



**“Oh honey, don’t you know?”  
The Social Construction of Food Access in a  
Food Desert**

**Gloria Howerton**

Department of Geography, University of Georgia, Athens, GA, USA  
gjhowert@uga.edu

**Amy Trauger**

Department of Geography, University of Georgia, Athens, GA, USA  
atrauger@uga.edu

---

---

**Abstract**

Food deserts are demarcated areas characterized by limited food access, often defined by geographical distance from grocery stores. Literature suggests that food deserts are produced through uneven development, but also racial bias in the location of grocery stores. Socio-economic inequalities thus intersect with racialized landscapes, and this suggests that food deserts are both culturally and economically produced. Research on food desert solutions often emphasize narrow spatial analyses that privilege geographic solutions, as well as incorporate whitened understandings of access to food. We assert that food access is shaped by the racialized construction of places, and that small-scale grocery stores, which are understudied in food desert research, may be useful places to study how access to food is culturally produced. Using intercept interviews inside and outside of two small-scale grocery stores, we examined the production of social exclusion around food access in a USDA classified food desert in a small Southern city. We conclude that economic development that integrates community organizing and

place-making activities are keys to mitigating social exclusion in food deserts, and call for further research on in the role of place in shaping access to food.

## **Keywords**

Food desert; social exclusion; community imaginary; place narratives

---

## **Introduction**

In 2008, the USDA identified that nearly 24 million people live more than a mile from a supermarket, and that nearly half of those fall into a "low-income" category (USDA-ERS, 2009). The report acknowledges that food deserts, a term coined to capture retail gaps in access to food, exist in places with concentrated poverty, uneven development and racial inequality. The policy recommendations include economic development and investment in the form of mostly large-scale retail infrastructure. The USDA report acknowledges that other important food sources besides supermarkets exist, although they are undercounted in food surveys, and research shows that they are plagued by political and economic constraints (Robinson et al, 2016; Quandt et al, 2014). Small-scale food retail formats (i.e., small-scale groceries and co-operatives) are often located in food deserts, but more research is needed to understand their scope and role in urban food security strategies.

This paper is thus concerned with investigating how to remediate uneven food access, and we aim to contribute to the existing food justice literature that presumes that uneven access to food is a function of intersecting social, political and economic factors (Guthman 2008; Mares and Peña, 2011; McClintock 2011). To that end, we conducted a study using two small-scale groceries in food deserts in a small southern college town to understand how alternative forms of food retail (i.e., not supermarkets or gas stations) are perceived as sources of food by residents of food deserts. We chose these invisible urban foodways to better understand if the existing, but overlooked, food infrastructure can remediate uneven access to fresh and healthy food (Raja, Ma and Yadav, 2008; Cannuscio, Weiss and Asch, 2010). We found that small-scale retail formats provide important sources of fresh and healthy food in these particular food deserts, but racialized perceptions of place, social exclusions and financial instability of the stores negatively impacted sustained access to it.

## **Background and Context**

Despite the fact that more than enough food is produced for everyone in the United States, nearly 14 percent of all households suffer from food insecurity in 2014 (USDA, 2015). A 'food desert' is a geographical concept designed to capture the persistent retail gaps that exist in food provisioning in poor and underserved neighborhoods typically in inner cities, but also in rural communities (Bellinger

and Wang, 2011; Shaw, 2006; Gordon et al., 2011; Thomas, 2010; Walker, Keane and Burke, 2010). Food deserts are described as areas devoid of supermarkets (Walker et al., 2010), areas with limited access to affordable and nutritious food (USDA-ERS, 2009), or areas with limited access to food, which also suffer from deprivation and social exclusion (Wrigley et al., 2002). We turn our attention to this third definition in this paper to understand the role that social exclusion in the context of uneven development plays in food access.

### ***Uneven Development, Racialized Social Exclusion and Access to Food***

Capitalist economic and social relations are at the root of disparities in power that are mapped out over unevenly developed spaces (Lefebvre, 1992). One way in which this is made tangible is via the normalization of restricted spatial access to healthful food for those who are less economically secure (Bedore, 2012). The food desert literature reveals that the economic status of a neighborhood is a likely indicator of its physical proximity to adequate healthful food. In this sense, then, food deserts are a geographic manifestation of uneven socioeconomic development patterns. Smith (1984) describes uneven development as:

both the product and the geographical premise of capitalist development. [...] Uneven development is social inequality blazoned into the geographical landscape, and it is simultaneously the exploitation of that geographical unevenness for certain socially determined ends (206).

Uneven development is both a process and an outcome of capitalist practices that require inequality for the production of surplus. McClintock (2011) writes that the devaluation of geographically specific capital (i.e., land in urban areas) and the abandonment of certain areas of the city in times of capitalist downturn undergird the unevenness of development. Decisions about where and when to invest in the city are brought about through public policy, taxes, and planning. What McClintock calls "demarcated devaluation" of zones within the city is felt viscerally in the form of hunger, crime, lack of adequate housing and contaminated water and soil. Uneven development is a highly racialized process, originating in forces lying outside the community itself, with minority communities facing the worst of its effects especially with regard to food access (Shannon, 2014).

Food deserts are also a geographic manifestation of the production of scarcity (Smith, 1984) in which places are underserved and overcharged for a vital commodity such as food. Those living in food deserts tend to be surrounded by fast food and convenience stores, consequently paying much more for lower quality food, including fruits and vegetables when they are available (Cannuscio, Weiss and Asch, 2010). As a result, many residents develop complex strategies for sourcing food outside their home neighborhoods (Ledoux and Vojnovic, 2012; Shannon, 2016). Given this, supermarkets or other food sources cannot be seen as a

simple and ready solution to the problem of food deserts. This strategy presumes that the residents of such neighborhoods are financially capable of supporting the store, now or in the future, and if not, that people from outside the neighborhood are willing to travel there to shop. Simply changing the retail environment for food access has also been shown to do little to alter food acquisition patterns (Cummins, Flint and Matthews, 2014). These are critical assumptions that overlook the social constructivist role that race and class play in the place-making process of constructing retail environments.

Generally speaking, economically well-off neighborhoods tend to have greater access to nutritious food, and poorer neighborhoods have less access, although that is not the whole story. Slocum and Saldanha (2016) assert that "racism is endemic to global food systems in the aftermath of colonialism" with predictable results for minority communities (3). Food access also tends to directly reflect and promote racial disparities within society, with segregation a significant factor shaping access to food and health outcomes (Moreland and Filomena, 2007; Kurtz, 2016). A survey of the retail environment in 39 US cities reported that neighborhoods with high percentages of African Americans were systematically underserved by retail food outlets, but Latino and lower-income non-African American groups were not, leading to a conclusion that the inner-city retail gap is in part racial in nature (Bellinger and Wang, 2011). Other studies find that whiter, higher-income neighborhoods are more likely to have immediate access to fresh fruits and vegetables than predominantly African American neighborhoods regardless of income level (Baker, et al. 2006). Block et al. (2004) determined that race has an effect separate from income, and suggest that inaccurate or stereotyped marketing profiles for black neighborhoods or racial bias influence business decision-making. Hellig and Sawicki (2003) assert that stereotyped profiling of black neighborhoods and racial bias explain the absence of grocery stores in many African American neighborhoods. This suggests that facilitating access to food is not simply a matter of the financial viability of a retail outlet for business owners, but something deeper and more embedded in racialized narratives about place, a point to which we return later in the analysis.

### ***Understanding Uneven Food Access***

While we agree that food deserts are the product of capitalist unevenness (McClintock, 2011), places within them are culturally produced through repeated interaction (Creswell, 1996). Food access exists in a world of meaning, navigated by people constantly engaging in acts of interpretation. For example, Shannon (2016) finds that perception of streets, stores and staff all shape whether and how a person might enter any given store to purchase food. Williams et al. (2010) identify that inclusion and self-exclusion characterize the experience of shopping, which is linked inextricably to the embodied experience of race. Delaney (2002) asserts that racialization processes are inherently spatial because race-centered ideologies mix with other ideological elements (such as citizenship), as well as other types of

power (such as law) to produce the landscapes of every-day life. The construction of place and landscape is thus tied up in common sense narratives of who belongs, which are reproduced through embodied performances (Cresswell, 1996).

The use of “as the crow flies” measurements of distances to food sources in food desert research does not account for neighborhood composition, and does not capture the complexity neighborhood-scale dynamics (McCutcheon, 2015). Distances used in food desert research, such as in the USDA report, are often arbitrarily based on radii ranging from 0.25 miles to 1 mile (Thomas, 2010; Walker et al., 2010; Gordon et al., 2011). These are considered “walkable distances,” that lend themselves well to research done using GIS to locate a supermarket, but which obscure how landscape factors, age, disability, the presence of young children, climate, and time poverty might also impact an individual's ability to access food in a store within one mile of the household (Shannon, 2016). Further, and more importantly for the most underserved neighborhoods, even when there are points of food access located within “walking distance” of any given household, such as a farmer's market, they may be socially exclusionary because they are coded as white and/or middle-class (Alkon and McCullen, 2010).

Well-intentioned efforts to bring “good food to others” often overlook the role that race plays in shaping access to food (Guthman, 2008). The “doing of good” in underserved neighborhoods draws attention away from the production of inequality under capitalism, and it allows advocates for alternative food systems to normalize middle class whiteness. It also shapes urban landscapes in the image of alternative food systems and obscures the food procurement strategies of low-income people of color (Lyons et al, 2013). The “community imaginary” (Alkon and McCullen, 2010) that is often held by advocates of and consumers in alternative food networks reflects liberal, white, affluent identities, and tends to obscure and justify structural barriers to entry for those who do not fit within this idea of “community.” This imaginary constitutes an unmarked category of perceived “goodness” that works to empower particular groups (i.e., white farmers and white consumers) while at the same time marginalizes others (i.e., low-income consumers, nonwhite laborers).

Haney-Lopez (1997) points to legal legitimation and racial reification as twin forces that constrain the imagination and encourage whiteness to exist as an unmarked category, or what he calls the “transparency phenomenon.” The reification of “unmarked” whiteness thus creates the norm around which other races are constructed, and obscures the experience of racial violence, white privilege and racial formation (Haney Lopez, 1997). It is this backdrop of legally and socially legitimized color-blindness that makes the study of the every-day spatial experiences racialized individuals so important (Peake and Schein, 2000). Price (2010) calls for the use of “narrative” as a strategy for understanding how people negotiate landscapes, and how narratives about belonging and exclusion serve as a powerful mechanism to shape the world and how it is experienced.

Alkon and Traugot (2008) highlight how narratives are particularly useful for explaining the social construction of place. They identify two narrative strategies. 1) place comparison, “in which actors negatively characterize nearby places to advocate for strategies intended to maintain differences between them” and 2) place meta-narratives, which are “culturally available tales [that] describe types of places and offer broad notions in which details of specific locales can be contextualized” (98). Given that places take on meaning through “common sense” notions that are reinforced by embodied performances of inclusion, members of privileged and dominant group have and use the power to (re)create landscapes in ways that fortify their specific ideal of community and place, and perpetuate similarities in proximate places or differentiation between places. These powerful social narratives have been shown in other research to have the potential to impact access to food (Slocum, 2006; Guthman, 2008; Alkon and McCullen, 2011). We draw on the concepts of community imaginaries and place narratives to understand whether and how existing food sources may be defined and influenced by social exclusion.

## **Methods and Methodology**

The research question animating this research was thus whether and how small-scale groceries (points of food access that are understudied) could mitigate food deserts at a neighborhood scale. Given that knowledge and racialized social exclusion are important factors shaping food access, we were especially interested in how small-scale groceries as places were described by both shoppers and non-shoppers. We used qualitative methodologies and frameworks to capture and analyze how people talked about and perceived social spaces. Discourse analysis informs our interpretation of the qualitative data in order to better understand the social construction of place in with regard to inclusion and exclusion, particularly as it pertains to how spaces are racialized (Cruikshank, 2012).

## ***Study Sites***

Athens-Clarke County, with an estimated population of 120,000 in 2014, had a poverty rate of 38% between 2009 and 2015, giving it one of the highest overall poverty rates in Georgia and the USA for a town of its size (US Census Bureau, 2016). Athens is home to the University of Georgia (UGA), a large Research 1 university with a student population of around 36,000 in the Fall Semester of 2016. Within Athens there are pockets of poverty interspersed in middle class areas, as well as short-term housing for low-income students and long-term housing for low-income residents. The racial makeup as of 2015 is 56% white, 28% black, 11% Hispanic/Latino, 4% Asian and 1% other (US Census Bureau, 2016). According the USDA, thirteen of the 30 census tracts in Athens are labeled as food deserts, impacting nearly one-third of the urban population (USDA-ERS, 2016).

Two neighborhood-scale groceries, Taj Mahal Groceries and Daily Co-Op Groceries, were chosen for the study sites given their 1) location in a USDA food desert, 2) proximity to residential areas 3) acceptance of EBT (Electronic Benefit

Transfer) cards and 4) location on major bus routes. The cases are similar in terms of scale, local ownership, and neighborhood proximity, and serve as effective counterpoints to chain supermarkets, although they are organized very differently. Because they specialize in two very different "niches" in food retailing (ethnic and organic), they can demonstrate how places are constructed to include or exclude people. In order to speak to issues other than financial barriers, both of the study sites accept EBT, although the cost of non-bulk staple foods such as milk and eggs in these stores was typically higher than in larger-scale grocery stores.

Daily Groceries Co-Op (henceforth referred to as Daily) is a cooperative grocery store located in a cluster of small stores in a residential area on a major road close to the downtown area. Two bus stops are located roughly 600 feet away from Daily on either side of the street. The area is served by three city buses as well as one University of Georgia bus line. The stated goals of the cooperative at the time of research were "to operate through practices that are ethically responsive to both the social and environmental conditions of production and the needs of our community" through "investing in local and cooperative communities to offer fairly priced local, nutritious, organic, and fair trade foods, and by adhering to the cooperative principles" (Daily Groceries, 2013). Cooperative principles included the use of "working members," or volunteers who worked in exchange for voting privileges and a discount on purchases. The neighborhood surrounding Daily is largely white and middle-class, although it borders a largely low-income and African-American neighborhood to the south. The neighborhood is also a historic district that is rapidly gentrifying.

Like Daily, the Taj Mahal Grocery Store is located along a relatively major road that runs between the University of Georgia campus and a large shopping center. Taj Mahal is situated within a small shopping complex, which is directly across the street from public housing, managed by Athens Housing Authority, known as "Rocksprings." Taj Mahal is within less than a block of two bus stops, which are serviced by two city buses making hourly stops. Taj Mahal is a private, family-run grocery store that is slightly larger than a typical convenience store. Like many small-scale stores in Athens (including three Latin American groceries and two Southeast Asian stores in the neighborhoods under study), the owners are immigrants. This store specializes in South Asian foods and has refrigerators and freezers full of prepared meals, vegetables, and cuts of meat in addition to shelves stocked with staples such as spices, lentils and rice in one half of the store. As such it could be considered a specialty store. However, the other half offers many American staple foods, canned and boxed groceries, a limited selection of produce, eggs and milk, as well as basic convenience store type items, such as light bulbs and batteries. The neighborhood immediate to the store is largely poor and non-white, although it borders a diverse, affluent neighborhood to the west that is largely composed of university faculty and students. The area is also rapidly changing with new forms of development and investment.

## ***Methods and Analysis***

The research team is composed of a professor who is a white woman and a graduate student who identifies as a multi-racial woman of color. In 2013 the student member of the team intercept interviewed 28 people about their grocery shopping habits and preferences. People were contacted at the nearby bus stops and in the stores themselves and asked if they would participate in a short interview about their shopping preferences. Our goal in conducting interviews was to understand why some individuals choose to shop in these stores, and why others, who may be physically able to access them, do not. To that end, we chose participants in two types of locations: 1) shoppers were intercepted in each of the grocery stores (n=10), and 2) non-shoppers were intercepted primarily at nearby bus stops (n=10). Eight other respondents either worked or volunteered in the stores. The student researcher was a regular rider on both bus routes at the time, and had been for about a year prior to beginning the interviews. Shoppers were asked if they would be willing to participate in a longer, more in-depth interview that included a cognitive mapping exercise of the neighborhood. All but one participant agreed to participate in the second interview. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

The interviews at bus stops were with predominantly low-income, non-white (black and Latino) participants, save for one low-income white woman. At Daily, the shopping respondents were exclusively white due to there being only white shoppers in the store during times that interviews were conducted. At Taj Mahal, shopping respondents identified as white, black, and Indian, but there was only one white respondent at Taj Mahal. In spite of a wide range of stores to choose as possible cases in the study, the positionality of the student researcher largely determined which stores were chosen. Because ethnographic methods rely on access and trust, the research benefited from the student researcher's pre-existing relationship with Daily and an embodied racialized subjectivity similar to the Taj Mahal's owners and clientele. While the student researcher's embodied positionality may have made conversations about race and identity difficult for white shoppers, the reverse situation (a white professor discussing race with people of color) may have been ethically or politically troubling, as well as a significant barrier to conducting the research.

In addition to collecting interview data, a total of 30 hours of participant observation were conducted in both locations by the student researcher. At Daily, this was conducted through acting as a working-member cashier for four hours per week for a month and a half. While Taj Mahal does not have a similar working member program, the student researcher spent time at the store observing customers with the permission of the store owner for two hours per week for three weeks. Findings were also corroborated through online reviews of the stores (i.e., Yelp.com). The interviews and field notes were transcribed into narrative documents, which were then coded for emergent themes (Clifford et al. 2016). The narratives were hand-coded and three central themes related to racialized social

exclusion emerged regarding perceptions of 1) who did or did not belong in the store, 2) the place of the store in the community and 3) the place of the neighborhood. These themes resonated with Alkon and Traugot's (2008) analysis of place as shaped by narratives about belonging.

We paid particular attention to the way in which respondents engaged in color-blind discourses in an effort to obscure discussions of race. Haney Lopez (1997) identifies the "transparency phenomenon," which marks the tendency among whites to not notice whiteness as an important underpinning of color-blind ideology, and to avoid directly speaking about race, instead making "semantic moves" (Myers and Williamson, 2001) to talk about it indirectly. People making semantic moves often engage in what Bonilla-Silva (2010) calls "rhetorical incoherence," which include mistakes in speech such as long pauses, repetition, or grammatical mistakes that noticeably increase when those who adhere to colorblind ideologies are made uncomfortable by discussions of race. This is often part of a search for some kind of "socially appropriate" color-blind discourse that allows the speaker to avoid explicitly discussing discomfiting topics of race, while they implicitly participate in the reinforcement of racialized hierarchies.

## Discussion and Results

In the following discussion, we examine the three themes we identified in the raw data with the aim of understanding what place coding might mean for food deserts. In the first section we aim to make sense of how narratives about "local" and "organic" construct a "community imaginary" that unreflexively excludes certain people and communities. In the second section we examine how racialized statements about who belongs in places function as "place meta-narratives" to demarcate space. We also examine the "place comparisons" that people use to explain why they avoid certain stores, and the challenges this poses for addressing inequities in food deserts. The analysis of the two stores suggests that although affordable staple foods are accessible to people in the surrounding neighborhood, some places are coded as frightening and avoidable, and others are coded as forgettable and exclusive.

### *"Nice place. Pretty white": Constructing Whiteness Community Imaginaries*

Alternative food system advocates hope to bolster local economies, support environmental sustainability, preserve local culture, and tighten community bonds through the practice of "ethical consumption" (Barnett et al, 2005). These themes were brought up frequently by shoppers interviewed at Daily (all of whom identified as white), many of whom saw locally-owned and operated grocery stores as being an integral part of the local food system. One Daily shopper spoke for herself and others on why she shopped at Daily:

I would think for a lot of people it would be the ethical standpoint. And maybe equal or secondary, depending on how you look at it, would be having products that are alternative to mainstream

products...I think they think it's a more ethical place to shop. Maybe greener, more sustainable. Socially conscious.

Shoppers at Daily Groceries frequently prided themselves on the idea that they had an understanding of the industrial food system and its relationship to the food that they were able to purchase at grocery stores.

Many respondents referred to "big box" stores as being unethical, and saw Daily as an alternative to corporate ills. A few Daily shoppers discussed their outright refusal to shop at chain supermarkets. Wal-Mart repeatedly came up as an example of a place at which Daily clientele would not shop. One woman said, "I don't shop at Wal-Mart. It's not really close, and I just prefer not to even if it was. Even if it was closer than the co-op. Because it's Wal-Mart." At the time of the research Wal-Mart was considering a store in downtown Athens, and many of Daily's members were heavily invested in a successful campaign to keep it out. For these interviewees, the creation and protection of alternatives, was paramount to expanding food access in the neighborhood.

Not every Daily shopper felt that they could feed themselves with this practice of food provisioning, however. Buying as much as possible at the co-op and only turning to larger chain stores for things that absolutely could not be found at Daily was a common strategy, although there was often a disclaimer explaining that even when shopping at chain groceries they would be selective and as "ethical" as possible in their choices. For example, one woman stated:

To me, the value of a co-op is knowing that there's no middle man taking off some of it. So I buy most of my food here, and then go to places like Kroger and just shop in the natural foods section. I'm also looking for organic, even at Kroger. I always buy organic produce. And, um, local is best.

The rhetoric surrounding ideas of the "local" is extremely pervasive at Daily in spite of the national and international origin of many products. Most people did not initially define what they meant by "local," and when pressed it usually referred to local production of the food or supporting a local business. Local business owners were considered community members who needed the support of the rest of the community by shoppers, and there was an important emphasis among them about keeping money within the local economy. Many customers come from outside the neighborhood and the city itself, underscoring a geographically broad definition of the "local."

For many outside the ambit of the Daily Co-Op's community, the co-op barely registers as a food source (local, ethical or otherwise). Those interviewed at the bus stop (all but one of whom identified as persons of color) across the street from Daily were either unaware that it sold food or said they had simply never thought about it before. When asked why she doesn't buy food there, a non-shopper replied, "The Co-op is within walking distance of my house; I just forget it's

there!” Another man at a bus stop that was in plain view of the co-op had no idea that Daily sold food. When it was pointed out, he was surprised that he had somehow never even thought about it. He went on to say that whenever he wanted food he would go to the convenience store located almost directly across the street from the co-op. Two people were under the impression that Daily was a health supplement store and said that they might stop in there if they needed an herbal remedy. Another said he had meant to go in there once to get something recommended by Dr. Oz, a surgeon and popular television personality, and he might consider going in next time he was ill. Based on the observations of non-shoppers, Daily is forgettable, not note-worthy or not selling food, a space which is largely undifferentiated from the surrounding white and middle-class landscape.

Shoppers at Daily (all white) struggled to notice that most of the bodies in that space tend to be coded “white,” in an instance of the transparency phenomenon. In fact, only one Daily shopper overtly mentioned race (albeit in a fairly limited way) by describing Daily as “A nice place. Pretty white.” Race in the whitened space of Daily is an empty signifier, only notable, perhaps by the absence of any other racial identity, as demonstrated by this white male respondent who stammered out the following when asked to describe typical shoppers at Daily:

Um... It’s pretty. I don’t know. It’s pretty diverse, but there’s also obvious... like, missing... demographics, or, um, groups of people that don’t necessarily... come into the store. And I think... I don’t know. There are definitely some obvious groups that aren’t represented in the clientele.

While the whiteness of Daily seemed not particularly notable to shoppers, it was clear that whiteness was entrenched in the place and central to the identity of its customers when they were queried specifically about it. The meta-narratives about Daily are profoundly shaped by whiteness and the coding of the place as transparent to outsiders, although shoppers struggled to identify, name and grapple with this reality.

Although Taj Mahal is also a locally-owned and non-chain business and offers locally produced items, Daily shoppers did not associate it with “ethical” or “local” when they were asked for their thoughts on Taj Mahal. That this is so, in spite of the rehearsed -sounding talking points about supporting “local” business and food systems and creating local community, reveals the whitened imaginary associated with “local” values. However, Taj Mahal is a locally-owned business, in that the owners live in an area geographically proximate to their business. A Taj Mahal shopper made this observation when asked about the store:

I remember when they first opened, they used to literally live in [the back room of Taj Mahal]. The kids, the mom, and all the whole family used to be in there. They used to cook food in there. This business is like a family thing.

Efforts at fostering "local community" and a friendly, neighborly atmosphere were also present at Taj Mahal based on observations there.

Three cashiers regularly worked at Taj Mahal, and the majority of the time it was either the owner, Rani, or Ray, the only non-family employee, who also lived across the street. Ray would strike up a conversation about nearly anything with anyone; he pulled multiple people into conversations with him at a time, and frequently created small groups of shoppers who would chat at the register together. Rani, the store owner, also knew a great deal about her customers, who she called her "neighbors", and she inquired about their families and work. According to Rani roughly ninety percent of the clients are made up of predominantly African-American residents of the Rocksprings neighborhood. All of the shoppers from Rocksprings mentioned that people at Taj Mahal were very friendly, and Ray and Rani were frequently referred to as "nice people." One woman said, "I see people living near me in there all the time, and I catch up with them a little if I got time." One man said that, although he was not financially compensated, he liked to "help out from time to time" because Taj Mahal was a "nice place with nice people."

While efforts at inclusion at Taj Mahal were manifest, the politicized "local" and "community" narratives that characterized Daily were conspicuously absent. Doing the "ethical" work of shopping at Daily creates an idealized and exclusionary narrative of what it means to be "local" and the "community" of those who belong. As might be predicted, issues of unequal access to affordable and healthful food were not brought up by shoppers at Daily. Similarly, while anxiety about a number of ethical concerns such as the treatment of animals came up repeatedly when shoppers explained their aversion to industrial farming, the treatment of farm workers was never mentioned. In the case of Daily, "local" becomes an idealized, representational space which is only partially related to physical proximity, and which excludes some (farm workers) while it includes others (farm animals) This focus on the local imaginary obscures unfair and unequal relationships and systems, and is instead imbued with an idealized and exclusionary concept of community. While food may be affordable and available in the retail environment of the unevenly developed neighborhood, the store is socially constructed as a place that either does not sell "real" food, or is a place that is constructed by and for whites.

### ***Place Construction through Meta-Narratives and Comparisons***

The community imaginary of Daily directly relates to the narrative processes of the construction of the place, both about the store and the surrounding neighborhood. While the community imaginary signals "who belongs," the processes of place construction in our study identified who does *not* belong. In the case of Taj Mahal, interviewees used negative narratives about the people making use of the space to explain race-based fear and discomfort about the store and its surrounding neighborhood. Non-shoppers in the study articulated negative place

comparisons and other semantic strategies to justify their self-exclusion. Most non-shoppers and some shoppers at Taj Mahal identified that based on its location, the neighborhood was frightening and the clientele making the most use of the store was constructed as dangerous. Both place construction narratives are key to the store's ability to offer its affordable and available food to a wider community, thereby directly impacting its financial viability.

*"I just don't feel safe going in there": Racialized Place Meta-narratives*

While Daily's whiteness is transparent to both insiders and outsiders, shoppers and some non-shoppers at Taj Mahal frequently mentioned race as an indicator that they did not belong to the community of the store. Specifically, certain words and attributes marked the way in which the same kinds of things in both places were perceived through a racialized filter, demonstrating how people draw on racist stereotypes and assumptions to shape the social dynamics of a place. Several people brought up food stamps when describing shoppers at Taj Mahal, and one Indian woman indicated feelings of fear and discomfort associated with being around users of food stamps:

I just don't feel safe going in there. 'Cause I don't know who is standing behind me when I'm taking out my money. I don't know if they're gonna rob me or something. And a lot of the people get food stamps and all, and they come to spend them there. And that's the main business they have is from those people! Mostly from across the street in the housing project, you can tell. Yeah, it's like, lottery tickets they come to buy... And stuff with their food stamps. I go to the other grocery stores, I don't feel that, you know. But [at Taj Mahal] I just go there, I get my things and go.

The negative associations between food stamp usage and the people assumed to be using food stamps (in the case of Taj Mahal, almost exclusively African-American shoppers) did not come up at Daily. However, during participant observation, one member of the research team observed consistent use of EBT cards by many regular customers, most of whom were youthful and all of whom were white. Yet, no person in the course of the research brought up EBT in reference to Daily or its customers. EBT usage does not create a dangerous other to be avoided when navigating the landscape of the co-op, although that is selected as a proxy to explain a feeling of being out of place in Taj Mahal.

The reference to EBT use in some places but not others was not the only meta-narrative deployed to explain avoidance of people and places. When asked who the Taj Mahal seemed to be trying to attract, people frequently had difficulty stating their answers. The "Asian" or "Indian" community was typically supplied as an answer without any great unease, but most people fell into rhetorical incoherence and color-blind discourse when discussing people who were racialized as black. The following response illustrates the hesitation typically associated with

the naming of clientele: “I, uh, I think, I think they’re trying to attract the, the... the kind of folks who live in the, uh, the housing projects.” Another person explicitly voiced her fear of the inhabitants of Rocksprings by saying, “But the crowd there is not. I don’t. I mean. I don’t. I would not. I mean. [laughter] I feel afraid going in there because of the crowd that comes from the neighbor... neighboring... neighborhood.”

*"Oh honey, don't you know?": Negative Place-Comparisons*

The acknowledgment that there was an “American” side and an “Asian” side of Taj Mahal was common among shoppers, and is indicative of far more than the types of food sold on each side of the store. The discomfort that white shoppers at Taj Mahal felt did not extend to sharing space with the non-black minorities who frequent the Asian side of the grocery. For example, although “class” had been brought up by “color-blind” whites as a way to explain why the predominantly black neighborhood across the street was frightening, Asians of any socioeconomic class were not mentioned as a possible threat. Instead, their perceived culture was met with curiosity and interest rather than fear. For many, a trip to Taj Mahal was an experience in what Bailey (2007) calls “ethnic-food cruising.” Johnston and Baumann (2014) also demonstrate how consuming ethnic food work as cultural capital, serving as a mark of distinction of class or cosmopolitanism for white people.

Customers ruminated upon their love for “authentic” ethnic foods, expounding upon how they wanted to recreate ethnic cuisine as accurately as possible. The words “exotic” and “ethnic” were frequently employed by white shoppers to describe the merchandise. This implies the (always white) speaker’s own perceived lack of ethnicity, and the way in which anything marked as not white revealed the way in which whiteness shaped the speaker’s normative landscape. One woman who shopped exclusively on the Asian side said, “You know, it’s strange ‘cause it’s the same store and the store is teeny tiny, but... I feel more comfortable in the Pakistani and Indian side. But the other side... I don’t feel comfortable being in.” When asked what she would change about Taj Mahal, another customer said, “I would change what’s available on the American side, or I’d try to find ways to incorporate it. It’s really, really clear who the owner’s targeting. So, I feel like I can’t even go on that side.”

*Who the owner’s targeting* was an idea brought up a number of times by people who were less comfortable shopping in the “American” side of the store. In response to questions about who shops at the store, non-black respondents largely sought to avoid directly speaking about race, instead making “semantic moves” to talk about it indirectly, such as pointing to the hair products with African Americans pictured on the box or gesturing to the neighborhood across the street. One particularly telling example came from an interview with a white woman who spent a considerable portion of the interview describing why she felt uncomfortable

at Taj Mahal without ever explicitly mentioning race. When the recorder was turned off she leaned in and asked, “I didn’t sound, like, *racist*, did I?”

Other semantic moves had to do with associating people with place, effectively talking around the people that they were demeaning or othering by discussing the associated places instead. As previously quoted pieces of interview have revealed, people demonstrated negative connotations of the neighborhood across the street from Taj Mahal. Yet, it is unthinkable to imagine that people are actually frightened by the amalgamation of homes and sidewalks removed from the connotations of the people making use of them. To claim fear of a neighborhood is to claim fear of the people who are in the neighborhood. In mirroring the point in the coded language of place instead of people, individuals engage in place comparisons to explain feelings of discomfort and fear. One young white man made use of the street as proxy by saying:

I was just always hesitant to go in. Cause it’s in, well, I could understand why... I mean, I’m not really *scared* of the street. I mean, at night it can be kind of... eh. But I can see why people maybe wouldn’t go inside. You know? I can see why people would be like, ‘No, I’m not going in there’ when they see where it’s at.

Another interview with a white woman who refused to shop at Taj Mahal played out as follows:

Question: Why do you choose not to go to Taj Mahal?

Answer: Well. The neighborhood across from the Taj Mahal is a little... *problematic*.

Q: In what way?

A: Oh honey, don’t you know? That’s the projects, sweetie. Yeah, I mean, the neighborhood’s a little problematic.

Still another Asian shopper, who restricted herself to the South Asian side of Taj Mahal and refused to shop there after dark said, “I just feel when I go in there, when you see these other people in there... It just makes me run fast. I’m afraid to even park the car in that area sometimes. ‘Cause, it’s uh, it’s the, the... location. It’s a very, very scary place.”

The intersectionality between “blackness” and poverty in and around Taj Mahal caused whites and Asians (shoppers and non-shoppers) tremendous unease, causing them to explain their discomfort with negative narratives about place. The whiteness of Daily, made less transparent only through dialogue, does similar work in normalizing it as a place where racialized “others” ontologically do not exist. This racialized coding of place (re)produces forms of social exclusion that are either potentially threatening to the store financially (Taj Mahal) and/or presents barriers to accessing healthy food within the neighborhood (Daily). It also demonstrates how racial stereotypes and hierarchies perpetuate (mis)understandings of place. The similarity in the way most shoppers, those

people who feel they belong to the community, talked about their experiences in both stores ("nice people" and "community") reveal the extent to which a racialized "community imaginary" about who belongs and who does not has considerable power in shaping inclusion/exclusion in place. The tacit acceptance and lack of confrontation of these dynamics perpetuates negative and potentially misleading perceptions of places that impact the ability of the store to both provide food to residents, in the case of Daily. In the case of Taj Mahal, the problem became a failure to draw in a wider, more financially well-off customer base.

## **Conclusion**

As the literature discussed earlier in the paper on urban food access and food deserts shows, these issues cannot be dealt with solely through moving food, any food, within the predetermined radius of a neighborhood (Alkon and McCullen, 2010; Cummins, Flint and Matthews, 2014; McCutcheon, 2015; Shannon, 2016). Food access in cities is an increasingly intractable problem, with policy makers advocating for simplistic color-blind solutions that do not address existing inequalities the complexity of unevenly developed urban spaces (McClintock, 2011). Other solutions, such as farmers markets or urban gardens that do not emerge from the community in the neighborhood, recreate alternative food networks shaped by an exclusionary community imaginary based on environmental and social "ethics". These solutions do not fully consider a key factor in the emergence of unequal food access: uneven economic and racialized landscapes (Block et al, 2004). Because the definitions of food deserts rely so heavily on geographic access to large-scale retail infrastructure (Thomas, 2010), other sources of food, such as immigrant-owned stores and small-scale groceries, are too frequently overlooked. In theory, these smaller-scale businesses could help remediate the problem of food insecurity, particularly in neighborhoods characterized by racial segregation and uneven development. This study on the perceptions of the in-between strategy of small-scale grocery stores, a solution which may have the potential to alleviate both social exclusion and unequal food access, reveals that place matters a great deal to food access.

Our research shows that small-scale groceries, even when they provide access to fresh, healthy food, often fail because of community imaginaries of whiteness, negative place meta-narratives and negative place comparisons. These larger social dynamics of place construction operate in tandem with the economic problems of financial instability and low levels of capitalization that are characteristic of unevenly developed neighborhoods. In our study, the grocery store selling "local" and certified organic produce (Daily Co-Op) fell into the trap of creating a whitened and exclusive community imaginary. So imagined, the community of Daily shoppers and members impelled many of its shoppers and members (many of whom do not live in the neighborhood) succeeded in resisting competition from an urban Wal-Mart in downtown Athens; this may have increased food access for many residents of the food desert in this study. The

process of negative place construction rendered another food source in our research site (Taj Mahal market) vulnerable through its proximity to a poor neighborhood. This grocery store was characterized by shoppers and non-shoppers as a dangerous place based on negative perceptions of the customers and its adjacent neighborhood. While small-scale grocery stores may improve food access simpler for surrounding residential areas, two main factors threaten their long-term viability and their positive impact: financial instability and negative (racialized) perceptions by potential customers.

Since the research was conducted, Taj Mahal moved to a new location on a busier main street near a major shopping center on the edge of another low-income, predominantly African American community. Rani said she moved because the owner of the previous building raised the rent. The new store was smaller and only sold South Asian specialty items. They went out of business within a year. Daily has since restructured its business model and done away with the volunteer memberships. It expanded its packaged product line in its current location and is reportedly in conversation with a local non-profit to move into a new, larger retail space near a high-profile community garden project in the same low-income African-American community into which Rani moved her store. The area is rapidly gentrifying and there is a planned development of a mixed-income housing complex that is widely opposed by the current residents. No new grocery stores have been built in the area, and the social construction of place and the struggle for affordable food access continues.

Arguing for investment in the form of economic development in a diversity of food sources may seem axiomatic. That said, capital investment decisions are made in the context of grappling with both the pre-existing problems of often under-capitalized locally-owned businesses and financial instability of poor neighborhoods. This case study shows that economic development also, perhaps less transparently, highlights the complex challenges of white community imaginaries of alternative food sources, and negative place narratives and comparisons about immigrant-owned or ethnic food stores in poorer neighborhoods. As demonstrated by Cummins, Flint and Matthews (2014), simply changing the retail food environment is not enough. We urge communities to engage in organizing against racialized economic inequalities as a necessary first step toward drawing state and municipal investments, followed by place-making work to change perceptions of existing points of food access for both residents and non-residents. Acknowledging the racialized social construction of place would bring attention to the food retail formats that meet the needs of the neighborhood (what Daily shoppers resisted without perhaps fully understanding or respecting food scarcity issues), as well as make it more attractive to such businesses. This strategy may also have the add-on effect of widening the economic base for small-scale retail by drawing customers from other neighborhoods, in the way that both our cases attempted to do through offering specialty items. Further research on the racialized coding of place in points of food access is also needed to understand if

larger-scale grocery stores could also be impacted by negative place comparisons in poor neighborhoods.

## References

- Alkon, Alison Hope and Christie Grace McMullen. (2010). Whiteness and farmers markets: Performances, perpetuations... contestations? *Antipode*, 43(4), 937-959.
- Alkon, Alison Hope and Michael Traugot. (2008). Place matters, but how? Rural identity, environmental decision making, and the social construction of place. *City & Community*, 7(2), 97-112.
- Bailey, Cathryn. (2007). We are what we eat: Feminist vegetarianism and the reproduction of racial identity. *Hypatia*, 22(2), 39-59.
- Baker, Elizabeth A., Mario Schootman, Ellen Barnidge and Cheryl Kelly. (2006). The role of race and poverty in access to foods that enable individuals to adhere to dietary guidelines. *Preventing Chronic Disease*, 3(3), 1-11.
- Barnett, Clive, Nick Clarke, Paul Cloke and Alice Malpass. (2005). The political ethics of consumerism. *Consumer Policy Review*, 15(2), 45-51.
- Bedore, Melanie. (2012). Geographies of capital formation and rescaling: A historical-geographical approach to the food desert problem. *The Canadian Geographer*, 57(2), 133-153.
- Bellinger, William K. and Jue Wang. (2011). Poverty, place or race: Causes of the retail gap in smaller U.S. cities. *The Review of Black Political Economy*, 38, 253-270.
- Block, Jason P., Richard A. Scribner and Karen B. Desalvo. (2004). Fast food, race/ethnicity, and income: A geographic analysis. *American Journal for Preventative Medicine*, 27(3), 211-217.
- Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. (2010). *Racism Without Racists. Color-Blind Racism & Racial Inequality in Contemporary America*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publisher, Inc.
- Cannuscio, Carolyn C., Eve E. Weiss and David A. Asch (2010). The contribution of urban foodways to health disparities. *Journal of Urban Health*, 87(3), 381-393.
- Clifford, Nicholas, Meghan Cope, Shaun French and Thomas Gillespie. (2016). *Key methods in geography*. London: Sage.
- Cresswell, Timothy. (1996). *In place-out of place: geography, ideology, and transgression*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

- Cruikshank, Justin. (2012). Positioning positivism, critical realism and social constructionism in the health sciences: a philosophical orientation. *Nursing Inquiry*, 19(1), 71-82.
- Cummins, Steven, Ellen Flint and Stephen A. Matthews. (2014). New neighborhood grocery store increased awareness of food access but did not alter dietary habits or obesity. *Health Affairs*, 33(2), 283-291.
- Daily Groceries Co-Op (2013). <http://www.dailygroceries.org>. Accessed 02/18/2013.
- Delaney, David. (2002). The space that race makes. *The Professional Geographer*, 54(1), 6-14.
- Gordon, Cynthia, Marnie Purciel-Hill, Nirupa R. Ghai, Leslie Kaufman, Regina Graham and Gretchen V. Wye. (2011). Measuring food deserts in New York City's low-income neighborhoods. *Health & Place*, 17, 696-700.
- Guthman, Julie. (2008). Bringing good food to others: investigating the subjects of alternative food practice. *cultural geographies*, 15, 431-447.
- Haney-Lopez, Ian. (1997). *White by Law: The Legal Construction of Race*. New York: NYU Press.
- Hellig, Amy and David S. Sawicki. (2003). Race and residential accessibility to shopping and services. *Housing Policy Debate*, 14(1&2), 69-101.
- Johnston, Josee and Shyon Baumann. (2014). *Foodies: Democracy and Distinction in the Gourmet Foodscape*. London: Routledge.
- Kurtz, Hilda. (2016). Linking food deserts and racial segregation: Challenges and limitations. In, Rachel Slocum and Arun Saldanha (eds.), *Geographies of race and food: Fields, bodies, markets* (pp. 247-64). London: Routledge.
- Ledoux, Timothy F. and Igor Vojnovic. (2012). Going outside the neighborhood: The shopping patterns and adaptations of disadvantaged consumers living in the lower eastside neighborhoods of Detroit, Michigan. *Health & Place*, 19, 1-14.
- Lefebvre, Henri. (1992). *The Production of Space*. Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers.
- Lyons, Kristen, Carol Richards, Lotus Desfours and Marco Amati, M. (2013). Food in the city: urban food movements and the (re)-imagining of urban spaces. *Australian Planner*, 50(2), 157-163.
- Mares, Teresa M. and Devon G. Peña. (2011). Environmental and food justice. In Alison Hope Alkon and Julian Agyeman (eds), *Cultivating food justice: Race, class, and sustainability*, (pp. 197-220). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

- McClintock, Nathan Crane. (2011). *Cultivation, capital, and contamination: Urban agriculture in Oakland, California*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- McCutcheon, Priscilla. (2015). Food, faith, and the everyday struggle for black urban community. *Social & Cultural Geography*, 16(4), 385-406.
- Moreland, Kimberly and Susan Filomena. (2007). Disparities in the availability of fruits and vegetables between racially segregated urban neighbourhoods. *Public Health Nutrition*, 10(12), 1481-1489.
- Myers, Kristen A. and Passion Williamson. (2001). Race talk: the perpetuation of racism through private discourse. *Race and Society*, 4: 3-26.
- Peake, Linda and Richard H. Schein. (2000). Racing geography into the new millennium: Studies of 'race' and North American geographies. *Social & Cultural Geography*, 1(2), 133-142.
- Price, Patricia L. (2010). Cultural geography and the stories we tell ourselves. *cultural geographies*, 17(2), 203-210.
- Quandt, Sara A., Joseph G. Grzywacz, Grisel Trejo and Thomas A. Arcury. (2014). Nutritional strategies of Latino farmworker families with preschool children: Identifying leverage points for obesity prevention. *Social Science & Medicine*, 123, 72-81.
- Raja, Samina, Changxing Ma and Pavan Yadav. (2008). Beyond food deserts measuring and mapping racial disparities in neighborhood food environments. *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 27(4), 469-482.
- Robinson, Jonnell A., Evan Weissman, Susan Adair, Matthew Potteiger and Joaquin Villanueva. (2016). An oasis in the desert? The benefits and constraints of mobile markets operating in Syracuse, New York food deserts. *Agriculture and Human Values*, 33(4), 877-893.
- Shannon, Jerry. (2014). Food deserts: governing obesity in the neoliberal city. *Progress in Human Geography*, 38(2), 248-266.
- Shannon, Jerry. (2016). Beyond the supermarket solution: Linking food deserts, neighborhood context, and everyday mobility. *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*, 106(1), 186-202.
- Shaw, Hillary J. (2006). Food deserts: Towards the development of a classification. *Geografiska Annaler: Series B*, 88(2), 231-247.
- Slocum, Rachel. (2006). Anti-racist Practice and the Work of Community Food Organizations. *Antipode*, 38(2), 327-349.
- Slocum, Rachel and Arun Saldanha. (2016). *Geographies of race and food: Fields, bodies, markets*. London: Routledge.

- Smith, Neil. (1984). *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital, and the Production of Space*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Thomas, Brian J. (2010). Food deserts and the sociology of space: Distance to food retailers and food insecurity in an urban American neighborhood. *World Academy of Science, Engineering and Technology*, 67, 19-28.
- Thomas, Mary E. (2005). 'I think it's just natural': the spatiality of racial segregation at a US high school. *Environment and Planning A*, 37,1233-1248.
- United States Census Bureau (2016). Quick Facts. <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/PST045215/00>. Accessed 9/22/2016.
- United States Department of Agriculture-Economic Research Service. (2009). *Access to Affordable and Nutritious Food—Measuring and Understanding Food Deserts and Their Consequences: Report to Congress*. Administrative Publication No. (AP-036)
- United States Department of Agriculture-Economic Research Service. (2015). Report Summary: Food Insecurity. [http://www.ers.usda.gov/media/1896836/err194\\_summary.pdf](http://www.ers.usda.gov/media/1896836/err194_summary.pdf). Accessed 2/29/2016
- United States Department of Agriculture-Economic Research Service. (2016). Food Access Research Atlas. <http://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-access-research-atlas.aspx#.U7wsKCIFXw4>, Accessed 2/29/2016
- Walker, Renee E., James Butler, Andrea Kriska, Christopher Keane, Craig S. Fryer and Jessica G. Burke. (2010). How does food security impact residents of a food desert and a food oasis? *Journal of Hunger & Environmental Nutrition*, 5, 454-470.
- Walker, Renee E., Christopher Keane and Jessica G. Burke. (2010). Disparities and access to healthy food in the United States: A review of food deserts literature. *Health & Place*, 16, 876-884.
- Williams, Peter, Phil Hubbard, David Clark and Nigel Berkeley. (2010). Consumption, exclusion and emotion: the social geographies of shopping. *Social & Cultural Geography*, 2(2), 203-220.
- Wrigley, Neil, Daniel Warm, Barrie Margetts and Amanda Whelan. (2002). Assessing the impact of improved retail access on diet in a 'food desert': a preliminary report. *Urban Studies*, 39(11), 2061-2082.