders with folks, the aisles are full, there’s bargaining—you know how that can be in India.” This idea that hectic, bustling outdoor vegetable markets “feel like home” to newly arrived U.S. immigrants draws on orientalist imaginaries of Eastern cultural groups as homogenized and static, frozen in a preindustrial time (Said 1978). While the market manager likely meant to highlight and uplift her minority shoppers, her comment—read in context amidst other calls for racial equity in KC—is an embrace of diversity without politics, a celebration of ethnic groups that are perceived to be harmonious with nature and the environment, who are familiar with and comfortable with a local food market that aligns with white desires.

Further aligning the local food movement with new immigrants, many local food advocates in Kansas City frequently asserted that new immigrants are enthusiastic about local food, while simultaneously implying that Black people are not. I asked a vendor at a KC farmers market about the diversity of her customer base, and she responded by telling me that her best, favorite customers were Iraqi: “[one woman], she brought us stuffed zucchini—it had ground beef and dried lemon in it, and it was amazing.” When I pushed and asked about whether all low-income consumers of color could afford to shop at the market—a chief reason why many Black interviewees for this research cited not participating in the local food movement—she noted:

I have a lot of ladies who have now been shopping with me for three to four years—that’s such an important deal. I have other people show up who can’t tell the difference between a zucchini and a cucumber. They don’t know what a beet is. God help you if you show them a kohlrabi. People don’t know about touching their food. That’s the product of being an urban ghetto kid, honestly.

New U.S. immigrants, like the Iraqi customer from Kurdistan, are perceived as passionate local food advocates, but discursive celebration of them—in response to questions about racial equity—stalls further discussion of why other racialized groups may critique the food system. These narratives also, perhaps unintentionally, discursively put the onus of inclusivity and “diversification” on African Americans themselves (here, referenced in coded language about “ghetto kids”)—the conversation is redirected into a discussion of which racialized minorities like fruits and vegetables more—hardly a productive avenue of discussion for food systems reform. These narratives both mask the racialized inequities that exist in the local food movement and create hierarchies of inclusion.

Beyond “Diversity Work”: Transformative Racial Justice in the Local Food System

I have argued that local food advocates in KC demonstrate one possible response to critiques of the movement’s whiteness—a focus on “diversity” that celebrates phenotypic difference but ultimately fails to engage deeply with structural racialized inequity in the food system. I further argued that this is a new approach—while other studies have shown pervasive colorblindness within the movement, the narratives shared here demonstrate that amidst national discourse calling for an examination of whiteness, some local food advocates are attempting to undertake “diversity work.” When faced with questions of structural privilege within the local food system, the local food advocates cited above highlighted the phenotypic diversity of the movement—a strategy that scholars of institutional diversity have shown, whether intentionally or unintentionally, ultimately subverts demands for equity and justice. Further, the narratives shared in this article have demonstrated that racialized hierarchies—in which new immigrants to the U.S. and refugees from agrarian backgrounds are celebrated, while other racialized minorities, such as African Americans, are denigrated—exist in local food movement discourse and programs. Scholars of whiteness have indicated that these sorts of hierarchies of racial inclusion are a key way that structural white privilege is maintained (cf. Brodtkin 1998). These responses to calls for food systems reform are more aligned with white saviorism than radical structural change—efforts to “diversify” representations of the local food movement benefit white local food advocates economically and politically but do little for racialized others. These “diversity” narratives depoliticize the work of food systems reform—managerial approaches that allow “diversity” to be counted and measured quiet demands for systemic change.

It is important to acknowledge the limited scope of the research that informs this article. I was not able to discuss race, privilege, and local food systems with new U.S. immigrants or any of the refugee farmers from Burma and other Southeast Asian countries—due to research time limitations, but also, chiefly, because of language and cultural barriers. By not including these narratives here, ironically, this article recreates the patterns of surface-level representation and diversification that I have critiqued local food systems advocates for relying on. Researchers who are better positioned to discuss these sensitive issues with these different racialized groups should do so—it is important that marginalized narratives within the local food system are elevated, and meaningfully incorporated, in food systems work.

Why is it important to deeply interrogate racial inequality in KC and other local food contexts? Structural inequities exist in all domains of the food system—a blanket focus on diversity obscures the specific ways that social categories of race, gender, and class work (cf. Ahmed and Swan 2006: 98). These racialized inequities will not be solved by the extant, often well-meaning approaches to “diversifying” the local food movement, which include discursive celebration of racialized others and their cuisine, increasing phenotypic diversity of the movement’s representation, and the institution of “diversity statements.” These efforts at “diversity work” serve to change perceptions about the whiteness of the local food system, and do little to alter underlying structures of power.

Baseline understandings of how racialized inequity manifests in the local food movement need to be agreed on before transformative justice work can begin. The narratives shared in this article indicated a fundamental disagreement—here, between Black activists and white local food advocates—about how our food systems function. Black farmers—such as the panelist quoted earlier—tie food systems reform to larger projects of racial justice in the U.S., and call for radical redistribution of resources and power. Indigenous activists, through the food sovereignty movement, for example, have also been vocal on these issues for years. It is important to explore the specific racialized experiences of all minority groups within our food system, as oppression is experienced in myriad ways. In KC, the predominant response when white local food advocates are questioned about racial equity for Black Kansas Citians is to pivot to a discussion of how *other* racialized minorities are enthusiastic local food movement participants. This response might be intended as an effort to highlight and celebrate diversity. In function, however, it serves to depoliticize the calls for justice that are being voiced by reducing the issue to one of mere phenotypic difference, and stalls progress toward structural racial equity in the local food system.

What would a more transformative engagement with racial justice in the U.S. local food system look like? I do not mean to dismiss the connections that local food advocates attempt to make with racialized others through food; these attempts can be meaningful and can sometimes lead to deeper engagement with questions of justice and equity (cf. Duruz 2005; Slocum 2011). I also do not mean to dismiss immigrant and refugee involvement in the local food movement, or erase the agency of those who, in the narratives above, were tokenized by white local food advocates (cf. Narayan 1995; Slocum 2011). But more transformative responses to critiques of structural whiteness in the local food movement could be made; racial equity is not enacted via the surface-level celebration of (a particular few) racialized others. A meaningful, structural engagement with racial equity in the local food movement would involve a broader lens that looks at white structural privilege across the U.S., and the specific ways it violently manifests in U.S. food systems—from the perspectives of both food production and consumption. “Diversity statements” would be accompanied by racial justice accountability boards and other restructuring that would hold local food organizations accountable to the diverse groups they aim to serve. Celebration of diverse cuisines would accompany advocacy for just labor practices within the food system. A true accounting of how structural white privilege is embedded in the U.S. local food movement is possible, but it requires a genuine engagement with questions about power, privilege, and violence that communities of color in the United States have been asking for quite some time. 🍷

NOTES

1. Because of the sensitive nature of these interviews, many local food advocates agreed to speak with me only under conditions of anonymity. All names in this article are pseudonyms.
2. I have not included the described photograph and flyer, even though it is within the public domain, because I have not obtained consent from the featured farmers.

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