Who Speaks for (and Feeds) the Community? Competing Definitions of “Community” in the Austin, TX, Urban Farm Debate

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Alternative food supporters claim that food produced outside the corporate system can improve the wellbeing of communities. A closer look at these claims raises the question: How are members of the alternative food movement defining “community” and who is being included in and excluded from these definitions? We draw from in-depth interviews with (1) urban famers and their supporters and (2) neighborhood members of gentrifying East Austin to examine irreconcilable disputes on the process of rewriting Austin’s urban farm code. We use Stanley Fish’s concept of “interpretive communities” to understand competing definitions of “community” and theorize beyond this point by noting that when communities feel at threat, they come together as coalesced communities to gain support for their stance. The discussions in this paper can be situated within dialogues of critical geography, gentrification, alternative foodways, and public health to show how class, race, and ethnicity remain tied to environmental justice.

INTRODUCTION

Those involved in the Alternative Food Movement frequently claim their efforts are as much about building and fostering community as providing food (Busa and Gardner 2015; Lyson 2000; Wells and Gradwell 2001; Wight 2016). These claims often are marked by vague definitions of community and little details about exactly what community members gain in the process of implementing alternative food projects. In studies of food organizations, cultural elitism and the racialized nature of many progressive food projects have increasingly become important points of discussion. In these conversations, a number of scholars call for more qualitative research that examines these projects as spaces that harvest and perpetuate social inequality (Colls and Evans 2014; Shannon 2014). In this paper, we explore some of the sociological implications of urban farming in East Austin—a seemingly positive addition to a growing city. We extend the conversation offered by scholars of food organizations who argue that many of these food communities are characterized by an ethos of Whiteness and exclusivity (Alkon and McCullen 2011; Busa and Gardner 2015; Guthman 2008b; Lyson 2014).

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City & Community 18:4 December 2019
doi: 10.1111/cico.12416
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We draw from in-depth interviews with local stakeholders to examine how issues with urban farm activities in East Austin snowballed into a combative dispute about issues of gentrification and social and racial inequality. We argue that the debates about rewriting Austin’s farm code became so contentious in part due to clashing understandings of “community” between urban farmers and their supporters and long-established members of the East Austin neighborhood. Although both groups described their position as one that serves and helps the community, incongruent interpretations of “community” kept the two groups from arriving at a consensus. The urban farmers and their supporters largely based their sense of community on values involving fresh, healthy food, and the “larger community” of Austin. On the other side, advocates of stricter zoning laws described community in terms of the East Austin neighborhood, race, class, and being a good neighbor. Our discussion uses Stanley Fish’s (1980) concept of “interpretive community” to understand each group’s position. We extend Fish’s theory by arguing that when interpretive communities feel at threat, members of their group come together around a shared value and form coalesced communities, which they use to gain support and political leverage. In the case of Austin urban farm debates, both sides—the urban farmers and their supporters and the members of the neighborhood seeking to limit the farm activities—felt susceptible by proposed changes to the city’s farm ordinances. Consequently, the two groups coalesced around their core principles to frame the debates and garner support for their stance.

Our discussion brings attention to how alternative foodways and the idea of “community” can cause strife when competing communities emerge. The concept of interpretive communities helps illustrate how communities are socially constructed; and the idea of coalesced community helps understand how terms like “community” and “food” can become emotionally laden and aggravate existing tensions between groups in a city zoning debate. Moreover, our research shows how East Austin farmers and their supporters’ notions of community illustrate privileged perspectives and color blindness, and account little for the racial-ethnic groups most marginalized by gentrification in the East Side. We conclude by noting the limitations of neglecting multiple and overlapping understandings of community, especially in the context of a gentrifying city.

GENTRIFICATION AND URBAN FARMING

The relationship between urban farming and gentrification continues to be explored in both urban studies and foodways research. In these conversations, scholars bring attention to urban farming projects as causing (Anderson 2014; McClintock 2014; Mincye and Dobermig 2016) and being the result of gentrification (Jarosz 2008). By pioneering the alternative food movement in lower-income neighborhoods of growing cities, urban gardens help “clean up” areas that may have been considered neglected (Anderson 2014). In the process, the emerging scene becomes vulnerable to gentrification as the spatial capital generated by redevelopment brings in more affluent residents (Mincye and Dobermig 2016). Ultimately, increasing urbanization and gentrification lead to more demands for organic, seasonal, and locally grown foods (Jarosz 2008).

In urban landscapes where gentrification is most aggressive, redevelopment projects often are associated with economic liberalism and privatization, which leads cities to become more involved in public affairs concerning tourism, entertainment, and zoning.
In this context, value-added activities linked to the alternative food movement, such as urban farms, farmers’ markets, and food festivals, become catalysts of commercialization (Knowd 2006; McClintock 2014). Jakob (2012) discusses this type of economic endeavors as the “eventification” of staged experiences, promoted and consumed as part of development strategies. Urban farming as a packaged production offers social and cultural capital that fosters connectivity and nostalgia (Crouch 2006; Mincyte and Dobernig 2016; Timothy 2016). For example, many urban farms host special dinners, farm tours, benefits, and other celebrations that highlight the meeting point of past and present, urban and pastoral, and city and community (Brandth and Haugen 2014; Che 2016).

The politics of urban farming and gentrification come to a boiling point when tensions surrounding race, ethnicity, class, and debates about “right to the city” emerge. The friction between urban farmers and local residents due to smells and noises and the perception of some farmers as “land grabs” are themes in the literature (Ladner 2011; Paddeau 2017; Safransky 2016). In competition for territory, more powerful actors will try to marginalize smaller, less powerful groups by restricting their space (Bedore 2014; Smith and Kurtz 2003; Safransky 2016). When these types of conflict arise, the role of city governance becomes a prominent influencer to limit or support the development of urban agriculture (Andersoon 2014; Bedmore 2014; Brinkley and Vitello 2014; Irazabal and Punja 2009).

THE EAST AUSTIN ZONING DEBATE

Austin, TX, is one of the fastest-growing cities in the United States that has been experiencing high rates of gentrification in recent years (Romero 2018; Winder 2017). This gentrification is particularly prevalent on the east side of I-35—the interstate that physically divides the city in half and separates downtown from “East Austin.” The East Side has experienced a rise in upscale, hip restaurants, boutique hotels, and other businesses catering to a young, affluent class. These changes stand at odds with the long history of racial segregation in the city as the East Side traditionally has housed lower income African–American and Latino neighborhoods. With the economic transformation of East Austin, these communities are quickly disappearing (Tang 2014).

This same area of town also is the home of four commercial urban farms: Springdale Farm, HausBar Farm, Boggy Creek Farm, and Rain Lily Farm. White farmers privately own each of the farms. Of the four farms, only Springdale Farm is commercially zoned. The other farms are established in residential areas. The land these farms occupy ranges between two and five acres in size and they sell their produce on site, at farm stands, through food delivery services, and to local restaurants. One of the farms also has an addition to its property, which is rented as a novelty Airbnb. Because Springdale Farm is commercially zoned, this farm also hosts large social events and attracts “foodies” by having a high-end food truck on farm grounds.

In 2012, issues with a malfunctioning compost system at HausBar Farm served as a catalyst to a bitter debate between two groups: (1) East Austin urban farmers and supporters of the alternative food movement and (2) neighborhood residents, which included the grassroots Latino activist group People in Defense of the Earth and Her Resources (PODER). The two major issues of the debate involved how many events the farms could
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host, particularly the three farms that were not commercial zoned, and the farms’ ability to process fowl and rabbits on site in a single family-zoned neighborhood. PODER and its affiliates argued before the city council that some of the farm activities, such as animal processing, should not be taking place in a residentially zoned neighborhood. They also noted that large events, including weekend dinners and weddings, added traffic, increased noise, and reduced the quality of life for residents in these neighborhoods. PODER demanded that the voices of Latino long-time East Side residents were considered in the recommendations for the new farm code. For these activists, the urban farms represented an emerging city geared toward the tastes and interests of gentrifiers (as one participant called them “the colonizers”). The East Austin urban farmers rebutted the advocates of stricter zoning laws by arguing that their farms added value to East Austin through increased access to fresh, healthy, and local food. Further, their farms were spaces of community and education, as several schools in the area used the farms for field trips about the food system.

The neighborhood activists contended that the types and costs of produce generated by the farms were not a realistic pathway to feeding the food insecure in East Austin. The stance clinched on reports made by the city of Austin stating that Travis County—where most of Austin is located—only purchases around 1 percent of its food locally, despite efforts made by the city to increase local food production (City of Austin Office of Sustainability 2015). This statistic, along with the comments from the interviews, suggests the debate over urban farming in Austin was less about material demands of feeding the city as a whole than it was about which group would be granted the power to shape the cultural and social character of the East Side.

Between 2012 and 2015, the Austin City Council voted on several issues of the urban farm code. The first major vote in 2013 ended animal processing on all the farms. In 2015, the council tackled issues regarding social events on farms and ruled that residentially zoned farms could host six large events per year. The council agreed to allow Springdale Farm, which was commercially zoned, the ability to hold 22 events per year with attendees ranging between 51 and 150 in number, five events per year with more than 150 attendees, and unlimited events with 50 or fewer attendees.

In the opening months of 2018, Springdale Farm announced it would be sold to a development group. By reconnecting with some informants, we learned the land would likely be redeveloped, primarily for housing, although the developers may retain part of the land as a farm and on-site restaurant. Additionally, our informant suggested other farms throughout the city have scaled down their production, and this did not bode well for the long-term survival of the urban farms. The group most affected by the closing of Springdale’s farm-stand, and a reduction in other urban farming efforts, may be local chefs who source fresh produce from these sites. Another change involving the farms has been the arrival of some local companies who connect farmers to restaurants, although it remains unclear if this will help the remaining East Austin farms.

Through the 2012–2015 debates, the urban farmers and their supporters, as well as advocates of East Austin neighborhoods, argued that their position was most important as it involved the wellness of the community. Despite several attempts to bring these groups together, including mediation sessions led by a retired judge, the groups’ differences remained intractable. In the following sections, we explain how compromise was difficult, if not impossible, by arguing that each group represented a distinct interpretive community. We note how these interpretive communities transformed into coalesced communities

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during the debates in the process of taking a stance to guide the future of urban farm policy.

“COMMUNITY” AND ALTERNATIVE FOODWAYS

Discussions about the role of community within the alternative food movement are extensive. Scholars point to the crucial function of community in the process of producing and consuming food (Busa and Gardner 2015; Janssen 2010; Lyson 2000; Wells and Gradwell 2001; Wight 2016). The conversations argue that civic agriculturalists and their enterprises are integral components of both rural and urban communities (Lyson 2000; Wells and Gradwell 2001). As noted by Lyson (2000), “the direct contact between civic farmers and consumers nurtures bonds of community” (p. 57). These discussions, however, have not emerged without criticism from scholars who challenge the ways in which “community” is described within the alternative food movement (Alkon and McCullen 2011; Busa and Gardner 2015; Guthman 2008b; Lyson 2014).

The scholars who critique the extent to which alternative food practices promote community point to “the paradox of exclusivity” that these spaces perpetuate (Zitcer 2015). As DeLind (2003) noted, it often seems that, within the alternative food movement, “community” operates more as metaphor than effective social action. In these contexts, “community” more accurately refers to shared interests rather than a reciprocal interchange of rights and obligations among members (Abbott, Cone, and Kakaliouras 1995; DuPuis and Goodman 2005; Janssen 2010). For example, in many community agriculture projects, farmers are more likely to work with other farmers than with buyers and neighbors who want to participate in the food growth process (Janssen 2010). This has led scholars to question the degree to which “community” mainly exists to feed the market appeal of the alternative food movement (DeLind 2003; Janssen 2010).

The limited boundaries of “community” within alternative foodways involve the lack of racial and class diversity of these groups (Alkon and McCullen 2011; Billings and Cabbil 2011; Guthman 2008a,b; Kato and McKinney 2015). Alkon and Agyeman (2011) describe the scene as a “monoculture” terrain where low-income and racial minorities hardly ever are members (p. 16). These scholars emphasize how the alternative food community serves mostly privileged and affluent consumers, who, like the farmers, tend to be White and assume similar values (Alkon 2012; Alkon and Agyeman 2011; Alkon and McCullen 2011; Guthman 2008a,b). Participants of progressive food projects often fail to recognize their colorblindness (Guthman 2008a), which restrains dialogues about discrimination within the alternative food movement (Alkon 2012; Slocum 2006, 2007).

Stepping beyond this literature, studies on urban health and food deserts also bring attention to the importance of addressing questions of defining community (Beaulac et al. 2009; Chaix et al. 2009; Colls and Evans 2014; Cummins 2007; Hilmers et al. 2012; Shannon 2014). In this body of work, scholars analyze the salience of context, fuzzy versus sharp understandings of geographical boundaries, neighborhood design, and the implication of policies when defining community. Similar to the alternative food literature, epidemiological and food desert researches highlight the racial and ethnic composition of neighborhoods when discussing disparities to resources (Beaulac et al. 2009; Hilmers et al. 2012), and critique whose ideas and values dominate the attempts at “making a difference” (Colls and Evans 2014; Shannon 2014).
As Janssen (2010), Shannon (2014), and Busa and Gardner (2015) suggest, it is important that we interrogate whose social values and definitions of “community” get emphasized in the rhetoric of progressive food and healthy neighborhood projects. Knowing that discursive understandings of community can lead to important consequences, broadening definitions of community is an indispensable component of environmental and food justice. In particular, in and around urban centers, the necessity to work with overlapping understanding of community can yield to a larger political network and resources to fight food insecurity and protect the future of those involved in such endeavors (Davidson 2011; Fraser and Kick 2005).

**INTERPRETIVE COMMUNITIES**

Stanley Fish’s (1980) discussion of “interpretive communities” emphasizes the links between meaning-making, social structures, and frames of reference (Fontaine 1988; Goodheart 1983; Kálmán 1997; Stone 2011). As an analytical frame, the idea of interpretive communities has been compared to “linguistic communities,” arguing that the meaning is contingent to a set of cultural assumptions (Farrer 2015). Fish’s model contends that our interpretation of any text results from our social ties to an interpretive community (1980). Thus, interpretive communities participate as active influencers of every meaning-making process (Dasenbrock 1986; Mourão 2015; Stewart 2016; Zelizer 1993).

Fish stated, 

Members of the same community will necessarily agree because they will see (and by seeing, make) everything in relation to that community’s assumed purposes and goals; and conversely, members of different communities will disagree because from each of their respective positions, the other “simply” cannot see what is obviously and inescapably there. (Fish 1980:15)

As noted by Shahzad (2011), “We interpret texts because we are part of an interpretive community that gives us a particular way of reading a text” (p. 307). From this perspective, the understanding of any social fact is dependent on the group with whom individuals share an identity. Interpretive communities may involve family, peers, teachers, media and technology, and religious and political organizations (Shahzad 2011).

Moreover, because individuals are part of many interpretative communities simultaneously, the communities with which social actors have the strongest ties will have the greatest influence. In particular, those communities with which members share the highest level of emotional attachment will play a more critical role in the processes of remembering and learning (Shahzad 2011). Interpretive communities transform collective interpretation into collective memory and, subsequently, use those narratives as templates for understanding additional material (Zelizer 1993). This includes definitions of resources and even source selection (Shahzad 2011; Zelizer 1993). In other words, interpretive communities serve as powerful channels in the process of receiving, analyzing, and retaining the meaning of cultural symbols (Farrer 2015; Stone 2011).

In the occasions that distinct interpretive communities approach the same social phenomenon, opposing readings of discourse may produce clashing positions (Maillé and Saint-Charles 2012; Stewart 2016). When this takes place, it is often the case that one community will see its counterpart as “radical in error” (Dasenbrock 1986:1028).
Interpretive communities provide insight, as well as limiting frames, specifically in terms of what is considered politically feasible (Stone 2011). As a result, groups in conflict may not only be unable to reach compromise, it may be difficult for members to even consider what sort of future actions can be taken by other units of governance to benefit both sides.

In this paper, we go beyond Fish’s concept of interpretive communities to argue that, because communities are fluid and adaptable, when communities perceive a threat to their group, they transform a shared belief or value into a moral or political stance, and coalesce. In this context, a *coalesced community* refers to a group whose members originally came together around shared interests and understandings, but because of a larger risk to their community, the group comes together and forms loyalties to one or more of the group’s core values. We use the idea of *coalesced community* to understand how the debates in East Austin became so contentious and largely irreconcilable. We argue that during the zoning debates two existing interpretive communities (East Austin urban farmers and their supporters and East Austin community activists) transformed into *coalesced communities* based on the threat rewriting the city’s urban farm code presented (e.g., farmers were in danger of losing their livelihoods, and community activists feared increasing gentrification and decreases in quality of life).

In using the Austin urban farm debate as a case study, we bring attention to how each group defined “community” in order to validate the importance of and gain support for their stance. Fish’s concept is helpful in this discussion to understand the significance of social ties and cultural values in the process of community dynamics. By emphasizing an interpretive approach to community, we are able to present how progressive social action, like the alternative food movement, which emphasizes the role of “community,” can also complicate the existence of other viable communities. The concept of *coalesced community* extends Fish’s theory by linking discursive understandings of community to practices that have the potential to transform into material consequences, for example, the development of policies and laws, which could result in farmers losing their businesses, and/or members of a neighborhood facing reduced quality of life and/or being displaced from their communities.

**METHODS**

Our discussion in this paper derives from research we conducted on the process of rewriting the urban farm ordinance for Austin, TX, between 2012 and 2015. We draw from in-depth interviews with (1) urban farmers and their supporters and (2) members of the neighborhood advocating for stricter zoning laws to examine the irreconcilable disputes over urban farms in East Austin. Our research also is informed by fieldwork experience and informal conversations that helped us understand the neighborhood dynamics and the debates outside media coverage. While conducting the research, we paid attention to a variety of topics including issues of race and social inequality and the participants’ attitudes toward gentrification in Austin. For this paper, we focused on competing understandings of “community” during conversations about the zoning debates.

In the recruitment phase of this study, we examined editorials from two local newspapers—*Austin American-Statesman* and *The Austin Chronicle*—and compiled the names of people who spoke publicly about the farm debates. We contacted these individuals via phone or e-mail. To recruit additional participants, we employed a snowballing
technique and asked participants to refer others who were willing and well suited to speak about the debates.

Ultimately, we completed a total of 26 interviews during the summer and early fall of 2015, which include four urban farmers whose farms were at the center of the debate and four individuals affiliated with PODER—the grassroots organization that was most vocal in their criticisms of the farms’ activities. We also interviewed four farmers in Austin whose farms were not directly involved in the debate; four members of various food-related non-profits; three city government employees and neighborhood association representatives; two owners of food-related businesses; and five community activists knowledgeable about issues facing East Austin. Two of the East Side activists were People of Color—one African American and the other Hispanic. The four individuals affiliated with PODER identified as either Latino/a or Hispanic; and the rest of the interviewees were White. During the debates, many comments were made suggesting that the race and class of the farmers and their supporters informed their positions. Although we did not collect data on education level or income, and despite claims by the farmers that they were not of a high class, we understand how members of the neighborhood would perceive the urban farmers to have higher social class than their counterparts. For example, the HausBar’s guesthouse is an Airbnb Plus listing—indicating that the hosts can provide and charge for higher end accommodations. Similarly, Springdale Farm was recently appraised at $523,560, having increased in value by 50 percent in 5 years (Freer 2018). All participants were well acquainted with farm debates and expressed familiarity with one another since the Austin food scene is relatively small and closely connected.

The interviews were semistructured, which allowed us to ask questions directly related to our topic of interest as well as enabling participants to share relevant stories. During the interviews, we asked the participants about the origins of the debate, how various stakeholders presented the conflict, and the eventual outcomes of the dispute. All of the interviews were conducted in English, lasted between 45 minutes to 2 hours, and were held at the participant’s choice of location. For each interview, one or both of the authors were present. Interviews were digitally recorded and then transcribed. All participants and the farms were given pseudonyms in the analysis.

In the process of analyzing the interviews, we used NVivo 10 to organize, code, and categorize our data. After noting overarching themes through memoing and discussions between the researchers, we employed a focused coding approach to pay direct attention to each group’s conceptualization of community. In this paper, we connect these ideas to Fish’s (1980) notion of interpretive communities and extend beyond his work to suggest that communities can coalesce around specific issues when they perceive threat to their community. We looked to Swedberg’s (2016) work on theorizing to help develop the concept of coalesced community.

Concerns of generalizability are a common challenge in most qualitative research (Creswell 2013) and in studies involving foodscape in particular (Beaulac et al. 2009). Regional policies, city planning, and local culture have wide-ranging effects on how foodways are developed and routinized. Austin, TX, is a unique case for examining issues of urban farming, class, race, ethnicity, and gentrification, because much of the published literature on these topics focuses on cities that have experienced economic losses or natural disasters, as well as cities that have large African American populations (Colasanti et al. 2012; Passidomo 2014). Conversely, Austin is a city experiencing economic and population growth, and has a large Hispanic population, particularly where the major urban
farms are located (Herrick 2008). This combination of facts specific to Austin provides a wholly new context for studying urban farming that can address important gaps in the literature.

**ANALYSIS**

Our analysis of the in-depth interviews revealed urban famers and their supporters and members of the neighborhood had very different understandings of community. We argue these differences emerged because the two groups represent separate interpretive communities that each coalesced around its own set of values, goals, and experiences. Commitment to a set of ideals, which tie to the group’s definition of community, guided the behaviors of members of these two groups throughout the debate.

The farmers and farm supporters depicted community based on shared understanding of food and health. Their ideas of community included individuals who bought their food, participated in farm events, and, to some extent, the city at large. This group envisioned Austin’s future as local, fresh food based. This position clashed with the members of the neighborhood who advocated for stricter zoning laws. To this group, community centered on the East Side neighborhood rather than the city at large and community membership was determined by long-term residency, race, and being a “good neighbor”—things that seem at stake with loss of rights to the city and gentrification.

**The Farming Community**

During conversations with the urban farmers and their supporters, descriptions of community were centered on the local food industry, health, and fresh eating. This definition of community tended to be more about affiliation with the larger Alternative Food Movement and its ideals and transcended geography. The members of the food community described other participants from this group as involving fellow farmers, clients of the farms, and the entirety of the city of Austin.

Ken May and Sharon Miller, two Austin urban farmers, described the closeness of the farming community in Austin by referring to other farmers as friends. Ken described social interactions among farmers and how work and play around food help establish “community” for the urban farmers of East Austin. He described,

> When you get farmers together for an event—like [one of the farms] had a tomato dinner the other day and I was volunteering out there, helping pour wine. At the end of the events when everyone’s gone and the wine starts flowing, then it gets political but even then, not so political. I’m as liberal as can be, Kate and Gary are some of my best friends, and they’re super conservative.

Ken’s statement depicts several degrees of closeness within the farming community. As he recalled, he volunteered for a farm event that was followed by a more intimate setting in which the hosts and friends shared drinks and conversation. As Ken noted, these talks can get political but “not so political” to cause hurt feelings, showing that within this circle, friendships and an interest in food can bridge differences. Ken continued by explaining that many of these after-parties provide platforms for discussing shared values of the farming community. He said, “We [discuss] society, ideas of having a local food
source, having a more secure system. If there’s blight in California, it’s not going to affect the lettuce that any of these people are getting in the restaurants.” Ken’s experiences illustrate discussions advanced by DuPuis and Goodman (2005) and Janssen (2010), who argue that community for farmers frequently means sharing similar values.

Sharon described how the culture of the East Austin farms is so close that relationships with other farmers influenced her business approach. She said,

We chose not to do a farm stand or go to a farmer’s market because our dear friends have their farms here within a mile of us and we didn’t want to cut in on their business, and [we] very carefully started pursuing restaurants with whom they were not already doing business.

Cynthia Greene, a successful restaurant owner who sources produce from some of the East Austin farms for her business, explained how chefs were also part of the farming community. Cynthia said, “We feel like we’re really connected to something, and the community and other chefs, too. We see a lot of the other chefs at the farmers’ market all the time. It’s like a social occasion, but several times a week, and it just feels good.” In this statement, Cynthia, like Ken, depicted farm events as a social gathering. Cynthia’s reference to “community” in her description includes buyers at the market, who like chefs and farmers participate in the local food industry. Cynthia explained further,

I mean a lot of these people travel in packs because they are very like-minded in terms of how they want to eat and how they want to be sustainable by buying good foods for their body, eating fresh foods, [and] buying it from a local source so there’s not all the carbon footprint involved as much.

The expression “travel in packs” elicits a tribe-like depiction of community, which is solidified by Cynthia’s claim about members of the food scene being “very like-minded.” Similar to Ken, Cynthia’s discussion of community is linked to bonds created over shared values about food and lifestyle choices.

Conversations with urban farmers Kate and Gary Abbott provided further details about the farms’ clientele and how they fit within the community of farmers. Kate and Gary expressed, “We just love the sense of community we get from them [buyers] coming in here.” Kate and Gary described the type, “Young mothers that have had children that are really trying to be healthy, and eat healthy and understand that whatever they’re feeding their young newborn child is going to set them up for the rest of their lives.” Kate and Gary continued, “They’re making their own food, they’re eating healthy, they’re breastfeeding, they’re taking care of themselves.”

Claire’s picture of her farm’s customers illustrates a similar narrative. Claire said,

They’re men and women, [pregnant] mothers with their big bellies out. […] The thing they have in common with each other, that makes them our ideal customer, is that they will do the research. They’re studying this stuff. They want health. They want health for themselves. They want health for their earth.

Claire added, “They’re very educated people and they’re into the environment and their own health and because of that, they want us to succeed, because we’re providing this food.” Claire’s noting of “the environment” and “the earth” emphasizes a caring practice toward nonhuman nature, which Wells and Gradwell (2001) regard as usual among farmers. In addition, Claire’s description of clients of the farms in terms that qualified them as “educated” parallels the findings of Alkon and Agyeman (2011), who argue
alternative food movement projects often cater to privileged and affluent consumers. Through her interactions with customers, Claire ascribes to them characteristics that may or may not be accurate about the clients. Nowhere in Claire’s (or any of the farmers’ or their supporters’) statements does she suggest that the “trendiness” of local, organic food is what motivates her customers. By depicting this clientele as socially responsible and health conscious, Claire paints her customers with a moral brush that links farm activities with positive social action as beneficial.

Framing community in terms of the general populace permitted the farmers and their supporters to connect the farming network to the entirety of the city; it also facilitated discussions about the farmers’ vision for the future of Austin. As the community coalesced during the urban farm debate, the farmers and their supporters strongly linked their farms to Austin’s future and the health of the city at large. At this point in the dialogues, the participants emphasized the value of nonprofit events hosted on the farms, fundraising activities hosted on the farms’ ground, and how the farms contribute to the aesthetic feel and education of East Austin neighborhoods. Kate and Gary shared that they had recently started an educational nonprofit that benefits the community even though it is not cost-effective. They said regarding the project, “We’re a for-profit-farm and that is a terrible business model, but it’s community.” They added, “Our mission really is to turn on as many people to thinking about the choices we have in food. Period.” Sharon shared a similar vision for the future of Austin, saying, “So it’s really about hopefully changing the world just a little bit, getting people to think about sustainable issues, think about supporting local economies.” These findings align with the work of Wight (2016), who noted how alternative agriculture projects serve as opportunities of public education.

Rose Abernathy, who worked at a food-related nonprofit, further explained the value of urban farming in East Austin. Rose said,

It is about a cause, and one part of that cause is the community, and it is so clear with the urban farms how big of a role that plays. Their farms are open to so many people, not just to sell things […] people have their kids watching the chickens and they walk through, and they see what’s growing, and they grab John and they ask, “What are you doing about your fungus on your tomatoes this season with this rain?” And they’re learning and they’re experiencing things. There’s so much evidence out there of the benefits of knowing where your food comes from.

Rose’s statement explicitly links the community at large with the work of urban farms by describing farm activities as a “cause.” As noted by Rose, these higher values go beyond moneymaking activities, generating an educational field where children and adults can participate. Rose expanded her thoughts by naming specific nonprofit organizations and events with which East Austin farms collaborate. She said,

[Urban farmers] hold lots of events that are either free, just covers the cost of putting them on, or are nonprofit fundraisers, where the farmers don’t make money. […] By limiting the events [the farms can hold] what you’ve done is you’ve limited the community’s access to knowing about their food, to learning how to grow food, to connecting to a green space. […] I mean you’re punishing them [urban farmers] for any community service they do.

In defense of the farms, and the larger community, Rose expressed her grievances over the zoning disputes. Her statement asserts that constraining farm activities harms civic development regarding its education, nature, and health. When pressed on whether
the urban farms should be treated differently from other business zoning, Rose gave an unequivocal “yes.” From Rose’s stance, urban farming, and its contributions to the public, accounts for valuable community service.

By claiming the city as beneficiaries of the local food movement, the urban farmers and supporters strategically create an “imagined geography” (Said 1978) and/or “imagined community” (Anderson 2016). In the process, the narratives demystify accusations regarding urban farms as spaces that promote exclusivity and alienation. These same conversations provoke questions regarding the farmers’ awareness of their own privileges and the extent to which Austin in fact represents the cosmopolitan canopy of multiculturalism and cooperation it prides itself in being (Anderson 2014). Cheryl Baskez, an urban farmer, explained, “I mean everybody is participating in the farm—it’s not this elitist doors closed—we’re very open, and so I think of the farm more of a community center, than I do as a traditional farm” [emphasis added]. Cheryl’s description of her farm as a “community center” disassociates the East Austin farms from commercial venues. Stressing that “everybody” participates in the farm is both a rhetorical intensifier as well as a contradiction. By employing the hyperbole “everybody,” Cheryl depicts the farming scene as an all-inclusive and cooperative terrain. This illustration challenges previous sketches of the farm supporters as individuals who “travel in packs,” who are “very like-minded,” “educated,” and “do the research.”

Neighborhood Community

Scholars including Alkon and McCullen (2011), Lyson (2014), Busa and Gardner (2015), and Kato and McKinney (2015) have noted that, within the alternative food movement, “community” does not always overlap with an all-inclusive system. Thus, symbolic and physical spaces that focus on knowledge about food, health, sustainability, and the natural environment quickly can get reassigned as arenas that foster social inequality. Much of the zoning debate in East Austin was about just that—a long history of discrimination in the East Side reaching its boiling point. Urban farming, while standing as a seemingly progressive movement, served as a catalyst that brought forth dialogues about race, social and class status, privilege, and gentrification.

During the in-depth interviews with the advocates of stricter zoning laws, the participants continuously professed that they were not “anti-farm,” and instead they saw themselves as speaking on behalf of the community. In this context, “community” was tied to the East Austin neighborhood, race, and class. To delineate who was considered part of the East Austin community, the interviewees first described whom they termed a “good neighbor.” Maria Garcia, a self-proclaimed revolutionary, activist, and long-time East Austin resident, explained,

I say that there are two different kinds of people moving into East Austin. […] One is the new neighbors. These are people, mostly Anglo—but it doesn’t matter—who come in, buy a little house in the neighborhood, fix it up, add a room, do whatever they need to do for their family to fit, move in, and join the neighborhood association, or not. But again, involved in the community in whatever way they want. Those are the new neighbors. Then, there are the colonizers. And the colonizers are the ones who build a new McMansion, put a gate around their property so the rest of us can’t possibly get in [emphasis added].

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Maria’s statement distinguishes between the “new neighbors” and the “colonizers,” and connects “community” to neighborhood involvement. Although she makes it a point to note that the new residents mostly are “Anglo,” she clarifies that as long as the newcomers make an effort to become part of the neighborhood, race has little importance. Her word-choice “colonizer” paints residents not interested in fitting in with the neighborhood, as threatening, whose goal is to gentrify and disrupt the culture of the neighborhood. Maria explains further,

I would put the urban farmers who are there for the whole sake of making as much money as they can, any way they can as colonizers. I would call an urban farmer who was there with the intention of just raising pure food and sharing in some way, including selling—I’m not saying they can’t make money, make a living like [name of farm] had done for years—those are just new neighbors. So, I would say urban farmers fit in both categories, ‘cause the ones that are not causing harms to the neighbors, those are new neighbors. The ones that are causing harm, those are colonists [emphasis added].

The remainder of Maria’s statement elaborates on the importance of being a good neighbor. Maria classifies farmers who try to profit as much as they can as “colonizers,” alluding to the urban farms that host large events such as dinners, weddings, and other functions. Maria’s interpretation of a farm as a “colonizer” complements arguments advanced by DeLind (2003), by noting how some alternative foodways—in this case, an urban farm—contributes to further gentrification. To Maria, the farmers who are growing food, sharing and even selling in small amounts, are not as problematic as the farms she perceives as harming the social fabric of her community.

References of “good” and “bad” neighbors were also mentioned by Seth Wills, an East Austin activist, who described how local media presented a misleading depiction of the two sides of the urban farm debate. Seth explained,

The way that the media was interpreting [the debates] also happened to be the way that a lot of the urban farms were interpreting it, which is that PODER and the people advocating for the community were anti-urban farm. When in reality that’s not what was going on. Everyone who was in that room [city council meetings], having that discussion was very much in support of urban farms. Certain folks wanted to be heard a little bit more that they are currently being heard—something as simple as being a good neighbor.

Seth’s comment highlights a limitation of coalesced communities. In the process of coalescing around a core value, and presenting that position as a moral stance, the principles of coalesced communities run the risk of being oversimplified (such as being labeled “anti-farm”). Juan Garcia, a PODER affiliate, clarified the neighborhood community by saying, “Farming is not the problem. It’s what’s happening around it that caused, and continues to cause, the friction between long-time residents and some of the new people that are coming in.” Juan’s concerns involve the rapid growth of East Austin in a direction that glorifies conspicuous leisure, when traditionally the East Side has been home to working class minorities. Juan explained further, “Cesar Chavez [a main corridor in East Austin] has become the new 6th Street [entertainment district]. You see bars opening up all along on this [east] 6th Street; it’s become the new Rainey Street [most recently gentrified entertainment district].” By referencing the developing entertainment scene of East Austin, Juan implicitly linked the growing nightlife to some of the farm activities—one of the more contentious points of the debates. His critiques suggest that the farms serve
as another business that caters to the new, wealthier residents and are part of East Austin
losing its distinctive neighborhood feel.

The advocates for stricter zoning laws expressed that hosting large events creates too
much commotion in a residential neighborhood. Specific concerns involved loud music
until late hours, crowded street parking, and large quantities of alcohol consumption by
the guests of the events. To the participants representing the neighborhood community,
hosting too many of these activities made the farms a “bad neighbor” and reduced quality
of life for families living in the area. Blas Fernandez, a long-time resident of the neigh-
borhood and East Side activist, described the farm activities, “[Events] go on until two or
three o’clock in the morning, would bring 150 people that’d all get drunk. They’re park-
ing all over the neighborhood. [. . .] Imagine next door to your house: Friday night—a
wedding, Saturday afternoon—a wedding, Sunday afternoon—a wedding.” Beth Terrell,
an East Austin activist, also stated, “I think [one of the farms] has made an attempt to
be a good neighbor.” Beth added, “I think [another farm] are horrible neighbors. They
have loud events that go until 2 a.m. with amplified music every single weekend of the
wedding season.”

Amy Baker, a food-related business owner, described how the late night events were
“rude” and “not good neighbor behavior.” She even jested saying that she hoped all the
“bougie White folks” gentrifying East Austin would be rewarded with “a lifetime of 2:00
am wedding music.” Although Amy’s comments were made as a joke, other participants
pointed out that if some of the farms’ Latino neighbors were hosting loud events every
weekend local police would end these events immediately. Amy’s remarks challenge the
farmers’ assertions that the farms help provide healthy food to the city, by suggesting their
main activities are based in entertainment. The idea of urban farms as venues of social
experiences also is explored in Crouch (2006), Mincyte and Dobernig (2016), Timothy,
(2016), and Che (2016).

Ashley Mudd, a scholar and activist who had been involved with the East Austin com-
munity, captured the core of the debates by discussing social differences and privilege.
Ashley noted that the real problem did not start with the composting system, but rather
the lack of care and communication it represented. Ashley explains,

She [referencing to urban farmer] actually knew these smells got really bad and she didn’t
prioritize it, and she hadn’t brought her neighbors in on it, and when you smell putrid
chicken flesh—that’s noxious. And when there’s social difference, where you don’t feel rec-
ognized, or respected, and you were never told to expect [the smell]—there was not conver-
sation or relationship in place—then there’s a whole other context of feeling unwelcome in
your own neighborhood.

Ashley’s comments about the smells are linked to emotions common to other members
of the neighborhood community, and also are consistent with the research of Ladner
(2011) and Paddeau (2017). As Ashley explains, a number of the urban farms’ activi-
ties produced feelings of exclusion and division, leading some residents of East Austin
to feel “unwelcomed” in their own neighborhood. Her use of the expressions not feel-
ing “recognized” or “respected” as a collective sentiment that represents the East Austin
neighborhood suggests that a problem underlying the dispute is the changing culture of
East Austin and worries that long-term, Latino residents will feel even more marginalized
where many grew up. These beliefs clash with the depictions of community advanced by
the urban farmers as a cultural space that is receptive of all.
For the neighborhood group, the urban farms stand as a symbol of gentrification because the farms create spaces that foster and perpetuate White privilege in areas of town where only racial minorities used to live. Examples of this include the farmers’ dismissal of long-established neighborhood residents and their perceptions of community, and the spread of foodways that cater to “foodies” and the White upper-class. Arguably, Springdale being sold to developers and HausBar having a boutique AirBnB on site also add to the gentrification problem. Most importantly, the fact that Austin City Council sided with the urban farms and their supporters, as opposed to the neighborhood group, indicates that PODER and their supports have been politically displaced.

DISCUSSION

Interpretive communities are socially constructed groups that come together over shared meaning (Hansson 1989). However, because meaning can change over time through social interactions, shared beliefs and values both can draw members to an interpretative community, as well as reinforce group-level beliefs (Berkowitz and TerKeurst 2006). We suggest the term coalesced communities to discuss groups whose members originally come together around shared interests and understandings, but with time coalesce around a primary loyalty, particularly if they feel this loyalty/primary issue, or their community, is under threat.

In our work, we observe the emergence of two interpretive communities—urban farmers with strong values toward food and members of the East Side neighborhood who came together based on a neighborhood’s history. Even though these groups and their values are not necessarily at odds, when the city of Austin began to draft a policy in which only one of these communities would come out the victor, the two groups coalesced around their most dominant loyalty. Consequently, the best identifiable value of each group became their moral/political position. In other words, the two interpretive communities transformed into coalesced communities in order to gain political support for their stance.

The farmers coalesced around the moral issue of good, healthy food. In their minds, agricultural activities within city limits benefited everyone in the community. The East Side activists coalesced around issues of the local neighborhoods. For example, PODER, which initially was founded around issues of racial and environmental justice, attuned to issues of gentrification and the environment (including how noise and crowds affect the local environment and quality of life). From their position, People of Color and long-term residents in the East Side had already long suffered from environmental inequities and advocating for policies that benefited marginalized residents was protecting the community.

In the East Austin zoning debate, the formation of coalesced communities and the use of interpretive frames for considering “community” had concrete outcomes for residential neighborhoods in the East Side, and the urban farm code. This shows the influence of discursive power in accomplishing material consequences, and the means by which communities as “space” can create and transform “place.” Given the ruling of the City Council, which arguably favored the farms’ position, Austin’s sprawling gentrification will continue to colonize urban neighborhoods bordering the city’s center as the proponents of stricter zoning laws feared.
CONCLUSION

This paper can be situated within larger dialogues of space and place, and has the potential to engage interdisciplinary works that contribute to critical geography research. By bridging the literatures of gentrification, the alternative food movement, neighborhoods, and urban health, we show how the inequities of class, race, and ethnicity remain connected to environmental justice.

Our research brings attention to how generally perceived progressive food movements, which commonly flourish in the trenches of gentrification, such as food co-ops, farmers’ markets, community gardens, and urban farms, emphasize the role of “community” without taking into account to whom these spaces are a community. As a result, understandings of “community” become largely hegemonic and perpetuate cycles of privilege, exclusion, social inequality, and White upper-class habitus. At best, these definitions of community remain limited to the values, goals, and experiences of the individuals immersed in alternative foodways. Consequently, marginalized groups are further disfranchised.

Although limited to one site with its own historical and social context, the East Austin zoning debate illustrates how deceptively simple disagreements gave way to contentious disputes between two interpretive communities that could not identify common grounds. For the urban farmers, community was reduced to food, health, and the local culture. The East Austin neighborhood activists understood community membership as long-term residency, race, and being a “good neighbor.” By defining “community” strictly on the basis of social ties and cultural values common to their immediate group, the East Austin urban farmers and the neighborhood activists were unable to achieve any compromise. These two groups approached their positions and definitions of “community” from a singular and mostly fixed frame. As a result, the goals of each community appeared at odds, although they were not necessarily mutually exclusive. With greater understanding, the two groups could focus on their similarities, including that both groups are at risk of being displaced from the East Side due to rapidly increasing property taxes. Neighborhood activists could access social networks in the local alternative food scene and educate many around the city about the threats of gentrification. Future research could address case studies of sites where two opposing groups were able to identify mutual goals and form consensus, to examine under what contexts interpretative communities can prove to guide collective action.

Advocates of the alternative food movement could also benefit from these discussions. Given that they participate in the more privileged class, (re)considering their understandings of communities from additional and overlapping perspectives can strengthen their efforts. Accounting for racial and economic diversity, as well as social and cultural values outside their own, can only make alternative foodways stronger and farther-reaching. In all, by cultivating a critical consciousness, the alternative food movement could move toward greater food justice.

REFERENCES


WHO SPEAKS FOR (AND FEEDS) THE COMMUNITY?


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