

The Elusive Inclusive: Black Food Geographies and Racialized Food Spaces

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Abstract: North American food scholars, activists and policymakers often consider how to make a community food project more inclusive to “vulnerable populations” to increase participation in local food efforts. Drawing from qualitative research conducted with two community food organizations in Seattle, Washington, I argue that inclusive efforts are not addressing the power asymmetries present in organizations and within communities. Engaging with black geographies literature, I reveal how a black food justice organization grapples with violent histories of slavery and dispossession rooted in a black farming imaginary, and works to re-envision this imaginary to one of power and transformation. The spatial imaginaries and spaces of each food organization acknowledge racial histories differentially, informing their activism. Black geographies possess knowledge and spatial politics that can revitalize community food movements, and I consider how white food activists might reframe their work so that their efforts are not fueling the displacement of residents of color.

Keywords: food justice, black geographies, historical trauma, race, displacement, community food work

Introduction

In recent years there has been a growing conversation amongst food scholars, activists and policymakers questioning the ability of community food projects to serve low-income communities of color (Alkon and Agyeman 2011; Allen 2010; Guthman 2008; Slocum 2006). The issue of participation is often raised, framed as something that can be remedied by conducting “outreach” or building a more “inclusive” project that better engages local residents. In this article I argue that efforts for “inclusion” in community food projects will continue to struggle to build participation in communities of color if they do not shift the power structures that exist within the organization itself. I seek to re-frame the conversation of inclusion by drawing attention to the ways that race is embedded in food project spaces, and consider how alternative geographies, in this case black geographies, can invigorate critical food studies.

Using black geographies as a foundation, I call attention to the ways “we take for granted the geography knowledges that black subjects impart, as well as the long-standing spatial politics—from segregation to incarceration to emancipatory strategies—that inform black lives” (McKittrick and Woods 2007:6). When critical food scholars consider “what food desert residents seem to want” (Guthman 2008:443), the geographies and voices of the communities in question should be

at the forefront of these analyses. The alternative geographies of the marginalized are embedded in the neighborhoods activists seek to transform, and their differential knowledge reimagines the politics of place (McKittrick and Woods 2007). As such, I place black geographies at the forefront of my analysis to de-center the white actor as presumed practitioner of community food work.

In the following I draw upon in-depth fieldwork with a black food justice organization, Clean Greens. Based in the Central District neighborhood of Seattle, Washington, their work demonstrates how the complex histories and spatial practices of black geographies emerge in food justice activism. To understand how black geographies can be overlooked by community food projects, I also conducted fieldwork with Ace of Spades,¹ an urban farming collective led by white activists in Seattle's Central District. This comparative study of two organizations working in the same neighborhood reveals how the spatial imaginaries of each project differ, and how the food spaces they produce acknowledge racial histories in distinct ways. Utilizing qualitative interview data with the leaders of each organization, I document how both organizations struggle to build participation amongst local residents. While this shared struggle may seem paradoxical, it is the way that each organization engages this struggle differentially that complicates the participation narrative. Whereas Ace of Spades conceals racial histories and tensions, Clean Greens speaks openly of how the violent histories of slavery and sharecropping continue to resonate in Seattle's African American community, making farming seem an unappealing act.

Placing the community food practices of these two organizations in the historical and spatial context of the plantation (McKittrick 2013), this article considers how racialized processes rooted in the plantation continue to influence society, and how black geographies resist and reimagine the present.² Additionally, this study provides further insight as to why it is necessary to consider race when studying food (Slocum and Saldanha 2013), revealing how community food projects are particularly fascinating sites to employ Saldanha's concept of "viscosity". I consider how the white viscosity of Ace of Spades' garden spaces can hinder non-white participation in their projects, and consider how a viscosity of blackness could make urban gardening spaces more approachable to black residents. By threading theories of viscosity with those of black geographies, this article offers a multifaceted theoretical foundation upon which to consider the ways that race and racial histories are embedded in space.

To make these claims, I first delve into the literature of black geographies to set the food justice movement within the plantation context. Then, I engage with critical food studies literature to outline the ongoing conversation on race and whiteness in the food movement, and to reveal the ways that the actor within this literature is presumed to be white. Next, I provide a historical-geographic account of Seattle's Central District, connecting the neighborhood to broader black geographies in the United States. From there, I utilize qualitative data to demonstrate how the black food geographies of Clean Greens work to strengthen black autonomy in the Central District, and how Ace of Spades overlooks the neighborhood's black geographies despite their best efforts to be inclusive. Ultimately, my research considers how black food geographies enact a decolonial politics, and how black food spaces can serve as transformative spaces to excavate historical traumas.

Black Geographies and Food Justice

Central to this study is an understanding of African Americans' complex relationship with farming, and the subfield of black geographies fleshes out the spatial and historical context of this relationship. The site of the plantation is embedded in the American black ontology, serving not only as the basic site of production from which the global racial capitalist system was built, but also as the birthplace of an African American ethic of "survival, subsistence, resistance, and affirmation from the antebellum period to the present" (Woods 1998:27). The plantation complex set the parameters of the African American experience for centuries, working to control black labor by violently suppressing independent thought and collective action. This systemic oppression of freedom altered the black experience, shaping the vision, cultural practices and social movements of African American communities (Woods 1998). Within black geographies, the practices of racial domination and resistance produce a contradiction that "maps the ties and tensions between material and ideological dominations and oppositional spatial practices" (McKittrick 2006:xiv). Thus black geographies offer an alternate telling of history and a different spatial imaginary of the world, expanding geographers' conceptions of how space is produced across geographies of domination. By centering my analysis within black geographies, I trouble existing paradigms of the community food movement, seeking to de-center the white subject as the presumed actor within critical food studies. This study considers what imaginings are possible within a black *food* geography: in this case, an African-American-led food justice project.

Contextualizing the plantation complex in food justice work provides a deeper understanding of how contemporary violence is entangled in the violent structures, processes and ideologies that stem from the plantation. As the "penultimate site of black dispossession, anti-black violence, racial encounter, and innovative resistance", the plantation provides an analytical framework and context that enable us to locate racialized processes in the present, and trace their threads throughout history (McKittrick 2013:8). The American socio-political system and the very conceptions of freedom and justice that this system is founded upon were born from the plantation political economy—a capitalist structure fueled by anti-black violence and oppression. Is the form of "justice" that food and other social justice activists practice simply a politics of inclusion that upholds power asymmetries stemming from the plantation? Some food scholars have signaled (Alkon and Mares 2012; Heynen et al. 2012; Mares and Peña 2011) that perhaps a shift in terminology to that of "food sovereignty" would be more appropriate for food movements that address injustices across scale. While the use of food sovereignty connects North American struggles to indigenous struggles for autonomy across the globe, signaling our interconnection in the colonial present, I worry that the loss of this genealogy would displace the critique of institutional racism central to food justice activism and use a broad brushstroke to encompass place-based movements rooted in black geographies. In addition, the loss of the "justice" genealogy that traces food justice activism to its social justice roots in black social movements would be lost, submerging generations of black struggles for equity that are often tied to the land (Fields-Black 2008; Kelley 1990).

Land reform has been seen as “the cornerstone of African American economic, political and social autonomy and development” (Woods 1998:104), and yet despite this history, critical food scholars have only begun to engage with black geographies. McCutcheon’s insightful research reveals the way that African American community food organizations in rural Georgia work to “recreate the farm materially and discursively” in the black community (2013:62). The reimagining of the farm necessitates that black people’s voices and experiences of farming be unearthed from the landscape, for the remembering and telling of tragedies can drive people to seek justice and liberation (McCutcheon 2013:64–65). In this way, a black geography offers an alternate telling of the plantation, and of the act of farming itself. This article considers the ways that the farm is used to envision “plantation futures”, where black food justice projects use the land as a tool of liberation, drawing from practices of resistance that stem from plantation survival strategies (McKittrick 2013).

Organizations that ascribe to “food justice” are often direct descendants of social justice movements that emerged during the civil rights movement (Alkon and Agyeman 2011), also known as the Black Freedom Movement (Marable 2005). Black radical thought that emerged in the mid-twentieth century was revolutionary in how it sought to claim and reimagine the city, creating an “alternative geography of social and spatial transformation. Black radicalism is about the remaking of spaces ... about constructing new societies through progressive action” (Tyner 2006:219). The social movements that emerged at this time sought to reimagine the present, to reshape uneven geographies and envision “cognitive maps of the future, of a world not yet born” (Tyner 2006:220). The Black Panther Party’s “Free Breakfast for Children” program was an example of this radical form of politics, creating an alternative structure to meet black people’s basic needs (Heynen 2009). By providing breakfast for children, the program “pulled people out of the system and organized them into an alternative. Black children who go to school hungry each morning have been organized into their poverty and the Panther program freed them from that aspect of their poverty” (Cleaver 2006:213). The Free Breakfast Program focused on everyday survival, and considered this service to be a basis of the BPP’s politics to liberate the greater black community.

In some ways, food justice activism of the present works similarly to the BPP agenda, focusing on the immediate need for food access, while addressing systemic economic and racial health disparities in neighborhoods of color. For Clean Greens, these struggles are intertwined in the struggle against displacement, as they work to revitalize black urban space by increasing access to healthy food and creating opportunities for sustainable employment. The work of Clean Greens is a black food geography; an alternative geography of Seattle’s Central District that uses farming to re-inscribe blackness onto the landscape and imagine a more-just future. In the section that follows I engage literature in critical food studies that addresses whiteness and privilege in the community food movement to demonstrate how black geographies can nourish critical food studies.

Race, Privilege, and Community Food Spaces

Food geographers have led the conversation on whiteness in the food movement, critiquing the ways that white imaginaries infiltrate the spaces and practices of

the alternative food movement (Guthman 2008, 2011; Slocum 2007, 2011). A white epistemology is inherent in the food movement in the ways it “*articulate(s)* white ideals of health and nutrition, *offer(s)* whitened dreams of farming and gardening that erase the past and present of race in agriculture, *mobilize(s)* funding to direct programming toward non-white beneficiaries, and *create(s)* inviting spaces for white people” (Slocum 2011:314). Acting from a white epistemology perpetuates existing structures of power and privilege within food spaces, for it enables white activists “to speak from and to ‘survey and navigate social space from a position of authority’, with the assumption that their epistemologies are applicable to all peoples” (Harper 2011:224). As such, privileged food activists tend to assume that their emotions about food and agriculture are shared by all, building food projects around this assumption (Allen 1999; DuPuis and Goodman 2005; Guthman 2008). While the whiteness inherent in farmer’s markets has been interrogated (Alkon 2008; Slocum 2007), community food projects have been critiqued for their perpetuation of white privilege and colorblind ideologies (Guthman 2008; Slocum 2006), and community gardening projects have been shown to further processes of governmentality (Pudup 2008), an in-depth analysis of the ways that racial histories emerge within a community gardening project has yet to be conducted.

Questioning the role that power and privilege play in community food efforts, Patricia Allen addresses how “place is a socio-historical process and locality a set of relations” (2010:302), and thus the locality itself embodies asymmetries of power and privilege that have been produced throughout history and across scales. As such, “local food actors must be wary of the assumption that people within the same community will necessarily have the same understandings and interests because they share the same geographic space or are involved in the same food system” (Allen 2010:301). These assumptions are a reflection of the privilege activists can carry, and that privilege then becomes embedded in and reproduced by the projects they create. Race, power and privilege emerge through community food spaces; they either reify existing inequalities or challenge them, depending on how the food space is being produced.

Power asymmetries can be reproduced within local food movements, with “historical legacies of entitlements, resources and privileges tend to amplify some voices and mute or completely drown out others” (Allen 2010:304). Allen recommends that for projects to be inclusive,

special efforts need to be made to include those who have been materially or discursively marginalized ... we need to be creative about finding ways to incorporate vulnerable people into a deliberative democratic process that can be used to improve both individual and structural equity (2010:304).

While I agree with the fundamentals of Allen’s suggestions, I question who the “we” is in this final statement; it seems the “we” who are to act remain the privileged food activists, who need to “include the vulnerable” in their democracy. This act of inclusion further reifies power asymmetries by assuming the “we” are privileged actors in positions of leadership and the vulnerable are the inactive in

need of incorporation. I argue that these power asymmetries will continue to be reproduced by food activists and critical food scholars if the alternative geographies of the marginalized are not centralized in community food work and literature.

In the following I highlight how racial histories influence the practices of community food projects, considering how two different food organizations, Clean Greens and Ace of Spades, illuminate these histories differentially. I am not arguing that either food justice site is “right” or “wrong”, but rather that placing food justice activism amongst histories and geographies of racial violence allows us to contextualize the interlocking workings of power in place, and understand how violence can be reproduced in everyday geographies. To demonstrate how Clean Greens’ work encompasses a genealogy of black struggle rooted in place, I will now contextualize Seattle’s Central District within black geographies of the United States.

Placing the Central District

While Seattle is home to one of the most diverse zip-codes in the United States,³ the city remains deeply segregated; the southernmost neighborhoods of Seattle house the vast majority of Seattle’s residents of color while north Seattle neighborhoods are predominantly white (Morrill 2011; Ramírez 2011). This research focuses on the Central District (CD), a neighborhood east of downtown Seattle that is often considered to be the gateway to the “south end” of Seattle (see Figure 1). While the CD has been gentrifying over the past 30 years (McGee 2007; Simonson 2011), it has been the political and cultural hub of Seattle’s African American community for the past 70 years. As part of the Great Migration, tens of thousands of African Americans migrated to Seattle from the 1930s to the 1960s, many drawn to defense industry jobs based in Seattle’s shipyards. The oppressive practices of the plantation bloc and the sharecropping system in the South also fueled the Great Migration, a system wrapped in violence and fraud that subjected black farmers to a feudal system of debt peonage (Woods 1998:91–93). As black workers arrived, the city implemented racially restrictive housing covenants, relegating them to specific residential areas in the city, primarily within the CD (Taylor 1994). By 1960 the CD had a black majority, and as job discrimination kept African Americans unemployed or under-employed through the 1960s, the Black Panther Party (BPP) established their headquarters and breakfast centers in the CD to combat increasing poverty in the neighborhood.⁴ These economic frustrations fueled the civil rights movement and made the CD into a place synonymous with black solidarity, the neighborhood serving as the economic, cultural and political hub of Seattle’s black community (Taylor 1994).

The CD was economically and racially isolated in the city’s not-too-distant past, and the histories of inequality continue to mark the neighborhood and its residents, with high rates of poverty and food insecurity disproportionately affecting Seattle’s African American community (Bjorn et al. 2008; Nord et al. 2010). Currently, African American families are being displaced from the same neighborhood they were once confined to, with many low-income African American residents moving away as the CD becomes an increasingly trendy place to live, causing housing costs to rise (McGee 2007). Over the past 40 years, African Americans have gone from

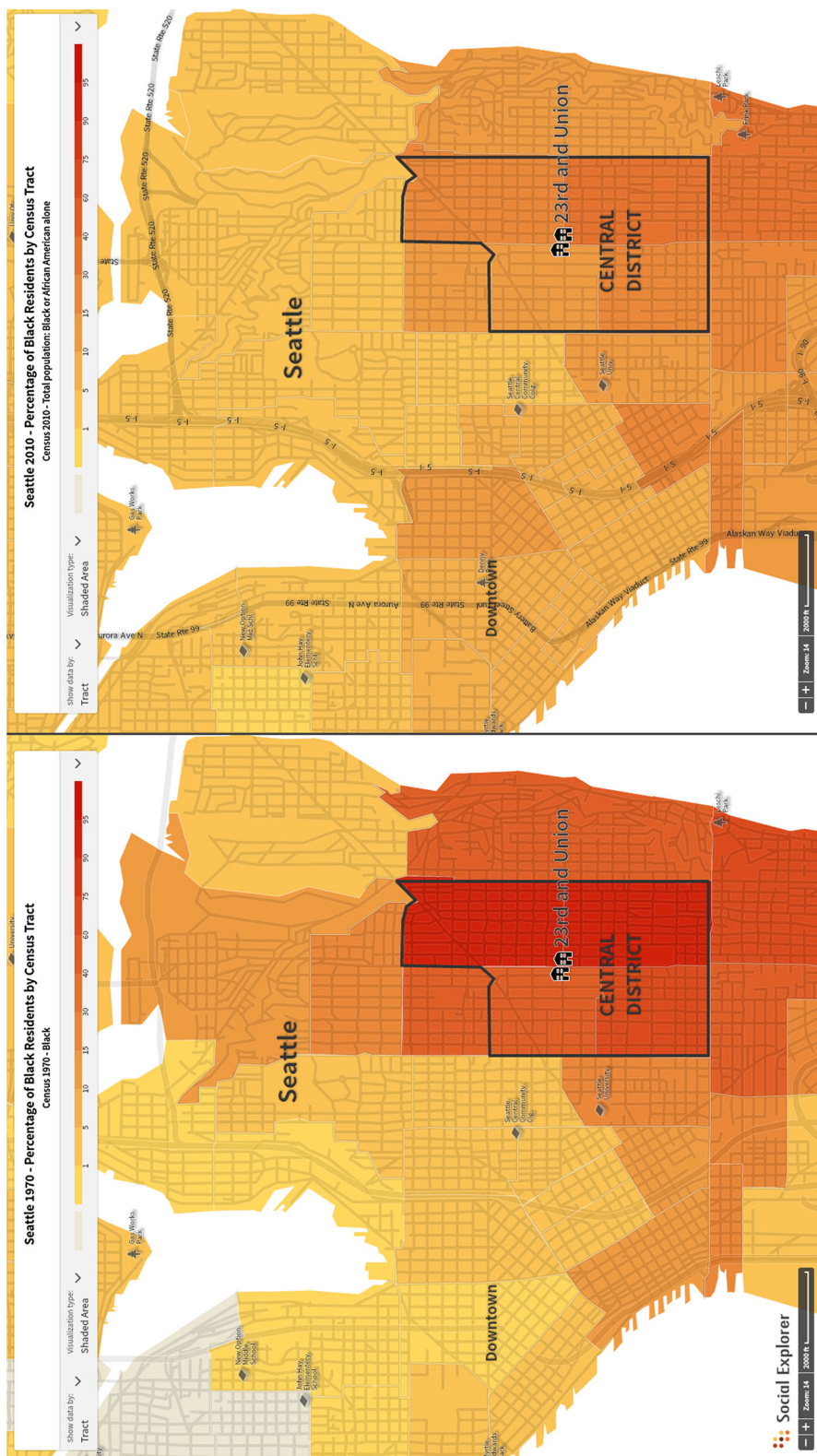


Figure 1: Change in percentage of black residents in Seattle's Central District neighborhood between 1970 and 2010

making up 78.5% of the CD's population in 1970, to 58.5% in 1990, to 21.6% in 2010 (US Census 1970–2010). While white residents now make up the majority of the neighborhood, some African American residents struggle to maintain a foothold in the community they have built for themselves. Such is the case of Clean Greens.

Founded in 2007 by longstanding African American residents of the CD, Clean Greens Farm and Market provides affordable fresh produce to low-income people. Founder Robert Jeffrey, Reverend of a Baptist church in the CD, draws connections between the organization's work and the civil rights movement. Clean Greens is the latest branch of the Reverend's three decades of working to increase the economic and political autonomy of Seattle's African American community. The organization leases 22 acres of farmland 30 miles outside of Seattle, cultivating food that is sold through their farm stands and Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program. In the long-term Clean Greens seeks to create economically and environmentally sustainable jobs for low-income residents, but at present the production and distribution of the food is conducted predominantly by volunteer labor. Clean Greens' community food work is deeply intertwined in a struggle against racial and economic inequalities, and they aim to establish community-owned projects that will enable the African American community to thrive in the neighborhood they call home. It is Clean Greens' commitment to social justice, its African American leadership and its strong roots in the CD that make the organization unique among community food projects in Seattle.

To understand how Clean Greens' food justice practice differs from other community food organizations working in the CD, I also investigate the urban farming group Ace of Spades. I chose to research the Aces to understand the intentions and actions of an urban farming collective—the establishment of urban gardens in low-income neighborhoods has been a common form of food activism across North America in recent years. Ace of Spades was garnering a lot of attention online and in the Seattle food movement when I first began this research in 2010, founded that year by a group of young predominantly white individuals. The collective's stated mission is to “(re)connect folks with food” by building urban farms in neighborhoods that lack access to affordable healthy food and have higher rates of health problems. The Aces identified vacant plots of land in South Seattle and contacted the landowners, seeking to establish gardens in what they term “underutilized” urban spaces. They have established garden sites in Beacon Hill and the CD, two South Seattle neighborhoods with larger proportions of non-white residents than Seattle's city-wide demographic (Ramírez 2011). Ace of Spades' gardens are open for anyone to farm; they share the harvest amongst whoever volunteers, and the remaining harvest is donated to local food banks.

In the spring of 2010 I began volunteering with each organization, responding to calls for volunteers to work on their respective farms. After these initial encounters, I requested interviews with the leaders of each organization, who were aware of my position as a researcher from our first interactions. My level of participation with each organization, however, varies dramatically, for I only volunteered at Ace of Spades' CD garden a few times, whereas my level of involvement with Clean Greens has been extensive. Initially I worked as an occasional volunteer at Clean

Greens' farm, and went on to be actively involved in the organization's development through 2013. In 2010–2011, I conducted qualitative interviews with leaders at each organization who were intimately familiar with the workings of the organization. Interviews were conducted in cafes or in a location that the interview subject suggested, such as their home or office, and all were audio-recorded after receiving subjects' approval and consent. The following sections engage with the data collected at these interviews, and reveal the ways that black geographies and race emerge through community food activism.

Black Food Geographies

Founder Robert Jeffrey has been building social justice projects in the CD since the mid-1980s, and Clean Greens is the product of decades of radical black activism, a manifestation of the CD's black geographies. Clean Greens is an offshoot of the Black Autonomy Mobilization (BAM), an organization that Jeffrey founded in the 1980s to promote economic justice by funding black community-based development projects. The organization grew extensively in the late 1980s–early 1990s, building a substantial volunteer base and political presence in Seattle. However, when Jeffrey's church and BAM's office space burnt down in 1995, the organization lost a great deal of momentum. Jeffrey mentioned that some Seattle political leaders have urged him to change the name of the organization, saying that BAM will never succeed because having "Black" in the title deters people. The Reverend, however, scoffs at this suggestion, saying that is precisely why the organization calls itself Black, to challenge stigmas of blackness and the sort of inclusionary politics that waters down social movements. "Those people don't believe in black autonomy," Jeffrey explained, "they don't understand that this is a key part of our movement. We don't want an upper-middle class movement" (personal correspondence, January 2011). Jeffrey's statement reveals how BAM and Clean Greens are political movements born of the black geographies of the CD. Much like Black Power advocates before him, who "were intolerant of appeasing white liberals with language that whites approved", Jeffrey refuses to let the movement be bought out by the upper-middle class (Tyner 2006:228). Clean Greens pushes a politics that is proudly black, that stems from and strengthens an alternative geography of the CD—a unique sense of the CD that cultivates an alternate vision of what is politically possible.

The leaders of Clean Greens believe that their organization differs from others in Seattle for they are not entering a community to address food insecurity—they are members of the community itself. Maya, the former CSA coordinator of Clean Greens, sees the organization as better able to reach the black community than other projects:

I think Clean Greens eventually will connect to this community ... because we are African Americans out here doing this work, I think we can connect with people ... in a way that maybe someone else cannot, just because we are the same people (Maya interview, February 2011).

Maya stresses that trust is key to address issues of food insecurity in the CD's African American community, and emphasizes that Clean Greens can best do this work because they "are the same people". Clean Greens leaders possess an embodied

knowledge of the black and low-income geographies of Seattle. This embodied knowledge enables Clean Greens leaders to understand what their community most needs, and they see food insecurity as deeply intertwined with the poverty, racism, and underemployment black CD residents face. Much like other black autonomy movements throughout African American history (McCutcheon 2013), Clean Greens sees the land as a tool of liberation; by cultivating land, they create a black food geography that addresses structural inequalities by employing residents in the production and distribution of sustainably grown food. Such is the vision of the leaders of Clean Greens—to build black autonomy in the CD so that black residents can resist displacement and thrive in their home neighborhood. The black geographies of Clean Greens influence the spaces they create, embedding the spaces with a viscosity of blackness. Viscosity refers to the tendency of a collective of bodies of a particular race becoming viscous, or attracting each other and becoming sticky (Saldanha 2007). Studying viscosity:

enables a rigorous grasping of social spaces by putting the dynamic physicality of human bodies and their interactions at the forefront of analysis. In basic terms, viscosity pertains to two dimensions of a collective of bodies: its sticking together, and its relative permeability (Saldanha 2007:5).

For Clean Greens, the black food spaces they create exude a viscosity that makes their projects more approachable to black residents, since the prevalence of black bodies implies that it is a safe space, free of racialized microaggressions.

Despite this black viscosity, Clean Greens struggles to get black residents to come out and volunteer on the farm. While the farm-stand volunteers and customers are mostly African American residents, Clean Greens Program Director Lottie explains that the majority of people who volunteer on the farm are not:

Now we have about eight people from church that's dedicated to helping ... But the other [volunteers], it's predominately white ... We don't have very many black people that come out and work on the farm ... My daughters tell me, "You came from the farm, why would you want to go back out there in the fields?"; I say, it's not like the fields where I came from. I had to do that to help my parents out to make a living. I'm not doing it to make a living now. I'm doing this for healthiness. But they haven't been out to the farm not once (Lottie interview, February 2011).

Lottie's reflections unearth a conversation that all of the leaders of Clean Greens brought up in their interviews: the organization's struggle to engage black residents in farming. As she alludes to above, Lottie migrated to Seattle from Louisiana in the 1960s, where her parents were sharecroppers when she was a girl. Despite Lottie's passion for Clean Greens, and her distinction of how farming is now something she does joyously, her daughters do not understand why she would want to farm, why she would want to take part in an act that her family was once forcibly tied to. Lottie's comments unearth a fraught history of farming within the CD's African American community that complicates Clean Greens' efforts to engage black residents in their food justice work. As Jeffrey elaborates:

The weird thing that we are dealing with in the African American community is the whole history of slavery ... of sharecropping ... of the exploitation of people through

the land. The land was used to destroy the self-esteem, the will of the people, the spirit of people. So instead of blaming the system, they blame the land ... the land then becomes the reminder of the pain and the hurt and the suffering and the inhumanity (Jeffrey interview, 11 February 2010).

The disconnect that Jeffrey notices in the African American community does not emerge from a lack of motivation to farm, but rather from a historical trauma of exploitation, where the plantation regime violently tied African Americans to the land for generations.

As a result, black residents of the CD are reluctant to volunteer on the farm for they largely perceive agricultural work to be demeaning. As Reverend Jeffrey eloquently explains:

The people of this community support the farm, but there is a disconnect when it comes to actually being in the dirt, planting seeds, harvesting crops. And that disconnect comes as a result of the historical problem in our community. A lot of the people who we deal with come from the south. The younger people do not come from the south but their grandmothers and their mothers came from the south, and they told these kids all the horror stories. These are collective memories about a horror that people went through, and this horror, unfortunately, is connected to the land and to the earth ... I've seen people cringe about the thought of getting on their knees in the dirt and planting a seed. People telling us they would never do that, they would help out in any way that they can but they would never be out in the field (quoted in Dohrn 2011).

Following Jeffrey's explanations, the collective memory of slavery and the violent racist processes it produced continue to resonate within the black imaginary of farming. While McCutcheon (2011, 2013) has documented similar black imaginaries of the farm as a space of terror in her research, she also notes that the farm represents a space of hope in the black geographical imagination. In other studies that have documented black farmers and their use of the land as a tool of liberation (Fields-Black 2008; Kelley 1990), the black farmers addressed reside in a rural setting, often in the American South. In the case of Clean Greens, nearly all of the black residents actively involved in the organization, particularly those who regularly worked on the farm, were born in the South. As Jeffrey points out, the urban black population of Seattle that Clean Greens is working to engage are largely descendants of those who migrated from the South two or three generations prior, residents who have little if any experience with farming.

How might an urban black imaginary of farming differ from a rural black imaginary of farming? To what extent has the urbanization and distancing of the black population from the rural south, from the site of the plantation—the origin of black dispossession and oppression on this continent, altered the black farming imaginary? The plantation complex is central to the construction and destruction of African American aspirations and the rural south is the pillar of African American identity and consciousness (Woods 1998:12, 31). How might urban black geographies, in an effort to create distance from African Americans' violent history with farming, have erased alternate memories and relationships with the land that are now being revived by black food justice geographies. As McKittrick elaborates, under the plantation complex, plots of land were given to some slaves so they could

grow their own food and nourish themselves, thus maximizing profits within the plantation economy. These plots of land:

illustrate a social order that is developed within the context of a dehumanizing system as it spatializes what would be considered impossible under slavery: the actual growth of narratives, food, and cultural practices that materialize deep connections between blackness and the earth and foster values that challenge systemic violence (2013:10).

Black food geographies were born under slavery; African Americans' lived experiences and dispossession are intertwined with technologies and cultures of resistance. The land was an intrinsic tool in black autonomy, and the seeds for liberation were passed on through the generations. For African Americans, the land and farming have always been considered the basis for black autonomy (Heynen 2009; Woods 1998); what black food justice projects are doing is replanting the seeds of liberation that were misplaced after the Great Migration, reconnecting urban black geographies to the black food geographies that cultivate power through farming.

Out on the farm, Lottie often recounts memories from her childhood of sharecropping as she tills the soil. The act of farming unearths these memories from her past, and Lottie speaks of them without anger or remorse in her voice—she speaks these memories with a touch of humor, seemingly content to release them, to free them from her subconsciousness. As McKittrick elaborates:

the site of memory is also the *sight* of memory—imagination requires a return to and an engagement with painful places, worlds where black people were and are denied humanity ... the site of memory displays and utters new sites of being, and a different sense of place, as they are embedded with forgetfulness (2006:33).

The act of farming and remembering trauma through farming releases sites/sights of memory. This eruption of memory is powerful for it makes visible the violent histories of slavery and sharecropping that have been erased and forgotten by the dominant American ideology, and acknowledges how these plantation legacies uphold uneven geographies of the present.

What you cannot see, and cannot remember, is part of a broader geographic project that thrives on forgetting and displacing blackness ... the site of memory is a powerful black geography because employing it assumes that the story of blackness in the diaspora is actual and possible, and that the discursive erasure of black peoples does not eliminate how they have been implicated in the construction of space (McKittrick 2006:33–34).

Remembering from one's memories or remembering what has been erased creates powerful oppositional geographies. These black geographies reinscribe the landscape with meaning, reproduce space in ways that challenge the plantation legacy, and refuse to succumb to the bleak and unjust present. The black food geographies revived by organizations such as Clean Greens produce powerful political alternatives and spatial imaginaries of a more just future.

There is tremendous potential in black food geographies, to overcome historical traumas and to build black autonomy through farming. The leaders of Clean Greens possess an experiential knowledge that enables them to lead a liberatory movement. As Maya elaborates:

I really think more than any other group of people, Clean Greens has the ability to communicate the importance of food justice to low-income families, people of color, than probably any other project ... I see Clean Greens changing the perspective of the way people eat, and what access they have to food, and what access they have to employment and their relationship to food. I see Clean Greens can potentially do that better than someone else. Because of who we are (Maya interview, 14 February 2011).

Despite their enthusiasm and vision to change the present, Clean Greens struggles to expand their projects—indeed they struggle to even stay afloat. While a large part of this struggle is due to the organization’s severe under-funding and the lack of time, resources and social capital needed to secure funding, another layer of their struggle could be generational. The current leaders of Clean Greens are over 60 years old, and the primary volunteers are retired folks from the community. While Clean Greens attracts at least a handful of young volunteers each growing season, young black volunteers are scarce. Their attempts to engage youth from the community have usually been short term, and only when they were able to offer paid positions to run the farm stands. Once again, this struggle to engage youth is also a consequence of lacking resources, but I question how much the generational gap plays a role. Perhaps what Clean Greens needs is not only a black viscosity, but a viscosity of black youth; if the space is invigorated with a more youthful aesthetic perhaps other young people will engage and incorporate their own geographies into the movement.

More research on black food geographies and black food justice projects is needed to get a sense of how and if these geographies are carrying on to the black millennial generation, or if community food work is considered to be too “white” to get involved in. In a city like Seattle where the majority of community food leaders are white, it is understandable why farming could be labeled as such. As Maya, the former CSA Coordinator and youngest leader of Clean Greens divulged, “food justice and all these organic things, to be honest with you, before this year I thought of it as white people. That’s what white people do” (interview, February 2011). To get a sense of “what white people do” in Seattle’s community food scene, and how a white-led community food project differs from a black food geography, the following section delves into fieldwork with the urban farming collective, Ace of Spades.

White Garden Spaces

Since 2010, Ace of Spades has built three gardens in “underutilized urban spaces” in South Seattle. As the organization’s co-founder, Adam, explained, the Aces set out to establish farms in “neighborhoods that were lacking access to food and had high rates of diabetes and obesity”: the CD and Beacon Hill. The Aces seek to engage residents that live close to their farming sites, and express an underlying desire to build relationships through the cultivation of food. When discussing the level of community participation at their gardens, Adam brings up the organization’s white leadership without being prompted:

Some of the questions and criticisms that we've gotten is because we're predominantly white ... and that's one of the things that we recognize. It's there. And it's really easy to look at our group and see us as, you know, the white people coming into the neighborhood and kind of almost taking over. But when you work with us, and understand the intentions behind what we're doing, and that we, you know, we are aware of these issues, and we are aligning ourselves with groups that fight for these issues (Adam interview, January 2011).

Adam's vagueness in this quote is striking. The benign reference to "these issues" could be interpreted to refer to racial differences, structural racism or gentrification even—he stumbles over his words in an attempt to defend the Aces' good intentions. Adam's awareness of "these issues" is coupled with an insistence that the Aces are responsible neighbors, "aligning themselves" with others who do the social justice work they do not. Later in the interview, Adam is asked if he thinks the Aces' whiteness hinders the willingness of residents of color to participate, and he responds:

I think it ... I'm, I'm sure it does. It's hard to say. But I'm sure it does ... It's like, our mission is solely to connect folks with food though the neighboring farms. Very simple, to food, you know? We don't touch on the social justice side of it on our website.

Once again, Adam recognizes how the Aces' whiteness could pose an obstacle, but does not engage with it. At times Adam's uncertainty makes it difficult to discern what he is referring to, and his speech has characteristics of what Bonilla-Silva calls "the language of colorblindness":

Because the new racial climate in America forbids the open expression of racially based feelings, views, and positions, when whites discuss issues that make them feel uncomfortable, they become almost incomprehensible ... this incoherent talk is the result of talking about race in a world that insists race does not matter (2003:68).

If incoherent talk can be used as an indicator of a color-blind racial politics, then Adam is clearly struggling with how to engage in a discussion of race, particularly regarding his own privileged position.

Adam recognizes how their efforts to engage the community in gardening can be perceived as invasive, yet insists that their presence is not harmful for their intentions are good. This negation has much to do with the privileged position of the Aces, and reflects an inability to understand how he is implicated in structural racism. For "it is precisely because few whites are aware of the benefits they receive simply from being white and that their actions, without malicious intent, may undermine the well-being of people of color, that white privilege is so pervasive and powerful" (Pulido 2000:15). Adam has the privilege to acknowledge racism, to acknowledge that he may be perceived as part of a collective of whites "taking over" a community, and yet displace any responsibility for how he is complicit in reproducing uneven geographies. He can rely on his position of privilege and yet ignore it at the same time, all the while feeling he is doing no wrong for his intentions are good. The actions of the predominantly white Aces are well meaning and "without malicious intent", yet the imposition of their privileged presence upon a poor community can have detrimental effects. The act of building gardens in low-income

communities may inadvertently “undermine the well-being of people of color” by attracting development that pushes them out of the neighborhood. The group migration of “creative producers”, or young underemployed artists, to a low-income neighborhood has long been identified as an onset of gentrification (Zukin 1987, 2008). I consider these young white gardeners to be a form of creative producers in their own right, creatively reclaiming vacant urban space much like the artists reclaim abandoned industrial warehouses. And similar to

most urban gentrifiers, [they] lead both an aesthetic and ascetic life ... they claim to admire—some even say make a fetish of—the ethnic diversity of their neighbors ... “sharing the streets with working class and non-white residents ... is part of their image of an authentic urban experience” (Zukin 2008:727).

This fetishism of non-white neighbors means no harm, and yet urban gentrifiers are fueling capitalist processes of “urban renewal” that will eventually displace low-income non-white residents (Smith, 1996). While recreating neglected urban spaces into “productive” spaces to grow food is inspiring and beneficial on one level, the prevalence of white bodies inhabiting garden spaces reifies uneven geographies and catalyzes gentrifying forces.

The Aces reclaim abandoned spaces in poor urban areas and make it “productive” by building gardens on that land. Their CD garden has transformed a space that had been abandoned, symbolic of the lack of investment in poor communities. One of their gardens is located on the intersection of 23rd and Union streets, formerly the commercial and cultural center of the CD’s black community.⁵ As Adam noted:

Especially on that intersection in the Central District, there’s not a lot of opportunity there for anything. It’s an empty lot, deserted gas station that’s being taken over by someone new at some point ... And that’s it. There’s really not anything going on. And I read about ... how it used to be like the center of civic life for the Central District years ago. And how can that ... [be revived]... what does that entail? ... How do we do it? (Adam interview, January 2011).

While Aces have succeeded in reclaiming desolate spaces of the neighborhood and revitalizing them, their inhabiting of the space has racialized it in a new way. Whereas the neglected space was symbolic of the urban deterioration of what was once a thriving African American neighborhood, the renewed space is symbolic of the ingenuity of the white collective. The garden has been built with the intention of rejuvenating the neighborhood, but these actions reify an imaginary of black neighborhoods being “left behind”, in need of the innovations that developers could bring, and further normalize processes of black dispossession (Lipsitz 2007; McKittrick 2011). Aces do not seem to recognize how their actions may discount these black geographies; they feel they are reclaiming the garden space not for themselves but for the whole community:

We work with the landowners ... and so we’ve like reclaimed this space. And so it’s hard ... it’s just not a common conversation where you’re like, I’ve reclaimed this space for all of us ... in a way that really resonates with people, and resonates with different groups of people. And figuring out what message, or project, is going to resonate with different groups to get them engaged has been challenging (Fiona interview, February 2011).

Fiona views the gardens as being transformative spaces that can overcome difference, yet she does not seem to recognize how their actions aid processes of gentrification and thus may not be perceived by residents as the creation of communal space. The landowners were happy to allow the Aces to work the land, knowing that their reclaiming of the space would give their land more value by making it productive. The land also accumulates value by being utilized by white individuals, for “white land is more valuable by virtue of its whiteness” (Pulido 2000:16). Thus the Aces’ white garden spaces accumulate value and fuel gentrification, enabling landowners to profit as the black geographies of the CD are displaced.⁶

The whiteness of the garden space is also produced through the visibility of those who are working in the garden, and the garden is embedded with a white viscosity. A consideration of viscosity allows for a more nuanced understanding of how race is embodied within spaces and through interaction, enabling a “fundamentally spatial way of imagining race” (Saldanha 2007:10). Thus, if the majority of volunteers working in a garden are white, their collective whiteness can become viscous, forming a force field that is not easily penetrated by non-white individuals. Built and populated by white volunteers, Ace’s gardens can be perceived as white spaces, and the viscosity of the bodies gardening can code the gardens as white. For non-white individuals to enter a garden, they must break the racial viscosity embedded in the space itself. It is uncomfortable for anyone to introduce oneself to a community of strangers; people of color must not only insert themselves into a foreign environment, but they must grapple with the power asymmetries embedded in the space. Thus, the white privilege of the Aces simultaneously assists them in establishing gardens and hinders their ability to engage residents of color in their efforts. Since the racial positionality of the Aces is inescapable, they will unintentionally continue to reproduce white garden spaces in their efforts.

At times the Aces’ frustration with the lack of community engagement leave them struggling for an explanation to justify this lack. For example, as Troy, co-founder of Ace of Spades, explains how Ace is “conducting outreach” by collaborating with an African American Community Center, he notes that the obstacles in their outreach are mainly due to “cultural differences”:

We’ve been working with other organizations that want to be a part of this ... We set up meetings with them. We do things. And they don’t do ... *they’re not like us. They don’t show up with like enthusiasm, and organization, and ready to make productive change ...* The part of community outreach that’s really important is to work with them on their timeline and understand what their perspective is, and what their priorities are. *And maybe culturally for them, it takes like five meetings where they don’t show up on time ...* And so we just had to realize, wow, they really want to have this garden. It’s really important to them. *But they just don’t know how to get their community together to make this happen ...* So we’re just like, we’re going to do it ... We’re gonna bring volunteers in, and we’re going to build the gardens out for them to help them get to the next level (Troy interview, February 2011, emphasis added).

Troy was visibly frustrated with the pace of their collaboration with the Community Center, and he tried to justify this frustration by framing the difference in their processes as “cultural difference”. His reference to “culturally, for them” seems to

connote race, as common discourses of cultural difference can often serve as code for racial difference (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Mitchell 2014). As such, Troy equates the Community Center's "slower" pace to be due to their culture, his white socio-spatial epistemology that enables him to survey the Community Center leaders from an assumed position of authority, and determine their cultural flaws (Dwyer and Jones 2000). By chalking up the Community Center's pace to cultural or racial difference, Troy erases agency of the Center's activists, overlooking how they may not have the time or resources to work at the Aces' pace due to economic constraints. Troy also does not recognize how the way he operates and engages with the Center's leaders may be silencing them and preventing a true collaboration from occurring. Instead, he attributes the slow pace of their collaboration as a matter of difference, and that the way to resolve this delay is for the Aces to take over the project to get it done. It seems that Troy sees the collaboration not as the building of a relationship between the two groups, but rather as a transaction, to accomplish a goal and move on.

However, another of Aces leaders, Fiona, seems more aware of how Ace of Spades may be perceived by the CD community and stresses their intention to collaborate:

It's a fine line too, especially within the food justice kind of arena ... I think the CD is susceptible to this too, you know, the whole like gentrification. You know, people coming in to tell the people who live there what they need and starting these gardens. I think that people are sensitive to that. They're like, we didn't ask for a garden, now you want me to come out and volunteer my time to do this? Thanks, but no thanks. And while people are appreciative that it's no longer a vacant lot with empty beer bottles on it, they're like, you can go on and do your thing, you know? A lot of times projects like ours do tend to get lumped into this whole gentrification category ... and that's why we've really tried to be really strategic about the projects that we'll do in the CD. And [the Community Center] ... I see it as a little bit different, because they're saying we want a garden, but we just don't know how to do it (Fiona interview, February 2011).

Fiona is aware of the critiques of groups like Aces, and has a more nuanced understanding than Adam or Troy as to why CD residents would be reluctant to engage in Aces' projects. She recognizes how Ace "gets lumped into the whole gentrification category" yet she does not distinguish how their project may be different. As Fiona says, people appreciate that the space is being revitalized, that there is a garden rather than a vacant lot, but they would rather not participate. The garden is permeated with the Aces viscosity of whiteness, and also of their urban gardening lifestyle—the shared interests and aesthetics that magnetize them to each other can be equally repellant to others, leaving residents saying "thanks but no thanks". Such is the power of viscosity; a racial and aesthetic momentum that draws people together, and repels those that are different. Fiona notes how they have tried to be strategic about the projects they are undertaking and build collaborations, so they aren't just "coming in", yet maintaining garden spaces in south Seattle remain the collective's primary objective, and their viscosity prevails.

By creating white garden spaces in the CD, the Aces are reproducing inequalities in the neighborhood, fueling processes that dispossess black geographies. While conducting “outreach” through collaboration with other organizations has become a side-project of theirs, the Aces’ primary mission remains the reclaiming “underutilized” land in south Seattle. They do not want to give up their privileged garden spaces, even if such spaces are inadvertently fueling a process that is harmful to the very residents they seek to assist. As such, the Aces are exuding a possessive investment in whiteness (Lipsitz 1998); a structural advantage that rewards white people while imposing impediments to asset accumulation for people of color. The white activists feel entitled to build gardens and to lead these projects; as Adam explained, “people are going to come out if they want. You can do so much. Like you got to be met halfway somewhere” (Adam interview, 31 January 2011). Adam’s privilege enables him to believe that if residents of color do not take part in their projects, it is their loss; the Aces did everything they could to include them and they simply did not meet them half way. What the Aces fail to realize is how “our possessive investments in our own racial privilege influence how we define problems and solutions” (DuPuis and Goodman 2005:362). For the Aces building a garden in a low-income neighborhood is a solution to food insecurity, yet this action fuels processes that dispossess residents of color and reify power asymmetries in the neighborhood. Ace of Spades have earnestly and passionately worked to build inclusive urban gardens in Seattle’s CD, demonstrating the “halting efforts of alternative food advocates to be white differently” (Slocum 2007:526). They disavow racism, they acknowledge structural inequities, and they have created a project that seeks to push beyond the societal limitations that divide people and to imagine new possibilities for change. Yet with all their good intentions and enthusiasm, the Aces reproduce violent power asymmetries, furthering processes of gentrification that disenfranchise the African American community of the CD. White food activists such as the Aces can only truly help alleviate the racial and economic inequalities that low-income communities of color face if they recognize how their possessive investment in urban gardens may be harming their neighbors more than helping them.

Conclusion

In this article I have argued that efforts to build more “inclusive” community food projects in low-income neighborhoods of color are not addressing the power asymmetries built into the projects themselves, and will continue to struggle to build participation until these power imbalances are addressed. Drawing from black geographies literature, I argue that black geographies and other alternative geographies possess a differential knowledge and spatial politics that can radically reimagine the uneven geographies of the present. Clean Greens struggles against black dispossession in Seattle by creating black food spaces, maintaining black viscosity in the CD and refusing to be displaced. They see food as an engine through which many inequities can be addressed, creating economic opportunities for black residents and improving community health through greater food access. However,

Clean Greens also grapples with historical traumas of slavery that hinder the ability of even a black-led food justice organization to engage black residents in farming.

Black food geographies unearth the violent histories of slavery that have been buried in the American consciousness, using memory to legitimize the traumas that linger like specters the present, and re-envision the black farming imaginary. These geographies can greatly inform critical food studies, revealing the complex relationship between African Americans and farming, and how the plantation bears the roots of the global racial capitalist system. By centralizing black geographies in my analysis, this article offers an example of how community food projects and critical food studies can be nourished by the knowledge and spatial politics of alternative geographies. Further studies that centralize the alternative geographies present in community food work are needed, and I urge critical food scholars to be wary of reproducing power asymmetries in their scholarship by presuming the practitioner of community food work is a privileged white actor.

Lastly, I revealed the ways that white garden spaces in low-income neighborhoods can reproduce neighborhood power asymmetries by further dispossessing residents of color. When white activists create gardens on abandoned tracts of land, the abandoned space is re-inscribed as white space, which adds value to the land by nature of its whiteness. In the case of *Ace of Spades* in Seattle, these gardens displace the black geographies of the neighborhood, and negate the agency of black residents as producers of space. The white garden spaces thus fuel gentrifying processes by increasing land value and attracting further development of the neighborhood, while the gardens remain populated by white bodies that, I argue, spatially exclude non-white bodies. The viscosity of the gardens attracts more white bodies of a similar aesthetic, and the more white bodies the more viscous and impenetrable the space becomes to non-white residents, despite their inclusionary intentions.

Although racially viscous spaces can hinder other bodies from entering, the stickiness also allows for a degree of comfort and power that can be utilized by black residents to reclaim the farm space for their own. While this may seem to reproduce the exclusivism of white garden spaces, it serves as a survival mechanism for marginalized peoples living in an oppressive society. I argue that if white activists are truly practicing an anti-racist politics, they will reevaluate their efforts, consider how they may be exuding a possessive investment in whiteness, and seek out projects led by the marginalized respectfully and with humility.

To end on a hopeful note, and to reveal the potential that I believe food justice activism holds, I return to the wisdom of Reverend Jeffrey:

The majority of our volunteers come from outside of the African American community. I think that a lot of people see this as a means of helping to solve some of the problems with poverty, helping to solve some of the problems with the absence of community. And it does, because people come in and they work together and it creates community (Jeffrey interview, 1 November 2010).

I believe there is tremendous potential in food justice activism; potential for transformation and for political alliance through interracial and interclass engagement. What makes Clean Greens' work different is that engagements occur within a space

led and negotiated by the African American leaders, creating a politics of alliance that is framed by the black geographies of the CD. The “community” or future that is imagined within these black farming spaces is radically different than the “inclusive” spaces attempted by white activists for these spaces emerge from black geographies: they are “the sites through which particular forces of empire ... bring forth a poetics that envisions a decolonial future” (McKittrick 2013:5). Black food geographies offer a transformative politics that have the potential to reimagine the asymmetry of the present. To prevent further displacement of people of color, I urge white food activists and scholars to decolonize their practice—to take a step back, and listen.

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Endnotes

- ¹ The name “Ace of Spades” and its leaders are pseudonyms. Originally I used pseudonyms for members of Clean Greens as well, but now the actual names of Reverend Jeffrey and Lottie are used, per their request. They wanted their efforts to be known and not shrouded by pseudonyms.
- ² Black geographies are by no means the only alternative geography implicated in the racial histories of agriculture, and while the geographies of migrant workers are not engaged in this study, their embodied experiences offer another necessary lens for a conversation on agriculture and oppression.
- ³ The 98118 zip code made up of Seattle’s Columbia City and South Beacon Hill neighborhoods has been proclaimed one of the most diverse in the nation by various local media citing 2010 Census data.
- ⁴ For an in-depth genealogy of the BPP in Seattle, see the “Seattle Black Panther Party History and Memory Project”: <http://depts.washington.edu/civilr/BPP.htm>
- ⁵ Testimonies of the meaning of the 23rd and Union intersection to Seattle’s black community were documented by local radio station, KUOW: <http://www2.kuow.org/program.php?id=18265>
- ⁶ As of October 2014, a vacant lot across the street from one of the Aces gardens on 23rd and Union has begun redevelopment into market-rate apartments and retail space: <http://www.capitolhillseattle.com/2014/01/developer-pays-3-8-million-for-23rd-and-union-project-will-begin-construction-this-spring/>

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