

Exclusionary Development: A Lack of Diversity in the Green Economy and Farmers'

Markets

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I. Abstract

This paper will investigate how the green movement, a movement which seeks to resolve injustices such as food insecurity, labor issues, and the destruction of the environment through agriculture, has failed to include the African American community. The black community has had to struggle over the landscape of farming and agriculture since the beginning of US history, and continues to be left out. This paper will seek to reconcile how history has shaped the conflict in the present day, and address what different people and organizations have done to resolve this problem.

II. Introduction

The complicated relationship between African Americans and the agricultural industry has lasted since early colonization. The reemergence of the notion of supporting local farms in the United States has given way to a new, greener economy, and the increasing popularity of farmers markets. Despite the progress that has been made in recent decades, it is clear that black farmers and consumers have been left out of this green revolution. The cultural landscape of farmers markets sheds light on a culture war which examines racial geography, classism, and history. Progress has been made by strategic attempts to intentionally include black farmers and create markets in areas with disproportionately high black populations, which has been proven to provide support to both farmers and consumers. Previous analyses of the green economy have left out the participation of minority and black communities, and neglect to address cultural history and how it intersects with environmental justice.

III. History

The word “race” has a loaded history. Although it is deemed important enough to include on job applications and college applications, race is really a social construct with no biological or scientific backing. Rather, race is a phenotype, a surface-level characteristic which is used as a method for division by society. The current divisions of race can be explained in part by economics. Historians such as Sidney Mintz have shown that slavery solved a labor shortage problem within the emerging American colonies. Physical differences were manifested into a way to divide largely immutable classes that represent not only phenotypical differences but also levels of intelligence, physical prowess, and cultural attributes (Gould, 1981, 24). “Racial ideology is materially embedded in space... and it is through ‘place’ that it has been given a local referent, become, a social fact, and aided in its own reproduction,” (Anderson, 1987, 584). Slavery’s brutal impact cannot be forgotten; the US cultural landscape is eternally marked by remnants. To neglect to mention the history of the African American community’s relationship to agriculture before the civil rights movement would disregard the significance of discriminatory land rights to this day.

Black farmers’ quest for participation in the agribusiness industry occurred during two stages. The first stage lasted from 1945-1970 and showed how black farmers responded to the growth of industrial agriculture. The second phase, from 1970-1990, represented a transition from labor intensive farming to capital intensive farming (Grim, 1995, 257). Following the Brown vs. Board of Education court decision in 1954, compulsory education laws were created that took away much of the black farming labor force (Grim, 1995, 259). The economic agricultural boom from World War II allowed black farmers to improve their standard of living

through the ability to purchase more efficient and effective technology. Trucks were an important innovation because black farmers were previously forced to sell to local merchants who did not pay fair prices, but with trucks they were able to seek better prices from more generous buyers (Grim, 1995, 262).

Furthermore, there is a history of black farmers not receiving their fair share from the USDA. The 1965 Civil Rights Commission analyzed USDA programs and found that they had failed to assure equal opportunity and treatment. Instead, the prevailing practice had been racial segregation and discrimination in providing assistance paid for by Federal funds (Grim, 1995, 262). To combat systematic oppression from federal agencies, black farmers created cooperatives to share technology, create unions, and order supplies in bulk to save money, which added around 10% to their incomes (Grim, 1995, 268). Since the early 1920s, the black community has lost innumerable acres of land that could have been converted into capital to improve black farming and livelihood throughout the last half of the twentieth century. Due to foreclosure, mismanagement, sale, and the manipulation of black landowners by banks and white farmers, fewer than 22,500 black agriculturists currently farm less than 2.5 million acres. The continuous loss of black-owned land has led to a decrease in the number of African American farmers who could potentially combine their resources to produce, process, market, and distribute their own goods as well as win contracts from agribusinesses. It also negatively affects the available acreage needed in order to continue participating in federal agricultural subsidy programs that encourage production, conservation, and agribusiness (Grim, 1995, 270).

IV. The Green Economy

The Green Economy has emerged as a staple market in the twenty-first century. Large corporations, such as clothing stores and technology stores, pride themselves on the sale of “green” products, which boast sustainable ingredients and effects. As a side-effect, greenwashing has become a prominent phenomenon among companies, who sell products which add a leaf to the packaging or “10% post-consumer recycled,” and reap the benefits from a sustainably-oriented consumer base without creating a truly sustainable product. Alkon commented on this phenomenon, “green is not only the color of trees; it is also the color of money” (Alkon, 2012, 8). The green economy represents a growing market valued at \$228 billion, which has been resilient through a turbulent economic recession. Sales of organic foods have skyrocketed from \$1 billion in 1990 to around \$20 billion in 2007, and farmers markets are the fastest growing segment of the food economy (Alkon, 2012, 8) The green economy has been used recently to support positive change in lieu of policy campaigns, as residents of West Oakland had seen no change among political elites.

The challenge of reconciling financial sustainability with environmental sustainability was echoed through the research and interviews conducted with local farmers. They found that many small farmers were forced to sell their land to industrial companies because the green economy lacks financial sustainability and calls for a tradeoff between financial stability and sustainability. There are not enough programs in place to protect small farmers, in fact, government subsidies historically favor large, industrial farms. Farmers’ markets have become increasingly important as a way to support the local farmer and the green economy, as a way to seek an intersection between environmental justice and financial sustainability.

The governing body of the green economy, the US Department of Agriculture, is not trusted by minority communities nor local farmers. Black farmers filed a class action suit under the Equal Credit Opportunity Act in 1997 against the USDA for discrimination in the distribution of farm loan programs (Tyler, 2014, 234). Tyler uses Critical Race Theory (CRT), a framework to explain race-based power dynamics, to explain the plight of black farmers. CRT frames race in both historical and contemporary contexts, which is essential in order to fully understand how the plight of people of color has culminated in agricultural discrimination. Using this framework, the study found that black farmers interviewed from Michigan were hesitant to use government loans because of racial discriminatory lending and the lack of any outreach (Tyler, 2014, 242). It is clear that the continued discrimination against black farmers has manifested into a modern-day distrust between the black community and the institutions that are supposed to support it.

V. Farmers' Markets

In her book *Black, White and Green*, Allison Alkon explores the reasons why farmers' markets are now associated with affluence, class and race (Alkon, 2012, 8). Furthermore, through data analysis, experts have been able to prove the idea that farmers' markets exclude minority communities. High density African American areas in the US, regardless of income, were shown as less likely to have access to food that promotes healthy diet choices compared to predominately white areas. The same study indicated that minority communities had a negative association with per capita farmers' markets within urban and rural communities (Singleton, 2015). At a farmers' market in Minneapolis, a researcher surveyed consumers and found 48% of them to be White, and 27% to self-categorize as African American. A majority of the African

Americans who were surveyed were concerned about food security and lived in areas of the city with greater economic inequality (Slocum, 2009, 48).

A separate research project conducted a study among SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) beneficiaries in an urban community in Oklahoma to learn about perceptions regarding barriers to farmers' market use (Wetherill, 2015). SNAP offers nutrition assistance to low-income individuals and collaborates with farmers' markets to provide fresh, local produce to minority and low-income communities. This study found that few participants ate fresh produce or preferred the convenience of a farmers' market. Farmers' markets were not perceived as affordable or accepting to minority communities. Three-quarters of SNAP and other food assistance recipients are minorities. This correlation is indicative of a way in which black and minority communities have been isolated from farmers' markets; SNAP beneficiaries are not fully aware of their benefits and are newly gaining access to fresh produce in this limited way. Wetherill cites five barriers to access: availability, accessibility, affordability (direct and indirect costs), accommodation to consumers' needs, and acceptability by the target audience (Wetherill, 2015). Affordability is not merely solved for by programs like SNAP; the geography of farmers' markets is a consistent barrier to access as most farmers' markets tend to be centered in affluent areas. The last two barriers to access, accommodation and acceptability, are indicative of the cultural exclusion of the black community. The stereotypical audience for farmers' markets is the young, white "hipster," and the products are marketed for this particular audience. The West Oakland case study will address how a farmers' market in West Oakland has found a way to market their products to a minority community.

In the 20th century, black farmers lost their land at a rate three to four times higher than white farmers (Alkon, 2007, 94). After the 1997 lawsuit which claimed that the USDA had been feeding false information about government programs and systematically discriminating against black farmers, an internal investigation revealed that loan applications filed by black farmers were reviewed three to four times slower than those by white farmers. Not only have black farmers been systemically denied the right to produce food, they are also unable to purchase what their families once grew. African American neighborhoods were demolished in the 60s, replaced with federal highway projects. This began “supermarket redlining,” the phenomenon that led to food deserts in minority areas as a result of grocery stores following the wealthy white families to the suburbs (Alkon, 2007, 98). The relationship between African American communities and food security is categorized by a loss of land, historical taboos, distrust of federal assistance, and cyclical, systematic discrimination.

Finally, Alkon explains how the landscape of a farmers’ market is shaped by a set of white cultural practices (Alkon, 2010). This constrains the ability of the green economy and local produce to meaningfully address inequality and food insecurity. Through observations at the Davis and North Berkeley farmers’ markets, the researchers found that white culture is inseparable from affluence and liberal political orientation. This delves into the idea of understanding privilege through an intersectional lens. The author suggests lifting the veil that still exists within farmers’ markets which blinds affluent consumers to the injustices along the commodity chain (Alkon, 2010). Mexican laborers and black farmers are not usually the ones selling food at farmers’ markets, which perpetuates a falsehood about the community involved in the green economy.

VI. Case Study: West Oakland Farmers' Market

Farmers' markets have become a way to represent a sense of rural community through the rustic-nature of buying food directly from the farmer (Alkon, 2012, 96). The West Oakland Farmers' Market was created to foster economic opportunities for black farmers and give them a way to provide the residents of that neighborhood with fresh produce. The creation of a link between black farmers and the black community is significant because it supports the assertion that other low-income communities of color have healthy food available because there are farmers from those communities to provide it (Alkon, 2012, 99). Thus, the green economy is essential to both the livelihood of the farmer and the community, so they need to support each other. Furthermore, the mix of products is intended to target black consumers. Commonly sold produce includes: collard greens, mustard greens, and lamb's-quarters in addition to the kale and chard found at many other markets (Alkon, 2012, 99). Shea butter is an essential ingredient in skin care items that are sold, which is native to Africa. Despite targeted marketing to a niche community, nearly half the market's customers are white, and many are new to this rapidly gentrifying neighborhood (Alkon, 2012, 6). This poses a dilemma; how can other communities support the black farming community without taking away from their sense of community, culture, and agency?

The West Oakland Farmers' Market was created by the activism of the Black Panther Party, which called for community self-determination and self-sufficiency. Previous Black Panther movements, such as their free breakfast program, were tied to a rejection of capitalism (Alkon, 2012, 14). The West Oakland Farmers' Market, however, has had to embrace capitalism in order to navigate the green economy. Most farmers' markets exclude members based on

various traits, whether it is class, race, gender, or lifestyle. Community membership at the West Oakland Farmers' Market is inclusionary toward black consumers and farmers, although all who enter the landscape are welcome (Alkon, 2012, 98). However, minimizing the role of race is problematic in West Oakland, whose geography is shaped by racial oppression. Both poor and black neighborhoods faced redlining and were bulldozed for federal projects in order to facilitate urban renewal. Furthermore, the minority and low-income neighborhoods have few places where they can buy fresh produce (Alkon, 2012, 98). The West Oakland Farmers' Market is representative of a targeted effort to include a disenfranchised community, and do what governmental institutions have failed to accomplish. Most of the research regarding this topic has claimed that the lack of outreach by institutions has been essential to the lack of access; this farmers' markets specifically reaches these disenfranchised communities. This model also forces citizens to consider the future of inclusionary cultural landscapes, and how society can develop without leaving others behind.

VII. Conclusion

In conclusion, through generations of discrimination and a lack of outreach, black farmers have been systemically discriminated against and left out of the green movement and green economy. Although farmers' markets are commonly acclaimed for their sustainability and promotion and support of local farmers, there is an underlying culture war between a "whitening" of the agricultural movement and minority communities that have been displaced from their land, and have prevailing food insecurity as a result of gentrification. Targeted movements to support black farmers and bring farmers' markets to black and minority communities have begun to change perceptions by the African American community about the

green movement, but have not had complete success thus far. These movements have been grassroots, as a result of prevailing distrust between minority communities and governmental institutions. In order to reconcile this systematic discrimination, the grassroots movement will need to continue and eventually reach the political elite to make institutional change. There are innumerable problems with the way the government currently hands out agricultural subsidies, and the first change should manifest itself in the support of local, minority farmers. The initial lawsuit against the USDA was over twenty years ago, and we have yet to see substantial change. True success will be the day that three-fourths of SNAP recipients are not black; this will symbolize a break in the cycle of discrimination and food insecurity.

VII. Works Cited

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